

SAVED

a novel



DOUG MAGEE

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For Mary, because I love to make her laugh.

Author's Note

I was once headed for the Presbyterian ministry. I went to seminary and became a Master of Divinity. But, having lost my faith somewhere along the way, I decided I was not a good fit for the clergy. The story you're about to read is the tale of a Midwestern man experiencing the world when he steps out of his church-based bubble. Is it autobiographical? Uh, no. Not really. I mean, I've never lived in the Midwest.

1

Citizen Frank

Frank Tripping's mortal soul met its match on the sun-splashed Saturday morning his neighbor, Daria Faloni, unaware Frank was watching from a small, wooded area between their houses, removed the top of her string bikini and lay down on a chaise to sunbathe. Frank, a good Christian man, wasn't lurking. He was on a mission at the time, an investigation, and Daria was part of his prey, she being a member of a houseful of godless villains.

When, a few minutes earlier, Frank had left his own lawn and rustled through some dense bushes, he hadn't expected anyone to be in the neighboring backyard. He was hoping to catch a glimpse of the goings-on in the house through the back windows. So, when Daria came out of the house, Frank froze, surprised. And when she let the sun caress her breasts unimpeded, the calm and luscious half-nudity, along with the bursting life of the late spring foliage and the brilliance of the blue sky above, was all a potentially confusing counterpoint to Frank's certainty he was spying on the Devil incarnate.

Frank had been saved for years, so, as Daria clicked back the top half of the chaise and pulled up her short, smooth legs, there was no question

continuing to partake of this forbidden image would ruin his chance to go to heaven. The tumescence that grew all by itself under his tighty-whities was the work of the Devil, to be sure, but since he had the assurance of salvation, continuing to stare at the prone, welcoming body could do Frank no harm, as in long-term, as in eternity.

Or so he thought. Salvation doesn't necessarily come bundled with wisdom or clairvoyance. As parts of him below the navel swelled like fruit ripening in fast forward, Frank's bland and regimented universe was taking a major hit. But, blinded by his mission, Frank couldn't see this. To him the disrobing was just a hiccup in his sleuthing. He continued to stare and let the rush of lust gallop along, devoting his thoughts to higher goals, to the investigation of Daria and her husband, known only to Frank as Quincy. Frank now knew Daria flaunted city and state regulations about nudity, and while that was a start, it was not the sort of illegal activity Frank was hunting for. He was sure that Quincy and his cohorts were into drugs.

Frank, however, wasn't quite sure about this category, drugs. It was 2007, Frank was in his forties, but his circumscribed life hadn't put him in touch with the world of illegal substances. Until recently, that is. Being an alert citizen, Frank had taken note early of the suspicious activity at what used to be the Sanford house. Mike and Carol Sanford, good Christians as well, had been transferred to Cleveland, and the new occupants, Daria, Quincy et al., could not have been more unlike them. The first sign of this was the sheer number of cars in the driveway. Make that in and out of the driveway. Cars that were there when Frank was taking the kids to Christ Camp on Saturday mornings, were gone, replaced by others, fifteen minutes later, when he returned.

Frank thought for a while the new owners were having construction done, and the cars belonged to the workers. But there were no signs of any renovations, and it soon became clear the traffic was way out of the ordinary for Belglade, Illinois. Most families in the neighborhood owned two cars, and there would be occasions, say Wednesday Bible study, when several cars were parked in a driveway or at the curb, but that was all regulated

and known. The comings and goings in Quincy's driveway were a different and very troubling matter altogether. Frank wasn't sure how it came to him, but, after realizing the cars had nothing to do with construction, the word "drugs" popped into his head and wouldn't leave.

Unlike some of his neighbors who only clucked privately about the unusual situation, Frank, not previously known for decisive action, surprised himself by going to the police station, waiting patiently for forty-five minutes, and finally speaking with Detective Gerald Manley about his suspicions.

Manley complimented Frank in rather florid terms for coming to him, for stepping forward, and for his vigilance. Frank mumbled something about his Christian duty but was wondering why all the compliments, whether he was doing something more dangerous than he expected. He knew about the ruthless, blood-spattered drug wars in the city. At their minister's suggestion, he and the family had watched countless hours of *Cops* in order to understand how the Devil worked and how Satan was being defeated by the brave men and women on the front lines. Sitting with Manley that morning, however, he realized that perhaps, in doing his Christian duty, he was putting himself on those front lines, something he hadn't thought about before.

"And what do you think is going on with all that traffic?"

"Drugs?"

Frank and his wife, Grace, had used the word definitively, without hesitation, in their conversations about Quincy. But his homebased assurance withered there in the police station. The questioning look the detective gave him made Frank realize that he, the alert citizen, didn't know what he was talking about.

"Most likely," was Manley's response after a moment, as he made a note of this in his notepad. "You say he has a beard and dresses casually all the time, doesn't seem to work?"

"Not that I've seen. I mean I'm at work all day myself."

"And, just for the record, where is that?"

"Newtone."

"Newtone. My cousin's over there. Robbie Tomlinson?"

“It’s a big corporation. Sorry. I mostly know the members of my prayer group.”

“He wouldn’t be one of those. Uh, so, drugs. What do you think? They movin’ it, or have we got a mill over there?”

Frank didn’t have a clue, and once again it showed. Manley was perceptive and, in a quick presentation, schooled Frank on some of the more basic elements of the drug trade. Then, with a firm handshake and a pat on the back, he sent Frank off to the front to scout the enemy. He didn’t use that language, but that was the way Frank took it, the words he used to himself as he drove home that fateful Saturday.

Frank didn’t tell Grace all of the things Manley had told him. She was shuttling between a spelling lesson with Franklin Jr., nine, and a biblical mathematics lesson with Rachael, 12, when he came home, so he was brief.

“We need to keep our eyes out, and when we get something concrete, Manley said they’ll be able to get a search warrant.”

Frank and Grace prayed briefly for luck in their search, and Grace went back to the homeschooling. Frank went out the back door, wandered around the backyard for a while, seeing what angle he could get on the house next door, and then, in a half-crouch, entered the wooded area.

Twenty-eight minutes later Daria’s breasts came unexpectedly into the picture. He maintained his vigil, as he’d done in the past, but when Daria absentmindedly ran her fingers over her inner thigh, Frank’s eye followed those fingers down that pure smooth skin. When the fingers stopped, however, Frank’s gaze continued toward the holy of holies, and his tongue involuntarily poked out between his lips.

Then Grace’s voice shrieked in his head like a smoke alarm. “Don’t even think about that. It’s dirty down there. Dirty.” This had been growled on their wedding night, but the sound of it was still fresh in Frank’s ears. He had long ago prayed himself out of the problem, and Jesus had in fact delivered him from the evil of that perversion, but the Devil can be stubborn, even when he’s beaten.

Frank sucked his tongue back in, and he and his swollen member turned

away from Daria and her temptations. As he walked awkwardly toward his upright Christian home, Frank fished around in his overheated brain for a biblical passage that might put out the fire the Devil had started. Nothing came to mind, so Frank mumbled a generic prayer for guidance. That worked. By the time he got back in the kitchen things were starting to get better, and only the heavy sweat on his forehead remained from his tussle with evil.

Manley had told Frank to keep a diary, make notes about any goings-on he observed, so that he could be precise if he ever needed to testify. Frank found a spiral notebook in the closet and went to the bedroom desk to record his intelligence-gathering. He noted the date and the time and then stopped cold when Daria's bikini top slid from her breasts and floated to the ground. Over and over the skimpy material gave way to the smoothness of her skin, the inviting V of her legs, and Frank found himself unable to put pen to paper. Rachael's chirpy voice brought him back to reality.

"Mom said you could help me with this."

Rachael was standing there as if she'd been waiting for a while. In his confusion Frank couldn't remember what he'd been doing just then, or if Rachael could see the same things he was seeing. Then he got a grip and began helping his daughter with her math.

"If each disciple brought fifteen people to Jesus in a year, how many new Christians would there be at the end of the year...?"

Later that night Frank made the decision to forego any more observations of Daria Faloni's backyard. That was a trap, he could tell. When he and Grace knelt in prayer, he found himself opening his eyes, looking across the bed, and seeing Grace's puckered cleavage partially exposed over her flannel nightgown. He quickly closed his eyes, fearing the worst, that the Devil had once again sunk his talons deep in Frank's God-fearing brain.

And then Frank remembered the last time a rush of lust swept over him, the last time he and Grace united the sacred temples of their bodies, as their minister, Pastor Otto, would have it. Although years ago, it was still vivid to him. It was a Saturday night. Frank, Grace and the kids had just

come back from the annual Prayer Luck dinner, and Grace was in ecstasy. Unexpectedly she had been chosen Christian Wife of the Year, *the* top honor for women at Mt. Olive Baptist. She was floating, singing to herself as she and Frank put the kids to bed.

In her floating state she had inadvertently left the bathroom door ajar as she got ready for bed, enough so that Frank, in bed in his pajamas, could see Grace's naked body, including her well-formed breasts and delta of pubic hair, a very rare sight. This vision was followed by a very rare occurrence. Frank's penis rose all by itself under his pajama bottoms. Grace's near-euphoric state had caused her to leave her nightgown in the bedroom and so she had to prance out of the bathroom jaybird naked. Frank's phallic friend took note of this even in the near dark.

Once she had her nightgown on Grace, chattering about her win, came to the bed and, with the flourish of a magician, whipped the bedcovers back, exposing Frank and his member, which had now poked up through the fly of his pajama bottoms and stood there like a rocket on the launch pad. Grace stopped chattering in mid-sentence, and Frank froze, expecting some sort of scolding for not being able to control his sacred temple. But the Christian Wife of the Year knew what to do.

"You are the Devil," she purred down at the unusual appearance. "I will punish you and send you back to Hell."

Frank still hadn't gotten a grip on the proceedings but Grace had, literally. She grabbed Frank's penis as if it were a microphone and growled at it.

"Get thee behind me Satan."

Her grip was so tight the burgeoning rocket gave Frank a dart or two of deep pain. To his great surprise Grace then clambered closer and straddled her husband. Frank's Satan stalk tried to obey Grace's command and headed south but Grace managed to pull it back and incarcerate it in her penitentiary. Frank saw Grace's breasts under her nightgown do a lilting dance, and pain turned to a bit of pleasure for him. But that didn't last long because Grace began a series of awkward gyrations that made Frank

wonder if he was going to be detached from Lucifer when that Devil was sent back to Hell.

After a few go-rounds Grace slowed and let loose some odd chirps before her whole body shivered. Frank had never seen anything like this before. Grace mumbled something that might have been “praise Jesus,” sighed lightly and heaved herself off Frank, her near-mania subsiding by the second. Together Frank and Grace watched Beelzebub begin to wilt as a bubble of milky substance escaped the collapse. Soon the mighty Devil dropped over dead.

The silence in the bedroom then was deep. And it continued the next morning as the family got ready for church, drove to Mt. Olive and sat in their usual pew. As luck would have it, Pastor Otto’s sermon that morning was about procreational sex versus recreational sex. The latter was an abomination, according to him, a practice for libertines and homosexuals. Though Grace had been silent since the incident the night before she had experienced soft waves of pleasure thinking about it. Those waves now crashed on the rocky shore of shame, and Mt. Olive’s current Christian Wife of the Year vowed she would never repeat the sort of exorcism she had engaged in twelve hours earlier. And in the years to come she had kept her vow despite fond memories of that shivering moment.

Frank experienced shivers of the fearful kind thinking about this, climbing into bed with Grace. The ritual peck he delivered to Grace’s forehead several minutes later brought a quick replay of Daria’s thigh and a rush of blood to Frank’s midsection, but he was able to shut down that Satanic vision. A few minutes later Grace’s comforting snore lulled him to sleep.

2

First Steps

In the weeks that followed Frank was able to stick to the task Manley had set for him and developed a pretty sophisticated system of notation. Cars were described by their make and model, and by license plate numbers when they were visible. Times in and out were noted, and the people who came and went were broken down into gender, body types, and whether or not they were carrying anything like a paper bag or a suitcase.

This last was Frank's idea, and he was thrilled when, on one of his first snoops, a heavily tattooed man pulled up in a tan Nissan Sentra, spent twelve minutes and seventeen seconds inside the house, and came out with a plastic shopping bag. Frank could hear Manley oohing and aahing over that coup.

Frank set up a command post in Franklin Jr.'s bedroom because that was the only room in the house with a direct view of the Target, as Frank referred to the drug den. When he was instructing the kids in his observation and notation techniques, Rachael was confused by the designation and wondered what the Target store at the Chippewa Mall had to do with their investigation. Frank patted her head lovingly and explained the difference

between the Target where you bought things and the Target where, he was sure, other things, things not of the Lord, were being sold.

Because he spent his days processing invoices in a cubicle at Newton, Frank had to rely on Grace and the kids to monitor the situation and accurately record activity from 8:40 when he left the house, until 5:07 when he returned. Even though Franklin Jr. was three years younger than Rachael, his work on the project was more legible and accurate than his sister's. The family prayed for Rachael's improvement, and the Lord led her to a Nancy Drew detective story that gave her ideas and incentives. Grace, however, saw this as a mixed blessing because the whole thrust of the Nancy Drew series was a very deftly conceived feminist agenda that might lead Rachael to think women could lead families, etc. Grace had forgotten how the book made it into the house. She made sure the book disappeared quickly.

After a month the spiral notebook was packed with information. Frank decided it was time to take his findings back to Manley. With pride and confidence, he gave Manley a brief lesson in his code, and let him soak up the results of the investigation. The balding detective peered through reading glasses, asked a few questions, and then tipped back in his rickety desk chair.

"This is all to the good but I don't think we can get a warrant out of this. We're going to need more than just the fact a few cars come and go."

Frank was disappointed. In twenty-seven days there had been seventeen different cars coming and going from the house. Eleven of those cars had made more than one visit. Two had visited every day. Over the course of the month Frank had paid much more attention to some of the voiceovers on *Cops* and realized that the term "drug traffic" was quite telling, that most drugs were "moved" by car.

"What more would you need?" Frank asked after a pause.

Trying to imagine what else he could do brought Daria's little striptease back to him, but he quickly panned away from the image, the way they do in the movies, and let his lens focus on the front yard, on the cars there, Daria out of the picture.

"I'm not sure what more you could do without becoming a peeping Tom,"

Manley answered, as if he could read Frank's thoughts. "But just cars isn't enough. We had a very embarrassing run-in with such information recently. A woman over on Thomas Street come in with the same kind of stuff you got here, plus pictures and license plate numbers and everything. Well, we went with that, got a judge to give us a warrant, went in, and you know what?"

"What?"

"Ever heard of eBay?"

"Sort of."

"Turns out this guy was selling rare auto parts over the eBay, and local customers and suppliers were coming right to his house. The only good thing about our raid was one of the other detectives found a door handle to his '57 Mustang he couldn't find anywhere else."

"I don't think they're selling auto parts over there. I've never seen an auto parts man with a beard."

Manley admitted he hadn't seen a bearded auto parts man recently, but "these days you never know what kinda businesses people got in their homes." He suggested Frank might want to pay his neighbors a straight-out visit, friendly like. Frank asked if that might be dangerous, and Manley said he didn't think so.

"They like to pretend they're just folks, you know. Why don't you make up some excuse, maybe tell them something about trash collection or whatever. They probably won't let you in the house, of course. But you'll be able to get an idea just by the way they act at the door."

"What should I look for?"

"Things that are out of place. Like furniture. We go into these meth mills or coke joints and the furniture's always ratty, looks like stuff the Salvation Army threw out. So, furniture. And light. They got the shades pulled down a lot?"

"I haven't noticed."

"Keep your eyes out for that. Good sign. And their eyes. People can look perfectly normal when they're on the stuff, but you get a good look at their eyes and you can tell. It shows. Looks like they've been up way too long."

You see that, and they don't say nothing about eBay or anything, and we might be able to get a warrant."

Frank wasn't really conscious of it, but Manley was using the time-honored police tactic of inclusion, bringing Frank into the inner circle, giving him the blessings of the brotherhood. While Frank could feel this, he also tried to imagine himself at Quincy's door and wondered if he could ever do that. For some reason he saw himself standing there, spiral notebook in hand, jabbering on about the way The Fourth is celebrated on the block (his first thought when Manley had said he should come up with some ruse), writing copious notes about what he was seeing, how Quincy's eyes looked.

He left Manley's office with a plan and deep anxiety. Part of that anxiety was whether or not he should tell Grace what he was thinking about doing. Frank was seeing himself as a soldier in the war on drugs now, and he was beginning to understand the warrior mentality. The soldier setting out for battle doesn't tell the wife everything he knows, the training he's been through, the things he's going to have to do on the front lines. Some things needed to be kept away from the family. As he pulled into his driveway, he decided this was one of those missions you undertook solo.

"Let not your heart be troubled..." was part of the passage his Men's Bible Breakfast was exploring the next morning, and Frank was ready to share his news about the drug house, and his very troubled sleep the night before, but Daria got in the way.

Pastor Otter said that Jesus was like a catheter for a troubled heart, that bringing him into your life was like threading the blessing of eternal life through your carotid artery down into the disturbed chambers of your heart and calming them. "Not only is Jesus the peacemaker, but he is the pacemaker as well."

The image was precise, and Frank threaded his own personal Jesus down through his carotid artery as instructed, but when he reached his heart, his flesh took a different form. Daria's swooping, free-to-the-breeze breasts replaced his own hairy chest, and guilt and confusion sent Jesus packing. Later, in the prayer circle, with his hand on Roger Baldwin's shoulder, while

he was supposed to be asking the Lord to keep Roger's son safe in college, Frank was imploring Him to make Daria get dressed and stay dressed.

The Lord, unfortunately, didn't act on Frank's request, but the little lustful blips, in the days that followed, didn't derail Frank's plans for a surveillance visit. Lying in bed next to the deeply-sleeping Grace, he would watch himself approach the Target house, boldly knock on the door, and, well, most of the time the plan stopped there. A little flop sweat would tinge his forehead then, but his determination never flagged. He was more driven in this endeavor than he'd ever been with anything in his life.

The Saturday morning he'd chosen for his look-see dawned grey, and by 11 o'clock, when Frank knew they would be awake over at Quincy's, a misty rain had hosed down the neighborhood briefly. This was enough of a change from his imagined scenario that he almost scrapped the mission. But he had engineered a little white-lie gambit to get Grace and the kids out of the house, sending them ahead of him to a Newtowne picnic, and he realized he was just stalling. He spent a half hour making himself look casual, going with shorts and a short-sleeved shirt that looked a little rumpled, went over his notes as to what he was to look for, and took the seventy-yard stroll to Quincy's front door.

In his nervousness Frank noticed all sorts of particulars that had no bearing on the investigation. He saw that though the lawn was decently cut, there were weeds poking through the brick walk to the front door. A pane of glass on the door was scratched. The paint job on the siding that he had admired only a year ago was flaking.

And then he saw something that might pertain to the case, remnants of dried vomit behind the bushes next to the front door. Human? Animal? Hard to tell. Frank had seen films about drug use, and he remembered some vomiting in among all the warnings. He was staring and making a mental note when the front door opened.

Frank straightened up preparing to face Quincy. Instead, a fresh-faced teenage boy greeted him. Frank had imagined a beginning in which Quincy had opened the door only a crack, but this boy had the door wide open, and

all the innards of the living room were available to Frank's gaze. The boy was tall, tousled, and dressed in jeans and a Lakers jersey. He had bright blue eyes that seemed clear and drug-free to Frank.

"Hi," the boy mumbled as he opened the door even wider, stepping aside as if to let Frank in. This was so far from what Frank had expected that he hesitated. "Come in. My uncle's not here."

Uncle? Come in? This kid could have been a teen-greeter at Mt. Olive Baptist. Frank suddenly felt protective. This nest of vipers he was about to step into was sucking in the young and the vulnerable. As Frank went through the front door, his mission took on new urgency. He had to get this kid out of there.

"My aunt's here. Would you like to speak with her?"

Frank's quick "no" didn't make it out of his lips before Daria herself came in from the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel. She was clothed in a loose-fitting t-shirt, and Frank was relieved to see. Her smile was convincingly warm and inviting. She could have been an *adult* greeter at Mt. Olive. She had come through the doorway as if she was expecting someone she knew, but she recovered well, and, after a few more swipes of the dish cloth, held out her hand.

"Hello. I'm Daria."

As she moved her hand toward Frank, she dropped the dish cloth, and Frank saw she was wearing a pair of jean short shorts. The thighs that ran down from the shorts were thin and toned, slightly tanned. He jerked his gaze back to her face, took her hand weakly, and regained some composure.

"I'm, uh..." In his preparations for his reconnaissance mission, Frank had contemplated using an alias. Manley had said there was a possibility that Frank could provide all his information anonymously, and Frank thought that if he kept his name from Quincy, he would further protect his family. But then he'd thought Quincy might somehow know his neighbors' names and become suspicious if Frank used a phony name, so he had decided to go with Frank Tripping. But Daria's presence threw him off for a second,

and he wasn't sure what he had decided. She stared, he gulped a little and continued. "I'm Frank Tripping. Franklin. I live next door."

"To the left or to the right?" She blinked a little, the way old time movie starlets used to blink as they talked.

"The right," Frank said pointing to the left. He had automatically clicked into his political leanings, forgetting that he was talking about the direction to his house. Daria was confused but did her best to help out.

"So, to the right as you face the house or to the left?"

"Oh, right. I mean yes."

He couldn't hold her gaze now. He was certain any second her t-shirt would magically, diabolically, drop from her frame and once again expose those breasts. Blood was abandoning his brain like theatergoers racing from a fire. His brain, in fact, was on fire, and he had to turn away from this Devil in order to continue.

It was then he saw the almost comically disheveled state of the living room. The furniture might have been "ratty," the way Manley said it should be if in fact this was a drug haven, but Frank found it hard to tell. Every surface, it seemed, was covered with either a book or a magazine. The walls were almost nightmarish. Painted white, they were covered with a mish-mash of tree branches, electrical conduit, Barbie dolls stuck in unrolled condoms, and words like "thicket" and "particular" written with the plastic letters you stick on a refrigerator for toddlers. The scene was dizzying, and for a few moments Frank was only vaguely aware that the teenager had left the room and that Daria was moving toward the couch talking.

"Sorry about the mess. We're real readers but we haven't got the bookcase thing down too well." She turned away from Frank and bent over to push some magazines aside on the couch. Her short shorts rose higher on the back of her thighs as she did, and the view to Frank was breathtaking.

But Frank found his strength, and the Lord moved his eyes from the hussy's backside to the strange goings-on on the wall. Daria, straightened, turned, saw Frank's gaze fixed on the wall, and explained.

"I'm a sculptor. Please, have a seat. Would you like some coffee? I just made some."

"Uh, yes, thank you."

"How do you take it?"

"Actually, no. I don't drink coffee."

"Oh, I see."

"That'll be fine."

"What?"

"Hi-C."

"Oh, no. I said, 'I see.'" She laughed easily at the mistake and moved past Frank, heading for the kitchen. As she did, she brushed her hand over his arm in a friendly gesture, and the touch went racing through Frank's whole frame. "Let me see if I've got something like Hi-C in there. We stocked up when we knew our nephew was coming."

She was gone, and Frank still stood looking at the jumble on the wall. The branches and the conduit melded and had a left to right flow. The Barbie Dolls, snuggled down in their condom sleeping bags, bobbed comically in the flow. Frank lost himself and smiled involuntarily.

Daria's voice, asking if root beer would do, snapped him out of this. He answered yes, and then was able to see the mark of the serpent in the whole crazy sculpture in front of him. With Daria out of the room, he was able to concentrate, and he realized that what he was looking at now might be exactly what Manley needed. Sculpture my ass, he thought. This is just what druggies do when they're "high."

"Do you like?"

Daria had returned and was handing him a glass of root beer. The glass itself was not normal, a kid's glass with Bugs Bunny characters all over it. Again, Daria punctuated her speaking with a friendly touch, this time on Frank's forearm as he took the glass. Again, the touch became an electrical charge racing around his body.

"I, uh..." Frank's brain was in such overdrive now he didn't know if Daria

was talking about the thing on the wall, the way her shorts rode up the back of her thighs when she bent over, the smiling kid at the door, or the weather.

“Sorry. Unfair question. I’m used to people having strong opinions about my art, any art, really. I don’t know. I shouldn’t ask for opinions, though. Spontaneity is better.” She took a breath and smiled. “Listen to me, babbling on. Please, have a seat.”

Whew. Frank could have taken a little more of the babbling. Daria had short auburn hair and bright, round blue eyes, and even though she was apologizing for something or other, going on as if she had done something wrong, her face was so supremely engaging Frank didn’t want her to stop. When she did, he realized the little performance was over, and she was inviting him to join her on the couch.

Suddenly Frank was aware that everything in the room, the mayhem on the wall, the stacks of books and magazines, the window, the glass of root beer in his hand were all foreign objects, distanced from him, all oddly angled and clunky, and that the only thing truly of any interest in the entire world was Daria’s marvelous face.

The teenager, who must have been on the phone in the kitchen, burst out laughing at something, and the spell was broken. Daria still smiled up at Frank, waiting for him to sit, but she was no longer the enchanting presence she had been only seconds before. Now she was the cunning temptress, and Frank’s brain geared down enough to see her and her surroundings for the evil they most clearly were.

Drugs. He had a brief moment in which he wondered if there were a way for Daria and Quincy and the teenager to get him “high” without giving him some substance, if just standing around this house could turn him on. He felt the sweat on the root beer glass and wondered if that could have a substance in it that had soaked into his pores.

“You can put the glass on the table. It won’t bother it.”

Another smile from the temptress as she pointed to a glass-top table nearby. She was reading his mind now. He had just thought about the glass of root beer and getting rid of it, and she had read his mind. She was also,

patiently, waiting for him to sit on the couch with her. He decided he had to move, had to do something, that just standing there made him an easy target. He turned awkwardly, put the glass down on the table, avoided Daria's knees, and sat between her and some magazines.

And then the smell hit him. Actually, "hit" is the wrong word for it. The fragrance that came through his nose and went straight to his brain was an essence without the usual properties of matter, without beginning or end, a wisp of worlds, a beauty without body. Frank realized it was coming from Daria, that it was a perfume or a cologne she was wearing, but it seemed instantly a part of himself as well. Daria was speaking now, smiling again, her eyes blinking as they had before, but it took Frank half of her first sentence to reel himself back from the place the fragrance had sent him.

"...seems really sweet."

"Pardon?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it was your daughter."

"What was my daughter?"

"The girl who came through the little woods out back."

"Girl?"

"Yes. A couple of days after we moved in. I was out in the backyard sunning myself, and I saw this little face in the bushes. She was just standing there. So, I went over and we talked. I think she said her name was Rachael. It was the little wooded area between our houses. She was very polite. You must be proud of her."

"Yes, we are. My wife and I. We're married."

Frank could almost see these words leave his mouth, see that they were nonsense, that if he called Grace his wife it meant that they were married, but he couldn't do anything about it. His mind was stuck on the very, very disturbing news Daria had just brought to him, to wit: She could see people hiding in the wooded area between their houses when she sunbathed. Had a half-naked Daria tried to lure Rachael into her yard? Had he, Frank, in his time in the bushes, perhaps turned away briefly, and had Daria seen him in that moment and decided to tempt him with her nakedness?

Daria must have guessed Frank was a little disturbed. She blew on her coffee, thinking.

“Marriage can be wonderful. Is yours a happy one?”

She brought her coffee cup to her lips, and that created folds in her t-shirt. Her breasts underneath the folds became gorgeously obvious. That fragrance swirled with every syllable. Frank knew he had to get out of there.

“I...I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry. Was that too personal?” She touched his forearm again. Again, a warm current raced around his neural network.

“No, I...think we’re compatible.”

“That’s very important. Very important.”

All of a sudden, he and Daria were best friends. It was like that woman in shipping who had Frank talking about Rachael’s skin problems only minutes after he’d poked his head in her cubicle, introduced himself, and asked if she could trace a package for him. Grace had sworn him to absolute secrecy on the matter of Rachael’s rash. But he blithely went on about it. It was a trick. He didn’t know how the shipping lady had done it, and he didn’t know how Daria just did it. Compatible? That was the truth, but it sure wasn’t an answer Pastor Otto would condone. What kind of black magic was she working?

“Aunt Dee, there’s somebody wants to speak to, uh, Quincy.” The teenager came into the living room with a flip phone.

“I’ll take it.”

Daria stood and reached for the phone. As she did, the backs of her thighs were even with Frank’s gaze. He could see a red indentation, probably from the piping on the couch cushion, that ran across both hamstrings. He had the urge to reach out and touch that marred flesh, but Daria moved away quickly. The teenager gave Daria the phone. She didn’t leave the room.

With Daria now not so close, Frank was able to swim back to the mission, to the reason he was there in the first place. The investigation. Daria was taking an “important” phone call. She was answering the call right in

front of him. That meant she wasn't suspicious, wasn't aware of Frank's intentions, thought him harmless. He began to make mental notes.

The phone Daria held wasn't a flip phone after all. It was one of those new ones Apple was selling, smart phones, ones Pastor Otto warned were the work of the Devil. That might be a sign. Manley had said something about communications among dealers, how they were all coded and high-tech. This phone fit that description. Then there was the conversation.

"He's not here but anytime will do. I can get you started. Trust me it's a breeze." Daria listened and then ended the conversation with "Fine, 'bye."

She hung up and went to the kitchen with the phone. Frank heard Daria saying something to the teenage boy, but he couldn't make out the words. What he had heard was burned into his brain, though, and he couldn't wait to get back to his notebook to write it down. The normalcy of the sentences was the tipoff. "Trust me, it's a breeze," had to be drug talk. Daria returned. She was a little more self-absorbed now, not as outgoing. Then she sat down and smiled again.

"I'm sorry. You know I didn't even ask the reason for your visit. Was it just to say hello?"

"No, it was, uh, The Fourth."

"The Fourth? What about The Fourth."

"Of July."

"Right. I guessed that." Her smile returned.

"Oh. Well, there's a tradition around here, been going on about three years now..."

"That's a short tradition, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. But it's a good one. We like to line the whole street with little American flags. You can get them over at Target over at the Chippewa Mall, do you know where that is?"

"Uh, yes." Daria was tentative and looked away.

"Well, we like to have them spaced about eight inches apart, right at the curb. We set them out the day before, and all day The Fourth, when you

look up and down the block, there's this pathway of flags. It's a great way to honor the country."

"Hmm. And everybody does this?"

"On our block. We had hoped it would spread, and they tried over on Pomeroy last year. Pomeroy's the next..."

"I know."

"...street over. They had some stragglers though, and it didn't look right, sort of like missing teeth."

"Well, I'm glad you warned me."

"Wouldn't want missing teeth on this block."

"No. But, uh, we might have a problem getting the flags."

"Actually, I've got extras, and The Snyders, up on the corner, are overstocked too. We thought we'd have the flags go around their whole property, but then we decided not to go on the cross street, so they've got a lot left over."

"It's not that. It's Quincy. He has this thing about the flag."

"Well, I understand that. Martha Noxon, in the maroon house across the street, she made a stink the first year too, said it was a desecration, and that the flag should only be on a pole. But we looked it up, and it's not a desecration as long as the flags are going in the right direction. That is..."

"No, it's not that. Quincy feels the flag is, uh, how to say this? Maybe he should tell you himself. We lost, I mean, he lost his father, a military man, when he was very young. He went to the funeral. He thought a funeral was where people came back from the dead. So, when he got there, and all they did was give him a flag, he took all his anger out on it. He can't stand to have one near the house. The Fourth is tough for him. I'm sure you can understand."

"He can't have a flag near the house?"

"Oh, I mean, he's not some radical or anything. It's not going to bother him if you all have flags on your lawns. It's just us. He wouldn't want flags on our lawn, I can tell you that."

The evidence was mounting. Disdain for the flag and drug use went hand

in hand in Frank's book. Add that to the sort of disheveled lifestyle in the living room, the wild thing on the wall, the mysterious phone call with the code words, the nudity in the backyard, and the case seemed complete.

When Frank realized this, he began to get nervous just being in the house. His exposure to *Cops* had shown him that the places where drugs were made, bought, and sold were nests of armed criminals. Frank couldn't imagine where Daria had a gun stashed, unless it was in the front of her shorts, underneath the shirt's overhang, but he began to suspect that she wouldn't be alone in the house, that is without Quincy, unless she had easy access to a gun.

Thinking about a gun poking down Daria's shorts did a little number on Frank, but a quick prayer for concentration pulled him back from the Devil's lust. He was settling into the investigation now, wondering what else he could observe. He was running down the list of things Manley had told him to look for when the doorbell rang. Daria got up immediately, pulled back a curtain on the front window, saw who was at the door, and turned to Frank.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to have to take care of this. And, I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

"That's okay." Frank was feeling it a good thing to be anonymous here. "I'll leave."

"I am sorry," Daria said over her shoulder as she moved toward the front door and opened it. "Maybe some other time...Hi."

She said this last to the person standing on the doorstep. Frank couldn't see who it was at first. Then in came one of the druggiest looking men Frank had ever seen. Not that he'd seen a lot, but in this day and age you can't escape the godless, as Pastor Otto said often, and Frank had seen his share.

This one was far gone. He was probably in his thirties but he looked about 60. He had scraggly brown hair, horrible complexion, sunken eyes, and his clothes were all rumpled, as if he'd slept in them for days. He was a little surprised to see Frank there and looked furtively from Frank to Daria. Daria smiled her smile again, but this time Frank wasn't taken in. Now he knew her collection of crinkles and teeth to be the serpent's grin.

“Sandy...This is...” Daria turned to Frank, “I still didn’t get your name.”

“Earl,” Frank said, pleased with himself for the ease with which he lied.

“See. I’m horrible at that. I would have guessed Frank, if I’d had to take a test,” then turning to Sandy, “This is Earl, our next-door neighbor.”

Sandy nodded and then coughed so hard into his hand Frank thought the man might just come apart. Daria gave Frank a look that said he better leave, and Frank angled past the coughing druggie and made it to the door.

“Thanks for coming. I’d love to meet your wife. Tell her to stop by.”

Frank nodded, sort of the way Sandy had nodded to him, and walked out the door. He was elated. He had gotten so much more than he could ever have hoped for. Instead of the glimpse Manley had told him he’d get, he had taken in a complete eyeful. Daria had revealed her breasts in the backyard, but that was nothing compared to what she had revealed in the house. She didn’t seem all that dumb or drugged out, but she sure was lacking in caution. Frank took the sidewalk route home, and while he walked, he replayed Daria’s phone call, Sandy’s entrance, and he started forming the words he’d use to relay all this to Manley.

“She was brazen, probably thinking I was just there to talk about The Fourth (that was my ruse),” he imagined himself saying. And he could imagine Manley nodding, notating, maybe even saying something like “good one, I’ll tell the boys to use that sometime too.” Frank knew he had to get on to the picnic, to meet Grace and the kids, but what he really wanted to do was get to his notebook, get the whole vivid experience of 15 minutes in a drug den down on paper.

He was at the garage door to the house, jangling some change in the front pocket of his shorts, when he discovered a little tumescence down there and realized the last part of his trip back had focused on those folds of t-shirt over Daria’s breasts. X-ray like Frank could see the unadorned breasts under those folds, and for some reason, unlike the way he had seen them in the backyard, the nipples were erect, quite erect.

He stopped where he was there in the garage and knelt in prayer. “Keep the temptress from my door,” was what came to him. “Keep the temptress

from my door.” The prayer had worked before, when he was trying to scrub his brainpan of the image of Daria’s sun-dappled breasts. But this time it seemed to have the opposite effect. The word temptress played over the image of the t-shirt, the t-shirt that had been so close to his vision, the breasts under it near enough to reach out and touch, and the tumescence grew. The more he prayed, the harder he got.

He was in the middle of this predicament when he heard the phone inside ring. Instinctively he stood and opened the door and got inside in time to catch the call on the third ring. The bulge in his pants rubbed against the kitchen counter, and it was in this awkward position that he got the news.

3

Slipping

Grace had done nothing wrong. She was concentrating on the road well enough, even though she was thinking that the light rain that morning might make the Newtowne picnic something of a bust. Her cottage cheese and gelatin salad was on the seat next to her, and the kids were in the back seat of the van playing with their portable Bible Scrabble game. Then, as she said later, “the Lord took the car off the road.” He had some help from a slickened surface, an unexpected curve, and some anti-lock brakes that were slow to anti.

It wasn’t much of a crash. Grace had taken the Pine Street route around the new subdivision north of town, and, luckily for all concerned, traffic there was almost nil that morning. The van simply slid sideways for about 50 feet and plopped into a roadside ditch, knocking up against the metal post holding a “curve ahead” sign. There was cottage cheese and gelatin salad all over the front seat. Franklin Jr. whacked his head so hard on the side window that he would require 10 stitches in his forehead. Rachael

was unscathed, and Grace sustained what she thought at first was a badly sprained wrist, but which turned out to be a hairline fracture of her forearm.

The whole thing happened so suddenly and so incongruously that Grace and the kids sat in the car dumfounded and not talking for about 20 seconds. Grace pulled herself up to a sitting position and took note of the fact that her sleeveless dress had come all askew and her lap was puddled with the lime green salad. Grace looked in the rearview mirror and asked if the kids were all right. Rachael, in a delayed reaction, began to wail about the blood pouring from Franklin Jr.'s cut. Grace, thinking in slow motion, looked over at the metal post creasing the side of the van and had a vague thought about undoing her seatbelt and getting out of the car. A knock at the driver side window made her jump.

Tom Adams, a coworker of Frank's and an indefatigable member of Mt. Olive Baptist, his normally red face redder from a short sprint to the scene of the accident, was there mouthing something and looking quite concerned. Grace hit the window button and was somewhat surprised it worked.

"...better get out." Tom finished.

"What?"

"If you can, you better get out. Anybody hurt?"

Grace then realized a couple of things. Her right hand, resting on the seat, wouldn't move when she wanted it to, and when it did move it hurt like heck. The pain started to reel her back from the realm of shock, and she was quickly aware that the left half of the top of her dress had slid down, and that her substantial, bra-covered left breast was staring Tom in the face.

When she tried to correct this problem, the bolts of lightning that went from her right wrist to her brain kept her from covering up. Rachael's wailing went up an octave. Franklin Jr. was repeating the word "blood" over and over, and Tom was saying things she couldn't understand. When Tom reached in and discreetly restored both Grace's dress and her dignity, the Lord decided it was time for Grace to pass out.

Frank got to the hospital just as they were finishing the x-rays on Grace's wrist. Tom, someone you would definitely want to have around in a situation

like this, was ministering to all three of the victims and was able to give Frank a quick and accurate picture of the whole episode (minus the view he had of Grace's breast). He had been driving about a quarter of a mile behind the van and saw the whole thing happen.

"Strange and mysterious ways, I'll tell you. Like in one of those video games where you think you're steering one way and you're going the other. That's what it looked like to me. Know what I mean?"

Frank didn't play video games because Grace was sure they were full of subliminal messages, but he sort of got the picture.

"You mean it was just our car, sliding off the road?"

"Ice skating. That's what it looked like. If it had been winter, I would have said she hit a patch of ice. She wasn't speeding or anything. Lucky too, because the van hit a road sign and if she'd been going fast..."

Tom didn't finish, the conclusion obvious. They were talking outside a glass-walled room, and Frank could see Franklin Jr. being sewn up and Grace, her arm tightly wrapped, getting fitted with a sling. Frank thanked Tom by putting a hand on his shoulder and went in the room.

Rachael came to him and hugged him so tightly her chin did some serious damage to his ribs. Grace, still a little dumbfounded, greeted him with bleary eyes. And Franklin Jr., the only one to recover fully mentally, craned his eyeballs around the hands of the doctor sewing him up and started babbling.

"The Scrabble pieces went all over the place, and I looked up and we were sort of spinning, and it was kind of cool, but then it wasn't cool because I slammed my head against the window, and then we stopped and there was blood and..."

The doctor, stepping between Franklin Jr. and Frank, slowed down the motor mouthing, and Frank turned to Grace.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah. They say I got a hairline in my arm here. No cast, though. That's good."

"That is. Boy, you were lucky Tom was behind you."

"Lucky, Frank?"

“I mean.”

“The Lord put him there to be sure. You know there’s no such thing as luck.”

“Right. Just an expression.”

“Well, don’t use it in front of the children.”

There was something off with Grace. She was a little spacey, and maybe, Frank thought, they’d given her something for her pain. But it was more than that. Grace was normally in control of things between them, even though she, along with all the other women at Mt. Olive had taken a pledge to obey their husbands in all things, but this was a bit beyond that normal level of control. This had a measure of accusation in it. Did she know, Frank thought guiltily, that while she and the kids were sliding off the road, he was taking root beer from a temptress whose gorgeous thighs were only inches away from his face?

After a twinge of pain hit Grace’s forearm, she continued.

“No, it wasn’t luck Tom was there. There’s no doubt about that. What I can’t figure out is why the Lord saw it necessary to give us a car crash. What was he trying to tell us? What’s going on that he wanted to alert us to?”

“There are things seen and things unseen,” Frank said automatically, not sure this was the right answer, but one that seemed just obscure enough to avoid the question.

“What does that mean?”

“Strange and mysterious. That’s what Tom said. He said it was strange and mysterious.”

The water Frank was in was heating up. Daria’s thighs and the attendant guilt were making Frank’s voice flutter a bit. Grace didn’t seem all that spacey now. She sensed something, and Frank’s vagueness made her sit up and sniff the wind.

“What’s strange and mysterious, Frank? Do you think we’ve been turning from the Lord?”

“Us?”

“It can happen. It can happen, and you don’t even know it.”

“I think we’d know it.”

Grace was getting a little agitated now, and Frank was happy to see this agitation didn’t have the accusatory veneer it had earlier. Grace was getting worried about herself.

“We were driving to the picnic in separate cars. We weren’t together. You don’t go to a picnic in separate cars, not if you’re a godly family. I bet that’s what the Lord was saying. ‘Take a look at yourselves, Mr. and Mrs. Franklin K. Tripping. Take a good look at yourselves.’ That’s what He was doing. Why were we in separate cars?”

Grace was so heartfelt about her concern that Frank nearly went down on his knees and confessed that he had sent the family on ahead, under the pretense that he needed to fix the backyard sprinkler system, so that he could carry on his investigation, and that he had been led right into the Devil’s lair and...

“The sprinklers,” he croaked, pulling himself back from this confessional brink. “You’re right. I chose finishing the work on the sprinklers over my family.”

“You could have done that after the picnic. It was raining, after all.”

“Right.”

“And what was wrong with the sprinklers anyway? You can’t fix things.”

“Yeah, I, uh, realized that shortly after you left. That must be the reason. The Lord must have been saying, ‘forget the sprinklers.’”

Luckily for Frank, Grace found the answer plausible. The doctor finished Franklin Jr.’s stitches and started talking to them about what needed to be done to avoid infection. Tom came in to say that Pastor Otto was on the way, and Rachael, for some reason, put another chin drill hug on Frank, his wincing prompting Grace to tell Rachael to let go.

The question of the Lord’s intent in the accident was thereby shelved until Pastor Otto arrived. When he did stride into the room, he was in a very combative mood and announced that Grace and the kids had been unwitting warriors in a battle he himself had been waging for months now.

Though the curve just ahead of the accident hadn’t been the cause of the

crash, the curve had been a nettling problem for the pastor. He had been engaged in a protracted debate with the town council about whether or not there should be guardrails on the curve. His insistence that the Lord was sending the town council a message “through the sacrifice of our poor sister and her sweet innocents” trumped Grace’s parsing of the reason behind the accident, and Frank couldn’t have agreed with him more.

All of them were off base, however. The accident really had nothing to do with a slippery road or sprinklers or Pastor Otto’s crusade. And, of course, it wasn’t random. No, that slide off the road was, deep down, an intelligently designed way of opening Grace’s eyes to the worth and wonder of her newly minted savior, Tom Adams.

4

Whistles

Frank was itching to go to Manley's office and unload all the intelligence he'd gathered on his reconnaissance mission. But the accident and Grace's needs crippled that plan for a few days.

Frank took Monday off to help around the house, do some of the instruction for the day, and run to the pharmacy. Grace and Percodan, her "yummies" she called them in front of the kids, had become good friends in the hospital and would continue their relationship until she could be absolutely certain she would have a painless day, several weeks later.

Tom came to visit Sunday after church and again Monday after work. Unaware Grace was buzzed on yummies, he found her gushing thank-yous, delivered every five minutes or so, a bit over the top. But Tom was one of those people who was drawn to a good crisis, and the accident and its aftermath qualified as pretty okay in that category.

No one realized, least of all Tom himself, that his brief glimpse of Grace's breast, and his brush of same with his hand, as he straightened her dress,

had been the real reason for his continuing ministrations. Such motivations aren't part of the makeup of good Christian men, of course, and Tom was a good Christian man. But he was ineluctably drawn to the Tripping household and, on one pretense or another, would be for quite a while.

Frank considered scooting out to Manley's office when Tom arrived, but he knew there would be too many questions, and he knew he'd be stretching his luck if he tried to bluff Grace again. Even yummied up she had a gimlet eye for signs of his anxiety or distress.

Grace, meanwhile, was having a problem with what she had always called her "situation." In short, she had great trouble working up the wifely obedience quotient she knew she should be allotting her husband. When she heard other women in the Gethsemane Group gush over the ways in which submission to their hubbies had made them more committed Christians, had changed some bad scenes to good in the house, and had even given them some earthly rewards such as new carpets and dishwashers, she would squeeze her eyelids tight and ask the Lord to please wipe out the assessment she had of her own mate; that he was a paunchy, unexciting, clumsy, hand-iwork-challenged, middling, office worker, who coddled his kids when he should have been shaping their fallen lives with good Christian discipline.

Her brush with death, as Grace began calling it the day after the mishap, did nothing to alter the "situation" and in fact deepened the distress. Tom's rather fevered aid both at the site of the crash and in the days following was a reminder that a) Frank had not been with his family when he should have been, and b) that a man who knew how to wield a hammer was somebody one might really enjoy being obedient to.

Tom, acting out of pure Christian charity, he thought, was, like Frank and his encounters with Daria, unaware of the ramifications of his actions. Tom's first inkling of the profundity of the change in him came late at night after his Monday visit to the Tripping home. He found himself in the shower, his hand moving up and down on his hardening "thing," his imagination bringing him a naked Grace, soapy and sultry there under the spray, turning her fine large rump to him, bending slightly and asking if he liked doggy style.

It was probably hearing the words “doggy style” come out of the mouth of his imagined Grace, or the Pastor Otto-induced whistle shrieking in his head, that jolted him from this Devil’s delusion and made him look down at the foreign object bobbing in and out of his fist. He had, of course, shed the masturbation malaise when he had been saved, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had gotten lustfully excited, but obviously there were things working in his body, urging him to unpack some old feelings and let her rip. Luckily the tiny water heater emptied, the shower turned icy, the moment passed, a quick “keep me on the path” prayer helped, and when his wife, Evangeline, knocked on the door and asked if everything was all right, Tom was able to answer yes and sort of mean it.

About that Pastor Otto-induced whistle. Pastor Otto had a thing for sins of the flesh, and particularly for what he called “Jimmy Carteritis,” the insidious lusting in the heart that could never be wiped out, even by years of working for Habitat for Humanity. Pastor Otto knew firsthand the dangers of looking at pornography and the treacheries, even, of leaving the eyes too long on the clothed and chaste female anatomy.

At the men’s Bible study one evening, with both Frank and Tom in attendance, Pastor Otto had witnessed to his own affliction with lust in his youth, evoking the essence of his encounters. When he saw he had evoked plenty of essence, he shocked the men back from their reveries with a blast on a piercing, high-pitched, silver whistle, thus imprinting them all with internal whistles they could use whenever the Devil caused their eyes to linger on any female anatomy at all.

Tom’s moment in the shower had a shrieking whistle soundtrack, and Frank had been hearing a continuous whistle, something akin to a bad case of tinnitus, pretty much ever since Daria’s backyard disrobing. The flurry of activity after the accident, and Frank’s guilt, toned down the tinnitus some through Monday and most of Tuesday.

Tuesday evening, however, as a warm early evening sun slanted down the street, giving the neighborhood a lush, buttery glow, the Devil had Daria walk barefoot out to water a flowerbed in the front yard, dressed in her jean

shorts again. The spraying water rainbowed in the light. She tossed her hair a little when a bug of some sort buzzed her. As she shifted to another part of the flowerbed, she did a little hop over the hose, and her breasts under her t-shirt did a little dance as well.

Frank, watching all this from the window of Franklin Jr.'s bedroom, heard the whistle go whacky, panned his vision over to the three cars parked in the driveway, and remembered the investigation, the criminality he had uncovered. He knew he'd have to forego lunch the next day and go see Manley.

5

The Road to Hell

The visit to the police station was the perfect antidote to Frank's guilt over the accident. He was ushered into Manley's office by a clerk as soon as he got there. Manley beamed him a broad smile, pumped his hand, had him sit, went and got another detective, whose name Frank didn't get, and the two of them sat across from Frank with notebooks open and pens scribbling.

"There was dried vomit right next to the front door. I..."

"How did you know it was vomit?" Manley asked gently, not wanting to seem skeptical.

"I don't know what else it could be. Looked just like when the kids up-chuck in the back seat. Only this was next to the front door."

"The front door," the other detective said, writing. "Means it was probably somebody coming to the front door. If it were a resident, he or she would probably vomit out the back door, don't you think?" Manley nodded to this and noted it in his notebook.

"Right," he said. "Guy's sick, needs a fix, they're a little slow coming to the door. Whoops."

Frank felt his power rising. A small clue, one he noticed, was now being reviewed favorably by these two professionals. He couldn't wait to get to the juicy stuff and see their reaction. He was a little nervous about what he was going to say about Daria, however. He wanted to keep that as dry as he could, not let on he had moments of confusion, moments when his cold eye had started to go warmish.

He described the beginning of the episode, the boy coming to the door, and being let in so quickly. Manley had an explanation for that. He said you might think that sellers would be very guarded, peep holes and chained doors and such, being very careful who they let in the house. But that was just Hollywood and maybe the big city. Out here, Manley explained, the druggies think they're dealing with small town bozos and operate with a much looser lifestyle.

"They don't count on citizens like you stepping up," Manley ended. Frank's pride swelled a little, and he went back to his narrative.

He leapfrogged any mention of Daria's attire or her assays at temptation. As he became more and more accepted by the cops, he revised his rendering of the scene, leeching it of his normal locutions, and adopting the clipped speech and mannerisms of the men in blue.

"It was an object made of scrap stuff and was hung on the wall. Don't know what you'd call it. It was a mess, just like the rest of the place. The woman tried to clean up some, but she didn't seem to mind that a visitor didn't have any place to sit."

"So, you stood the whole time?"

"No. I sat on the couch, she got me a pop, which she called 'soda,' and we talked until she got the phone call."

"Phone call?"

"The kid was on the phone practically the whole time. I could hear him in the kitchen. I tried to hear what he was talking about, but he was talking low. Then he came in the living room and said there was somebody on the line who had to talk to Quincy. The phone was one of those new ones. Apple or something."

“An iPhone?” Manley asked.

“I what?”

“Like this,” the other detective said pulling out what looked to Frank like a slab of plastic. But it did resemble the one Daria had used.

“Yes, I guess so. I couldn’t see too well. The woman took the call and moved away from me.”

“Did you hear what she said?” Manley was doing the questioning now. The other detective seemed to have all the information he needed.

“Just a couple of sentences. Seemed like the person on the other end of the line was worried about something, and this Daria was telling him or her to come over, that everything would be fine. ‘It’ll be a breeze,’ is the way she said it.”

Frank waited after this because Manley was writing a lot. The other detective stared at Frank, thinking. Then he spoke.

“You’ve got kids, right?”

“Yes. Two. Boy and a girl. That’s part of my reason for being here, to protect them.”

“My blood really boils when these scum bring kids into the operation. What did you say, nephew? My god. I wonder what his parents are going to say when they find out. You know just being in the house in this state could get him a good stiff sentence, and not in some cush juvie place.”

“Really? You think his parents don’t know?”

“Ah, you’re right. Probably they know and just don’t give a shit.”

Frank nodded, but the casual use of “shit” poked out at him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard anybody say that, at least not without apologizing afterward. This detective wasn’t apologizing, probably didn’t even realize what he was saying. But the moment served to impress Frank rather than leave him critical. Like soldiers in the trenches of Europe, these men were allowed some mild profanity. They deserved it. The Lord, Frank realized, would have no problem with those swear words.

“Damn right,” Frank heard himself shoot back. He was, after all, one of them now, wasn’t he?

“This Quincy,” Manley started, “He Afro-American? Like Quincy Jones?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so. I’ve only caught glimpses of him but...well, he is sort of dark, maybe tanned. I don’t know.”

“Probably not. The colo...Afro-Americans keep to themselves over there on South Street. They got their own market.” Manley got a second on this from his partner.

The two cops looked at Frank, waiting for him to join the casual racism they were engaging in, but Frank didn’t pick up on that. He didn’t even know where South Street was. But he still felt part of the brotherhood. He plowed ahead quickly after that, eager to get to the capper, the piece of information he knew would seal the deal; the desperate knock on the door, and the appearance of the scraggly “Sandy.”

Manley and the other detective gave each other looks at this description, the first time in the interview they had done so. They shared a thought before Manley spoke.

“Think it’s Markham?”

“If it is, there’s meth there for sure.”

“How long’s he been out?”

“Doesn’t have to be more’n 15 minutes with him.”

“I’ll say,” at which point Manley turned to Frank for a further description.

Frank gave it to him and told him about being sort of hustled out of the house. As he was doing so, he remembered the detail about the flags. He told that story, and neither Manley nor the other detective wrote anything down. Frank noted this and ended by saying, “I guess that doesn’t really have anything to do with drugs but...”

“No,” Manley said, agreeing and also agreeing with what Frank was about to say. “No, not to some liberal judge or something. But come on, guy don’t want to put the flag on his front lawn, spits on the country, so to speak, and he’s gonna have no problems breakin’ the law, turning kids into addicts, whatever. Kind of a gateway crime in my book.”

Manley stood up and signaled the meeting was over. Frank felt a twinge of incompleteness and stayed seated. He was used to any meeting ending in

a prayer. The two detectives must have picked up on this because they both went to Frank, put hands on his shoulders, and Manley began to mumble.

“Thank you for the gift of this brave soul, Lord. Amen.”

Frank was moved almost to tears. He had been heard and appreciated. He stood and shook hands with his new friends. Manley was grave.

“This is the delicate part, Frank. We’ve got enough for a search warrant, I believe. But from here on we don’t want you to have anything to do with this. We don’t have your full name anywhere here, and we won’t. If it ever comes to you testifying or anything, we’ll make sure you can do that anonymously. We’ll tell you when we’re going to move, give you enough time to be out of the neighborhood, you and your family. Then after we’ve got ‘em, if we’re lucky, they’ll just cop to the charge, plead out, and go do their time without a trial. I know that’s all technical stuff, and you might not understand it, but the bottom line is, you’ve done your job, you’ve done what you can to protect your family and our city, and we’ll take it from here.”

Frank waited by the front door of the station house until there were no cars going up or down the street, then headed quickly for his car in the parking lot. He slipped in, made sure again he wasn’t seen, and headed back to work. Truth be told he didn’t get much work done that afternoon. The phrase “...protect your family and our city” kept spinning in his head, and he had all he could do not to tell the whole office how heroic he had been.

Had Frank been able to see Manley and the other detective, whose name was Webster, recounting Frank’s visit to a little gaggle of cops around the coffee machine, breaking up the group particularly when they reenacted their prayer moment, Frank might not have wrapped himself in the rosy glow of heroism there in his cubicle. It wasn’t that the detectives were insincere about their pursuit of the bad guys. It was just that naivete can be a real hoot.

6

Brakes Off

Frank spent the following two weeks in high anxiety, expecting a call from Manley at any moment. He had wondered what excuse he would use to get the family out of the house and, after prayer, the Lord sent him a vision of Denny's. Grace always complained about their prices, but the kids loved the gargantuan desserts, and Frank knew that if he just blurted out, "Let's go to Denny's," without consulting Grace, Rachael, for sure, would be jumping up and down, making the trip a necessity.

Frank knew the Lord would forgive him for this breach of parental consultation because there was a higher objective being met; he was protecting his loved ones from the violence that was certain to come down.

Exactly what sort of violence occupied a lot of Frank's thinking in those days. There was, of course, the battering ram that he was sure the cops would use. Every time the cops on *Cops* were going after druggies, they used the thing to explode the front door of the house and rush in screaming all sorts of stuff. So, there would be that. And the cops would almost certainly throw Quincy down on the ground, and put a knee into his back,

and call him names that would be bleeped on TV. That too was standard operating procedure.

He wasn't sure what they would do with Daria. It probably depended on how much she resisted. The men druggies always got the throw-on-the-ground treatment, usually after some chaotic chase through a backyard. But the women only got the treatment if they mouthed off or started pounding a cop with their fists. He couldn't imagine Daria doing this.

While Frank was running through all these scenarios, there were, in the back of his mind, visions of a glorious day when he would be able to tell Grace, the kids, the congregation, the whole world, what he had done. Grace, in particular, he imagined, would finally realize her husband was a courageous Christian and swoon her appreciation of his bravery. He could see her maybe giving him a hug. Had he known what was up with Grace at that very moment, however, he wouldn't have harbored such high expectations.

Grace was, in fact, in hot pursuit of Tom's attention. She was squandering valuable prayer time thinking of ways she could get Tom to come over more often. Of course, she never would have voiced it that way, nor thought about it that way either. To her there was a window of opportunity in which she, as a recovering crash victim, could count on the sympathy of others and get them to do some of the things Frank couldn't do. Since Tom was the only one who had stepped up to help, she was mainly plotting intersections with him, at church mostly, and in those intersections making mention of, say, the hole in the wall behind Rachael's door where the knob hit, or the chipped tile near the bathtub. Tom was obliging but recently he'd been AWOL, and Grace was afraid that window of opportunity was going to slam shut soon.

Tom's absence was due to those lustful shower demons that rose, so to speak, after every visit to the Tripping house. Grace, especially during those times when Frank wasn't around, seemed to have a sixth sense about Tom's moment of temptation and did little to alter the course of the Devil's work. For instance, pointing to a rusted section of roof gutter she wished could be replaced, she turned away from Tom, and an almost perfect circle of

sunlight, coming through the maple in the backyard, highlighted that round mound of delight Grace had, in his imagination, invited him to enjoy in the shower. Tom whipped his gaze up to the rusted gutter, but his mind went numb, and the gutter briefly became, in his vision, an erect penis.

Frank, anticipating an imminent bust and a glorious revelation thereafter, missed any clues that there was some pretty fervid moth-to-flame stuff going on around the house. And at church. After a Sunday service, for instance, Frank walked ahead of Grace up the aisle and missed her button-holing Tom as he stood by himself. She flipped the switch to coquettish, and Tom was hooked.

"I was thinking of you yesterday with that rain. Poor guy. I said to myself, I wonder if Tom's Toyota still has that leak in the back window?"

"I caulked it Friday after work. No problem."

"You are clever."

"So's the Devil."

"What?"

Tom had had a little out-of-body experience and found himself commenting on his thought that the rain talk was really talk about something else. He rejoined his body and recovered nicely, however.

"Devil of a problem, because the caulking can get loosened by the bumps the car takes."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't know about that. I'm not too smart when it comes to those sorts of things. I think it takes a certain kind of mind to think like that. My mother used to say, 'know your mind' and I think that's the right attitude. My mind is, is...what?"

Tom realized this was his cue, but for the life of him he couldn't come up with an adjective other than "racy," or "doggy style," which wasn't really an adjective but was a phrase waiting on the front porch of his consciousness, ready to leap in the front door at a moment's notice. He went for the obvious.

"Kind."

"Kind?"

“WWJD. That’s the kind of mind you have. ‘What would Jesus do?’ is always at the forefront, and that means you’re always kind.”

Grace was stunned. She had never heard a sweeter thing from the lips of a man directed at her in her whole life. The last time she thought she had heard the ultimate compliment was when Frank, in a particularly un-Frank moment, had told her she was “diligent.” To many that would sound like a back handed slap, but to Grace, coming from Frank, that had been a *ne plus ultra*. Now, here, in the House of the Lord, a godly man had upped the ante by several degrees. Her lower lip quivered with an anticipated cry, but she held on to the pew rail and weathered the vertiginous effect of the lavish compliment.

“Gutter,” was the only thing that came out of her mouth. It was meant to be connected to a longer sentence, but she could only come up with the Cliff Notes version in her astonishment.

“Sorry?”

“Thank you. I meant to say. But I was thinking about the rain yesterday and our rusted gutter.”

Tom, of course, flashed on the erect penis lashed to the Tripping roof, but shook that off in time to respond in a normal interval.

“Did it come off?”

“No. But I was worried it would. Ever since we looked at that, and you had that clever idea of replacing only the one section, switching the other two, I’ve thought we ought to have that done before we really get into trouble.”

“Who?” Tom had dozed briefly during the gutter talk but roused when he heard, “we really get into trouble” and thought she might be referring to the two of them in the shower. Things were getting all balled up.

“Well, Frank and me I guess.”

“Oh, right. The gutter. Trouble. If it came off, you’d have a lot of water that might pool by the foundation and seep into the basement.”

“See. Now I didn’t think of that. I just thought it would look bad.”

Tom had tried to avoid her eyes, but now he couldn’t. To his left he heard Evangeline winding up her conversation with the usual “the Lord’s blessing

on you,” and Frank, in the aisle, was beginning to wonder when Grace was going to follow him. Tom turned to Grace, and her hazel pupils nailed him.

“Why don’t I come take a look at it Saturday?” Tom chirped, taking his cue with exquisite timing.

Also, right on cue some kids in the balcony pounded on the organ, and the sound, to Grace, was like a *ta-da!* celebrating her successful lure. While others went to silence the miscreants, Grace and Tom basked in the assurance of mutual acceptance. Then Grace purred.

“That would be wonderful.”

That night, before prayers and bed, Grace replayed the scene—complete with the kids’ *ta-da!*—and decided it was one of those nights when an extra yummiie would be just right.

7

Shouldering the Load

On the Tuesday night after the church service, Frank stayed up, sitting alone at the kitchen table, waiting for a possible late-night call from Manley. A high-pitched laugh coming from the direction of Daria and Quincy's backyard froze him. The laugh sounded again. He slid open the glass doors slowly and quietly and stepped outside.

He knew he couldn't go into the wooded area. He calculated that the best angle on Daria's backyard would come from his patio, which was slightly elevated. Hoping to get a little more elevation, Frank went inside and retrieved a kitchen stool. He found a solid few bricks on the patio, planted the stool, and started to climb on.

He looked a little bit like the elephant on the beach ball at the circus, except the elephant was a lot more graceful and flexible than Frank. Unable to stand on the stool, Frank settled for a kneeling position, straightened up, craned his neck, and took a look. There was nothing he could see at

first, but the laugh, and another deeper laugh, told him Daria and a man were still out there.

Then something that looked like fog floated across his vision, and Frank was confused at first. It was a warm, clear night. Fog was unlikely. What was going on? The fog disappeared, there was another laugh, this one extended and inviting. Then the fog again. Now Frank realized this was a plume of smoke, and he was shocked to think Daria was brazen enough to do her drugs in the open behind her house. He knew the smoke came from drugs rather than cigarettes because, well, because he just knew. He was that far into the investigation. He didn't need normal logic. His intuition had been sharpened. He was in the zone.

And then he was on the patio bricks, his right shoulder seemingly ripped from his body, his face pressed to the warm surface. He couldn't have told you how he went from his kneeling act on the stool to his rather forced supplication to the patio gods, but it happened very quickly, and the result, according to early indications, was that he had broken his shoulder. Had he screamed in pain? Could Daria have heard if he did? Grace? The kids? He didn't move, in part because it was too painful to do so, in part to listen for signs he'd been detected. Nothing was coming from his own house, and, after a few seconds, the laughter from Daria's sounded again. No disruption there.

Frank rolled away from the pain and was able to push himself up to his knees with his left hand. The toppled stool lay across his legs. His right shoulder went from shooting pains to a hot burn. He moved it slowly, found the muscles obeyed the commands he gave, and assumed nothing was broken.

By the time he was cleaning up in the bathroom, he had even more movement of the shoulder, and he thanked the Lord, literally of course, that he wouldn't have to explain a broken shoulder or cracked clavicle to Grace. The excitement of all this proved a soporific once he hit the pillow and, with Grace's snores in a bass register, he drifted off quickly.

Grace was normally the one who turned off the alarm in the morning,

but, after her hairline fracture, Frank had moved the clock to his side of the bed. When the morning radio prayer call-in show leaped out of the radio and scratched at Frank's sleeping brain the morning after his fall, he made an instinctive move to silence it by hitting the snooze button. But his now aching, stiff right shoulder didn't cooperate, and the pain made Frank start to howl. He quickly stifled the cry when he realized he would have some explaining to do if he were to scream. Grace, still in yummie land, didn't hear a thing.

As Frank woke the kids, he decided not to say anything to anyone about his accident. He knew he was horrible at fibbing, certain always that he was being detected, and, if he tried to make up some story about tripping and falling, he was sure to give away the fact that this wasn't the truth, and that wouldn't be good. Coming out of Franklin Jr.'s room, he saw himself in the hall mirror, hunched against the pain, Quasimodo-like, as if he were standing in a box that was a little shorter than he was. He straightened and felt the burn increase. He was lucky he didn't have any facial bruises, but he wondered how he was going to make it through the day without being detected.

The answer came when he opened the medicine cabinet for the toothpaste and found himself eye-to-eye with Grace's nearly depleted bottle of yummies. After a moment of hesitation, he popped one, and fifteen minutes later, pouring milk on Franklin Jr.'s cereal, felt a familiar lift, one he had felt with the painkillers he took in the aftermath of his gall bladder operation, a little pull back that gave him a different perspective on the hand that was pouring the milk, the glistening liquid itself. Shoulder? What shoulder?

The usual clichés aptly described his day thereafter. It went swimmingly, he was feeling no pain, etc. He didn't get much work done, other than making some nifty "s's" out of paper clips, but no one noticed that he was wounded, and he didn't have to explain a thing.

"Wounded" was his word for the shoulder injury because he saw the accident as more a casualty, an inevitable consequence of being on the front lines in the drug war. He wished he could confide in somebody other than

the detectives, but he knew that was risky. Manley had been clear that it was best to keep distance between him and the bust that was to come. You never could tell who might spill the beans if they knew.

He was dying to tell Grace, of course. They had been co-conspirators at first, but ever since he had engineered his solo visit to the drug den, he had made it his duty to keep his family in the dark, so they would be out of harm's way. Grace had had other things to deal with since that day and hadn't even mentioned Daria and Quincy. But she'd also been a little more critical than usual, probably because of the pain of the fracture. He would have loved to have told her what he had been up to, just so she would give him even more respect than her Christian duty demanded of her.

Frank's yummie wore off about 3:00, and the drive home was difficult. When he got to the house, Grace and the kids were at the kitchen table putting their 1,000-piece Passion of the Christ jigsaw puzzle together. All Frank wanted to do was head for that medicine cabinet, but he spent some time looking over Rachael's shoulder, helping her match one lash mark piece to one already in place. Just reaching down to point at the piece sent a nice little flaming dart up into his neck, and, as soon as he could, he headed down the hall.

Grace, unfortunately, was right behind him, and so he started for the bedroom. But with her good hand she yanked on his bad arm and ushered him into the bathroom. The pain in his shoulder was too intense to ignore, and his wince was so wide he thought he'd have to go through the door sideways. Grace didn't notice. She closed the bathroom door, whipped open the medicine cabinet, and pulled out her pill bottle, a cruel irony if ever there was one.

"I'm missing a pill."

"A pill?" was all Frank could get out as his shoulder screeched.

"I had five last night, and there were only four this morning. I'm worried."

"Are you sure you counted right?"

She gave him a look that said she would never make a mistake counting

those. “Yes. I waited until you got home because I’m not sure how to deal with this situation.”

“What situation?”

“Frank. Open your eyes. We have a thief in the house.”

“Couldn’t you just have dropped one?”

“I swept this floor five times.”

“In the toilet. Couldn’t it have dropped in the toilet?”

“Not likely. I take the pills out over here, and the toilet’s over there.”

“The sink, then.”

“I would have heard it, seen it, and it would have got caught in the drain basket. Why are you not facing the truth here. Franklin Jr. stole one of my pills.”

“Franklin Jr.?”

“That’s what I said to myself at first, but then I watched him closely. We were doing Bible spelling, and he was messing up on simple words like Jerusalem and righteousness. He said he was tired. Then later, during art, I had him color in his Old Testament coloring book, as sort of a test, and he failed.”

“How did he fail?”

“On at least two instances he colored way outside the lines, something he hasn’t done in years now. Praise Jesus he didn’t take more before I caught on. I’ve been praying all day for guidance. The Lord keeps saying we have to confront him, nip this in the bud. I’m going to have to get a refill, and I don’t want to have to worry about a thief around the house.”

Frank’s pain-addled mind twirled around the word “refill.” He considered first the fact that a fat new bottle of Percodan was in the future, but then he realized that Hawkeye would know if he touched one of those pills. Then a devious corner of his consciousness came up with a plan, one that involved him getting the prescription filled, returning to the house, and announcing that they would only give her half a prescription, or something like that, and pocketing the rest for his own pain management.

“Are you listening? What are we going to do?”

“I don’t think we want to accuse him until we’re absolutely sure.”

“Absolutely sure? Who else could it be? Rachael? Not a chance. You?”

“I might have mistaken it for an aspirin. I took an aspirin this morning.” He made a little show of looking in the medicine cabinet, but Grace wasn’t buying this at all.

“Trust me, you’d know if you got a yummie mixed up with an aspirin. You wouldn’t have been able to concentrate at work. You probably wouldn’t have even made it to work because you would have driven off the road. No, this stuff is powerful. It’s the kind of thing that makes you color outside the lines.”

Frank knew he was in too deep now. A confession at this point would be doubly suspicious. Was he confessing to protect Franklin Jr.? If not, why hadn’t he confessed right up front? And furthermore, what did he need the yummies for anyway? He was trapped.

“So, what should we do?” Grace glared at him, wishing he were Tom who, she was certain, would know exactly what to do.

“Well, of course, we need to pray about it first.” Good one. Grace couldn’t counter that with anything.

“Of course.”

She bowed her head. Frank bowed his, but when he did, stretching the neck muscles sent flaming ingots of agony throughout his body. The lash mark on the jigsaw puzzle came racing into Frank’s vision, and his mind went pain numb for a few seconds. When he recovered, he eased into the prayer, hoping for some sort of real help from the Lord.

“Lord, give us your wisdom and compassion as we deal with Franklin Jr. Remind us that your Father always dealt with loving kindness toward you, except when he allowed the Romans to kick and beat you, whip you and flay your skin until...Anyway. We won’t need to do that to Franklin Jr., but do we need to do anything at all is our question, I guess, because he’s basically a good kid, and I’m sure he’s learned his lesson and will be back coloring in the lines in no time. Amen.”

When he finished, he could feel Grace’s eyes on him and looked up to see her appraising him as if he were behind glass, an object for scrutiny.

One of her eyebrows was cocked, and she was thinking way too hard for Frank's comfort.

"You think we should do nothing?"

"I don't know. We haven't heard from the Lord." Frank was happy with this move. What could Grace do but wait?

Raise her voice, was the answer to that question.

"Franklin Jr.! Will you come here now please!" she let fly, keeping her eye on Frank until the innocent victim came to the bathroom door, wide-eyed and willing, the frisky lamb heading for the slaughter. "Did you take one of Mommie's yummys from this bottle?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"The Lord knows all the secrets of our heart, Franklin. When we tell lies, even little white lies, the Lord knows the truth. You can't hide from the Lord. Now, are you sure you didn't take one of Mommie's yummys?"

Franklin Jr. looked from Grace to Frank, who couldn't face his railroad-ed son. The seconds ticked away. Grace brandished the bottle like a gavel. Then Franklin Jr.'s voice, cracking, broke the silence.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I took one."

"You did? Why?"

"I thought they were candy."

"But I told you they were only called yummys, that they really weren't candy, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"And did you take it?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you colored outside the lines today?"

Franklin Jr. had been pretty sure of himself up to this point, but he'd only

been swinging at a straight fastball. This was a slider on the inside corner, and he wasn't sure what to do with it.

"Yes?"

"Is that with a question mark?"

"No?"

"Did you or did you not color outside the lines because you took one of Mommie's yummys?"

Something in Frank's brain always reacted to the phrase "Did you or did you not..." with the response, "Have you no dignity?" He never knew where that came from, but he found it appropriate in this setting. Still, he said nothing.

Franklin Jr. figured he had a fifty-fifty chance and took the plunge. "I did."

The confession was so complete Grace didn't take the interrogation any further. She looked at Frank, who still had his gaze averted, and decided she was on her own as far as meting out punishment was concerned.

"You will go into the kitchen and get some paper and go to your room and write, 'Thou Shall Not Steal' one thousand times, all in very good cursive. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Franklin Jr. looked from Grace to Frank again. This time Frank forced himself to play the father, patted his son on the head, as he gave him the sternest look he could muster, and then indicated Franklin Jr. should leave. He did and went to the kitchen to get paper. Rachael was still at the kitchen table working on the puzzle.

"What was that all about?" Rachael asked, innocently enough.

"You should know," Franklin Jr. spit back.

"What do you mean?"

"You took one of Mommie's yummys, didn't you?"

"No. Why?"

"You didn't?"

"Swear."

"You're not supposed to say that."

“Okay. I promise. Somebody stole one of Mommie’s yummys?”

“I thought for sure it was you.”

“And you told Mommie that?”

“No. I said it was me. And now I’ve got to write ‘Thou Shall Not Steal’ a thousand times.”

The siblings had a moment of group think before Rachael made the thought audible.

“Dad?”

“What?” came Frank’s voice nearby.

Having endured a couple of minutes of withering post-Inquisition dressing down from Grace, (“You would have just let him skate away, wouldn’t you? That’s how criminals get their start.”) Frank had come to the kitchen to survey the damage to his maligned son and entered the room as Rachael spoke. Rachael recovered quickly.

“Can you help me with this piece?”

“Sure.”

But Frank could taste the atmosphere and realized something was amiss. It was as if the conversation between his two children still echoed, and he caught a wisp of what Franklin Jr. might have told Rachael. But Franklin Jr.’s reason for copping a plea was still a mystery to Frank.

As Frank sat at the table, and Franklin Jr. left the kitchen with his sheaf of paper, Frank glanced out the kitchen window and got a jolt. The stool he had used for a perch the night before lay on the patio where he had left it. It had been there all day. Had Grace seen it? Had she missed it in the kitchen? Was she leaving it there to test him, see what he’d do about it? And, most importantly, where was she now, and could she see him if he scooted out to retrieve it?

“You’re not paying attention,” Rachael clucked, sounding very much like her mother.

“Sorry. What are we looking for?”

Rachael held up the piece, and Frank tried to concentrate, but his mind was plotting how he could get that missing piece of furniture back where

it belonged. He was tiptoeing on the patio, he was picking up the stool, he was caught, he wasn't caught and made it safely inside. He was a whole bunch of scenarios, but he wasn't working on the puzzle.

And then, neither was Rachael because Grace rang the prayer bell from the bedroom, and when Grace rang the prayer bell, you dropped everything and went to her. Unless, of course, there was a stool on the patio, and you needed to get it back in the kitchen. Frank knew he was going to hear it from Grace if he was even a minute tardy, but he calculated it would be better to face that upbraiding than the questions about the stool. He was through the glass doors and on the patio in seconds.

He realized, happily, that the stool was out of the sightline of the bedroom, so there was no chance of detection at all. Grace and the kids would be kneeling by the bed now anyway. He reached for the stool, forgetting in all his haste that he had a seriously damaged shoulder. The zing from the pain made him howl and nearly keel over. He managed to steady himself on the stool legs, and then pick it up and turn toward the house. That was when the soft voice came to him from the wooded area near the backyard.

"Earl?"

Frank didn't know who was talking, but it sounded as if someone was addressing him. Then he remembered his clever use of an alias at Daria's house. He turned to find her just inside the backyard, a mutt of some indeterminate breed sniffing around her ankles.

She was wearing an incongruous outfit for someone emerging from the bushes: a very short denim skirt with a zipper that ran the length of the front, a tightfitting, light pink tank top, that was probably doing double duty as a bra, though Frank was a little too far away to tell, and high heeled shoes that were really just some straps. Even in his compromised and pain-racked state, Frank could see she looked terrific.

Brandishing the stool, hunched against the shoulder pain, Frank struck something of a Bela Lagosi-ish pose as he answered with a weak, "Hi."

"Sorry to bother you. I tossed a ball for my friend's dog, and it kicked into the bushes. You didn't see a blue ball come through, did you?"

This set off a little associative chain reaction. “Blue ball” became “blue balls” became a long-ago “discussion” with Grace about, let us say, intermittent sex, and her preemptive dismissal of any actual phenomenon such as that locker room epithet referred to. The end of that chain was Grace herself, in the bedroom now, surely on her knees, waiting, about to get up and come looking for him.

“No. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Doobie will find it.”

“What?”

“The dog.” She was a little sheepish about this, but when she saw the name didn’t register with Frank/Earl she continued. “I’m sorry our visit got cut short the other day. You should come back when Quincy’s there and bring your family. We haven’t met many of the neighbors yet.”

“Will do,” Frank managed to squeak out. He raised his hand to give a little wave goodbye, but all he got was a wave of pain that made him stop at waist level. He turned to head for the house, but Daria’s voice stopped him.

“Earl, uh, I wanted to warn you, we’re having some work done on the house next week, and there might be some noise. Let me apologize in advance.”

Frank was about to give a quick “no problem,” but a funny thing happened on the way to the phrase. He had turned back to face Daria when she suddenly and inexplicably traversed the distance between them in no time, smiling, breasts tilting under the tank top, put a soft, cool hand around the back of his neck, kissed him lusciously on the lips, gracefully swooped the stool from his hand, threaded her arm through his, and headed them both toward the woods.

When that bubble popped, Daria was, of course, just where she had been, the stool was still in his hand, and his “no problem,” instead of the curt response he had planned, came out slowly, with something of a question mark at the end. Daria, perhaps used to men going a little squishy around her, did the conversation-ending wave, patted one of her superb thighs to call the dog, and disappeared.

Frank turned back toward the house, head down, lost in thought, until he got close to the glass doors and realized Grace was staring at him, Franklin Jr. and Rachael beside her. Grace's look said mucho trouble for Frank, but Frank thought there might be some room for hope in the fact that Daria had probably been out of Grace's sightline. He put on his best face as he brought the kitchen stool through the doors.

"What is the stool doing in your hand?"

"I don't know. It was out on the patio."

"Who put it there?"

"Not me."

This was out of Frank's mouth before he had thought about it, a knee-jerk response that he regretted almost immediately because Grace turned toward the miscreant of the moment, poor young Franklin Jr., and her body language said another grilling of the kid was in the offing. Frank, taking pity, and also noting that it didn't look like Franklin Jr. was going to take a bullet this time, overacted his ass off.

"Oh, wait a minute. I took it out there. What was I thinking? Yesterday. There was syrup on one of the legs, right here. And I took it out to wash it off, and then I got a phone call and...forgot all about it."

The syrup was a nice touch, an indication to an impartial observer that Frank was getting a little better at this fibbing business. But the phone call thing set off a little bell in Grace's evaluation of the story. Frank hardly ever got phone calls. Her eyebrow arched, but she indicated she'd let the investigation drop.

"The prayer bell, Frank?"

"I know. I should have left it for later. Sorry. Sorry kids. Dad goofed up."

Grace clicked her tongue as sort of a second to Frank's statement, then turned and headed for the bedroom. Franklin Jr., his reputation improved by the incident, followed. Frank was about to do the same, when, putting the stool back a little awkwardly because he couldn't use both hands, he noticed Rachael was still looking out the window.

"What's the woman from next door doing?"

Frank went to her and looked out to see Daria, back to them, bent over, poking around in the bushes, her short skirt hiked up to reveal the white of some skimpy underpants. Frank twirled Rachael quickly away from this and marched both of them toward the bedroom.

“I don’t know, but we don’t want anything to do with her, do we?”

“No.”

Sharing his disgust for the godless with his daughter helped bring Frank back to the reality of his situation. The Devil had been very clever out there in the backyard, leaving the stool, bringing Daria into the backyard dressed like that, conjuring that image of a kiss. But the Devil had gone too far when he exposed Rachael to the hussy’s backside. Frank couldn’t take that. He took a deep breath, knowing his sleuthing and reporting were going to soon evict the Devil’s handmaiden from his bushes, and his life. Several minutes later, kneeling around the bed with his family, Frank offered a prayer of thanks for the Lord’s guidance and the impenetrable shield he places around those who believe.

8

B-Day

By Saturday morning Frank's shoulder was feeling much better, and he himself, overall, felt somewhat changed. He thought maybe the successful fib on the stool question was behind his good spirits. Or perhaps it was the fact that he'd stopped worrying, minute by minute, if Manley was going to call. So, when, mid-morning, the call actually came, he was both surprised by it, and ready.

"Mr. Tripping, Manley. We're going in in three hours, 12:47 p.m. You'll want to be gone by then."

Frank started to ask a question, but Manley hung up, and Frank knew calling back was out of the question. He could tell the detective was in the midst of a major operation and didn't have time for foot soldiers to be pestering him with their anxieties.

He found himself to be surprisingly calm as he schemed how to hoodwink the family into leaving with him for at least four or five hours (he was certain there would be a lot of mess after the actual raid, including press, and maybe fire damage if there'd been a standoff or something like that.)

Grace was doing what she did every Saturday morning, baking Jesus

bread for the Helping Heart nursing home. The bread, Frank knew from experience, would be out about 11:00. He would have to come up with something that was time specific so that he could say, “well, we’ve got to be there by noon.” If *The Passion of the Christ* had still been in the theaters that would have been perfect. But it wasn’t, and Grace wouldn’t approve of any other film, not even the family ones some of the people in church were talking about. So, movies were out.

The prayer bell rang about 10:15, and the family gathered around the stove to pray for the rising of the Jesus bread. Frank’s mind wandered during the prayer and wandered well, as it turned out. The car needed washing. Simple as that. Elegant idea really. Car washing in the Tripping family was an outing, complete with hymn singing and prayer, as they sat in the water-bombarded car. Frank decided to make this the getaway activity as they finished blessing the bread.

After the prayer Frank went in Franklin Jr.’s room where he could get a good look at Daria’s house. There was one car in the driveway, one Frank didn’t recognize, and the shades were pulled in the windows facing the Tripping house. Nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew it was the calm before a storm, one he had whipped up himself.

He glowed with pride. Not only was his work about to lead to a collar (he loved that word, though he wasn’t quite sure what it meant—arrest, trial, sentence?) and rid the neighborhood of a real danger, but he had acted bravely in his own eyes, something he rarely did. Even in times when others might think of him as courageous, Frank always had an excuse for himself. He knew he didn’t *think* bravely, that in his mind he was always cowering, so how could he really have acted bravely if he hadn’t been inwardly courageous to begin with?

Anyway, this morning he knew he had both thought and acted bravely, and he was pleased with himself. On top of that he’d just come up with a scheme to further shield his brood from the unpleasantness and potential danger of being present when cops were going to be chasing half-naked druggies through the backyard.

He decided it was time to go tell Grace what the family was going to do after the Jesus bread came out of the oven. He found her in the kitchen in a particularly buoyant mood. She was polishing the kitchen table and seemed to be almost singing as she rubbed.

"It's car wash time. We'll go after the bread is out."

Grace stopped cold and looked up at him as if he had said Armageddon was a clever literary device, derived from pagan myths, adopted by early redactors of the New Testament to scare adherents and keep them bound to their fledgling sect.

"Impossible. Tom's coming over to fix the gutter."

"When?"

"At noon, or maybe a little after. He's fixing that broken window in Emily's office, and when he finishes that, he's coming over here. We can't leave."

"But why does he have to do it today?" This was a little oblique, and Grace took note. She forged ahead and answered a second question as well.

"It's Saturday, and he has off, and he has to do it in the first place because there's nobody in this house who can."

Frank let this slur zing past his ear, in part because he knew in his heart of hearts the heroism he was currently involved in trumped gutter-fixing by a mile, and also because there was an urgency now in evacuating the house that made all other worries and anxieties pale in comparison.

But how to convey this urgency without spilling the beans?

"We don't have to be here when he comes."

"What? Who's going to hold the ladder. The man's going to be up there by himself. Praise the Lord, Frank, he's giving us a big helping hand. He's answered our prayers."

"Our prayers?" Frank wanted to shoot back, but he knew that would be going too far. You didn't question a statement such as that without invoking the wrath of a) Grace and b) God. What to do?

Grace was intimating that he, Frank, would be the one out there holding the ladder, and that meant he couldn't, say, leave Grace in the house and take the kids to safety. He was going to have to be there, holding the ladder,

while the cops chased half-naked druggies through the backyard. Grace was still holding the polishing rag, staring at him as if his well-known, to her, daftness had spiraled into a higher plane of ineptitude. This pissed off Frank. He wanted to shout, "I may not know gutters, but I know gutter-snipes, and I'm in the very delicate process of ridding our neighborhood of a nest of the little buggers."

Then action replaced justification. He walked past Grace's stare, through the glass doors, out onto the patio. With a wary eye he checked to see if Daria or balls or dogs were coming through the wooded area, but all was clear there. He went to the corner of the house and looked up at the rusted gutter. If he could get the damned thing fixed in time, he could meet Tom at the door with a cheery "problem solved, thanks." He squinted up at the roof because a patch of bright clouds backlit the gutter. He couldn't tell from that angle what the big deal was. Grace came up behind him.

"What's the problem with the gutter again?"

"What's the problem? The thing's about to come flying off, that's the problem."

"So, you just need to sort of strap it on better?"

"Me?"

"I mean, it just needs to be strapped on better, tightened up."

"Replaced. Tom's bringing a new section of gutter to replace that rusted section. See? Where were you when we were talking about this?"

Indeed. Where was he? Grace's tone was disturbing. She didn't seem to be acknowledging the male's authority in the house. And what was worse, she was using that tone in relation to a household decision made by her and another male. This was a breech that would have to be discussed. But not right then. Frank glanced involuntarily at the wooded area and Daria's backyard, as if mayhem might come flying through the brush at any moment.

"Frank?"

"What?" He turned back, his mind refocused. But the problem was a knotty one.

"What are you thinking?"

“Well, we really need to get the car washed.”

“It can wait a couple of hours, can’t it? Tom said it would only take couple of hours.”

Except that the work will be disrupted by shouting and maybe gunshots, and Tom’s car will be hemmed in by news vans, and, because he’ll be perched on a ladder overlooking the drug den, he’ll be forced to do scads of interviews about what he saw when the bust went down.

“Can’t it?” Grace repeated.

“I guess so.”

“I will, of course, abide completely by your decision, just as Pastor Otto says women must.”

Grace, after winning an argument, always added this codicil as a sop to Frank’s pulverized ego, knowing full well that he wouldn’t dare exert any real authority after she had given him such a verbal nosebleed.

Frank was starting to think of alternatives. A call to Manley to ask him to call off the dogs for a while? After the clipped conversation earlier, Frank realized this wouldn’t fly. He probably couldn’t even reach Manley now. He was certainly in a bunker somewhere giving final orders, going over invasion plans. He wouldn’t have time for such a radical request. Come clean to Grace? That would certainly make sense. And he even had his mouth ready to deliver the truth. But his brain, unusually anticipatory of future moves, could see the dangers of such a revelation. The visit to Daria while the family was spinning off the road might easily come to the fore, if Frank were to divulge the upcoming raid, and Frank’s instantly activated sweat glands told him that wouldn’t be a good thing.

Then a stroke of genius hit. A big part of his desire to get the family away from the bust was driven by Manley’s saying it would be a good thing if the druggies didn’t see him lurking around during the arrest and link him to it. So, if Frank could just make a show of leaving the house himself, say an hour before the police cars piled up on the street, return surreptitiously, and, at the exact moment of the bust, when he spotted the first phalanx of cops descending on the viper’s nest, hustle the family and Tom into the

basement, pretending he had just been quick-witted enough to save them from the onslaught, all would be well, better than well. He could be the hero without revealing little details like those piping-created lines on the back of Daria's thighs which, somehow, kept driving him crazy.

"I'm glad to hear that," Frank said finally of Grace's faux capitulation. "I think we'll wait until Tom has left to get the car washed."

"Should we give a prayer of thanks for the Lord's helping us work out our problem?"

"Of course... Father, we thank thee..."

As they stood there, and Frank mumbled the words of the prayer, he multi-tasked and developed his idea further. He would have to be seen leaving the house by the criminals, and he would have to not be seen returning. His confidence was soaring now, and he knew he'd be able to nail the solutions to these two problems.

So, while Grace puttered around the house waiting for Tom to arrive, Frank puttered around the front yard waiting for someone to come out of the drug den so he could hop in his car and take off. He had already told Grace he needed a new stick of deodorant (the half-used one that had been in the bathroom was history), and he was ready to call to her as he was leaving.

He had fluffed the geraniums for the umpteenth time when he heard laughter, familiar laughter, from Daria's house, and he knew it was time to swing into action. He hurled his goodbye toward the house.

"Bye, Grace!" He didn't want to give any time of return.

He had deliberately made sure his car was close to the end of the driveway, with a good sightline from Daria's front door. He went to the car, looked over, and saw an unexpected thing. A white-haired woman, probably in her sixties, was standing with Daria looking over the little plot of flowers Daria was watering the evening she entranced Frank. He figured the lady was a relative, and they were on their way out to her car.

He opened his car door, got in and closed it hard enough to make a resounding thud. It worked. Daria and the woman looked over, Frank looked

back, he'd been seen. He quickly turned the car on, threw it into reverse, and the tires gave a little screech when he gunned it out of the driveway. He was thinking this wasn't such a great idea, that it might look like some sort of escape, when he heard another screech behind him and then, as he applied the brakes, another thud.

He turned to see Tom's car behind his, the two obviously joined at the bumper. Frank had a little trouble getting his seatbelt off, so when he got out and started to the back of his car, Tom was already surveying the damage.

"Jeez, Frank, this is all my fault. I wasn't thinking." Which was a falsehood. He had been thinking deeply about all the things he was going to say to Grace as he fixed the gutter, and he had been praying fervently for the Lord to keep any shower images safely tucked away while he was in her presence.

"No, I should have looked before I backed up. What's the damage?"

"Nothing. The Lord had us meet on my rubber extension. You got nothing. I got nothing."

"A miracle."

"Praise Jesus."

"Where're you off to?"

"Gotta get some deodorant."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Going anywhere near Home Depot?"

Frank looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to noon. Home Depot was at least fifteen minutes away, making the round trip thirty minutes minimum. Then there was finding whatever Tom needed and the lines. Frank was bound to get in one where some do-it-yourselfer was checking out the complete materials for a new bathroom or something. The bust was coming in an hour, less than an hour now.

"I hadn't planned on it. What do you need?"

"A hacksaw blade. You don't happen to have one, do you?"

"Which one's that?"

"Which blade?"

“No, which saw? I have one of the big ones, and I have this one my father used to use to saw off tree limbs.”

“It’s the one with a big U, and the blade goes across the top.”

“No, I don’t.”

Grace would have loved to hear this conversation. It would have confirmed so many things about her assessment of Frank (negatively) and Tom (positively). The two men stood there for a while, their cars still kissing, until Tom broke the silence.

“Well, I can make do with the blade I’ve got. Might take a little longer, but I think she’ll do the trick.”

“Good. I better get going so I can get back and help you.”

“Help me?”

“Grace said you needed somebody to hold the ladder.”

“Oh, of course. Better safe than sorry.”

“Right.” Frank headed for his car door, and, as he did, he glanced over at Daria’s house. He was surprised to see Daria and the white-haired woman going back into the house.

Then it hit him that this relative of Daria’s might, in fact, get caught up in the bust. That bothered him at first, but then he thought, “as the rod is bent so bends the tree,” meaning that this relative was partly responsible for Daria’s wayward life. As he turned the corner down the block, he realized it wasn’t “as the rod is bent...” but “as the branch is bent,” or...He couldn’t remember what the phrase was, but it didn’t matter. This relative, maybe a mother, should have known better.

The accident had put Frank behind schedule. He realized he didn’t have time to dash to the CVS, buy deodorant, and get back with enough time to get the family gathered in the house. He drove three blocks down Spruce, turned left on Park Street, and pulled over to the curb. This was a safe block. Neither he nor Grace knew anyone on it. He could leave the car there, tell Grace something went wrong with it, and retrieve it after all the messiness next door was over. He couldn’t, of course, drive back home because that would defeat the purpose of his having left.

He didn't want to call any attention to himself, so even though he wanted to sprint back to the house, he only did a quick walk, like the women did around the high school track in the evening. He had planned his route so that he would come in through the backyard, and Daria, who he knew had seen him leave, would not know that he had returned.

He imagined Daria and Quincy in custody, handcuffed, with a few minutes to talk in the back of the paddy wagon saying, "Couldn't have been that next door neighbor. I saw him leave just before they broke down the door."

Frank's logic didn't do justice to the word. Granted, the root of the illogic came from Manley, who suggested Frank and the family be out of the house during the arrest, but Frank grafted his own goofy reasoning to the scenario, imagining that being seen scooting away a half an hour or so before the event would somehow throw Daria and company off his trail in their attempt to locate the snitch who had turned them in. Not only was that unlikely, but it ignored the fact that, by paying a visit to Daria unannounced and for a dubious reason a scant couple of weeks or so ago, Frank had automatically put himself at the top of Quincy's ten most wanted list, even if Frank had, say, been at a convention in Las Vegas at the time of the arrest.

Another thinking lapse occurred when Frank left the sidewalk and took a right up Don and Helen Marriott's driveway. Their property abutted his in the back, and while there was a hedge between the two yards, it was an immature one, easy to squeeze through. In his mind Frank would just skip up the driveway, make a beeline for the backyard, pop through the hedge, go around the garage side of his own house, and go in the kitchen door, undetected by Daria.

That plan got foiled almost immediately when, as Frank was walking up the driveway, Don Marriott came out of the garage. He had just put the lawnmower away and still had grass flecks on the bottom of his pants. He was surprised to see Frank, but not overly so.

"Hey, Buddy, what brings you to the better half of the neighborhood." Don was sort of one note. Time and time again at Mt. Olive he'd make some reference to their relative positions, north/south, uptown/downtown, good

side of the hedge/bad side of the hedge. Frank didn't mind, but it bothered Grace because there was truth in his joking. Don's house was a bit more upscale than the Tripping's.

"Taking a shortcut, if you don't mind."

"Course not. Getting a little exercise?"

"No. Car died over on Park." Oops. Big mistake. Don owned the Citgo on Lincoln Boulevard.

"Hey. Let me get a glass of water, and we'll go take a look."

"Naw, thanks. Gotta get back. I think it's just..." Frank knew very little about cars. Always use unleaded regular. Keep looking at the Jiffy Lube sticker and take the car in when it reached the mileage on the sticker. Step on the gas to go, the brake to stop. That was about it. "...just a tune up."

"A tune up? You missed a tune up?"

"Yeah. Way back."

"I don't think that would mean anything. How'd she die?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well did she lurch, you know, sputter some, cough like, then go? Or did she just kind of ease down quietly?"

Frank was getting mighty antsy now. The minutes were ticking away, and Don was asking these impossible questions. Frank could feel his ire rising, the urge to spit out, "It just died, for chrissake!" becoming stronger by the second. But that would have been taking the Lord's name in vain and would have further delayed his beeline to his own yard.

"Kinda in between. Don, I'm late."

"Late?"

"Yeah, that's why I took the shortcut. Grace is getting her cast off today, and I gotta run her over to Hancock's office."

"Oh. I see. I didn't know Hancock had hours on Saturday."

"Yeah. Special I guess."

"Dang. You guys got pull. I tried to get him to lance a boil one Saturday, and he went fishin' instead. I just chalked it up to the fact he wasn't saved. But now I gotta think about it."

“It’s a puzzle. Gotta go. Thanks.” Frank started for the backyard, and Don held out his hand. Frank was about to shake it when Don said.

“Tell you what. Give me the keys, I’ll go over see what the problem is, have it back in your driveway before you get back, probably”

The image of Don driving up, just as the cops swooped down on Daria’s house, froze Frank for a second.

“Naw. Couldn’t ask you to do that. Not on a Saturday.”

“Hey, I’m no Hancock. Probably just flooded or something. Tell you the truth, now that I’ve got my own place, I’m doing so much paperwork I don’t get a lot of time to dive under the hood. Be fun for me.”

Frank was speed dialing solutions to this dilemma, but nobody was home. Then something in his own backyard, in the distance, caught his eye. He saw a ladder bobbing above the hedge like a puppet, angling toward the roof. Tom was already at work. Don saw Frank’s distraction and followed his gaze.

“Gotta go, Don. Tom Adams is helping with the rusted gutter. Gotta get over and hold the ladder for him. He and I can get the car. He’s good with cars.”

“I thought you said you were going to Hancock’s?”

“I am. When I’m not holding the ladder for Tom.”

“You got a busy day.”

“Say that again.”

“You got a busy day.” Real joker that Don. “Well, if you and Tom can’t work it out, you know where to find me.”

“Right.”

“Could we have a quick one?”

“A what?”

“A prayer. You know how Pastor Otto says we should have moments of prayerful celebration, as well as those times we’re asking the Lord for help.”

“Oh, right.”

Don held out both hands, and Frank took them. Don sang bass in the choir and always went into some deep octave when he prayed out loud.

“Heavenly Father, we are thankful for neighbors, for chance meetings

that allow us to fellowship in your name. Grant my brother Frank serenity and your calm on this busy day.”

“Amen.” Frank made a small tug with his hands, but Don held firm.

“And we celebrate the healing of our sister Grace. We were all worried sick when we heard the news of her accident, but we knew you would protect her, and now here she is ready to have her cast taken off. Praise your name.”

“Amen. Praise Jesus.” Frank remembered that Grace’s injury hadn’t required a cast and was glad Don wasn’t all that observant. He began to lift his head, but Don’s voice sent his chin diving back toward his chest.

“And Lord keep Tom and Frank safe as they undertake the stewardship of Frank’s lovely house. Make their work swift and sure. In the name of your Son, who died on the cross so that we might enjoy everlasting life, Amen.”

“Amen.” Frank and Don gave each other squeezes, and Frank started to head toward his house. “Thanks, Don. See ya.”

“Let me know about the car.”

“I will.”

Frank could see the ladder now, stationary against the roof. When he got to the hedge he checked his watch, saw that it was 12:34, and his heart started racing. Tom would be in the backyard now, probably, and so going around to the garage was out of the question. He poked his head through the hedge, saw Tom just starting to climb the rungs, and hot-footed it up to the base of the ladder hoping Tom would think he’d come around the corner.

“Ready, Tom?”

Frank’s stealth worked as he’d hoped, with one small problem. Tom, halfway up the ladder, was startled by the unexpected voice behind him, craned around precariously to see who was attacking his flank, lost his balance, and lurched as he tried to right himself.

Torqued by this lurch, the ladder started to slide left along the roof line. Frank managed to get a purchase on the side of the ladder and keep it from sliding all the way, but he used his not-quite-completely-healed shoulder, wrenching it again, and, with Grace nowhere in sight, he howled.

Frank managed to halt the ladder's fall, but the 12-foot aluminum structure, adorned with a grasping 190-pound Tom near the top, was not what you'd call stable. Tom clung to the right side of the ladder, afraid to move.

"You got it, Frank?"

"Yeah," Frank was able to blurt out, after the pain went from code red to amber.

"Can you push on it a little? I can't move, or she'll tip."

Grace came streaking out of the house now, screeching.

"Dear Lord, help!"

The ladder sagged a little more into Frank's shoulder, and he howled again.

"Grace, can you push?"

But Grace was, for some reason, running around like she was being chased by bees, screaming her new mantra, "Dear Lord, help!" Maybe she was reacting to some monumental adrenalin rush, but her flight rendered her useless.

Frank was about to black out from the pain in his shoulder. Prayer instinct kicked in, and he either mumbled or spoke completely inside his head (later he couldn't remember which) "Take this burden from me," and, to his great surprise and relief, the ladder seemed to lift as if pulled from him.

In fact, it *was* being pulled from him, and, when it was practically lifted from his shoulder all together, he looked up and saw a hairy male arm effecting the rescue. He followed that arm to a hairy face, and it took him a full two or three seconds to realize his deliverance had been at the hands of Quincy.

"I got it. Probably best if you come down." The muscles in his forearm were impressive, sinewy, steel-bandish. "Don't worry. I got it braced."

Frank looked down to see Quincy's bare foot curled up against the bottom of the ladder, and then realized the drug king was almost completely naked, except for a Stars and Stripes Speedo. Tom wasn't worrying about nakedness at that point. He came slithering down the ladder, pressing himself to the rungs.

"Thank you. Thank you. Just in the nick of time."

“Watch it there. You’re just about down. Anybody hurt?” Quincy said, offering a hand, which Tom took.

“I’m okay. I think Frank got the worst of it.”

Tom looked over at Frank and Grace, standing near each other. Frank was indeed grabbing his injured shoulder, but he and Grace were doing sort of an American-Gothic-with-mouths-open number, staring at Quincy. An outside observer might have said it was the combination of the hairy nakedness and the impressive curvature of the bulge under his Stars that had their jaws scraping the patio. But it was more than that, of course. They were flabbergasted by the fact that their savior, dispatched because of their prayers and screeching exhortations, was a man Grace suspected, and Frank was certain, was a criminal of the worst order.

“Shoulder?” Quincy asked. “Pulled it?”

“I’m okay.”

Frank was coming to his senses now that the pain was receding and letting him think again. He looked down at his watch. 12:41. Quincy stood there, not in a hurry to leave.

“I was just sort of chillin’ in the backyard, and I happened to look over right when the ladder started to tip. I could just see the top of it, but I said I better take a look, see if they need any help.”

He had the one brown tooth of a smoker, and the hair on the top of his lip bobbed when he talked. Grace, whose adrenalin level was giving her a high that few drugs could match, felt her breakfast bob in her throat, ready to return to the light. She reeled toward the house. Tom had sense enough to take her arm and lead her. Frank, still aghast at the turn of events, could only nod a thanks and start to follow Grace and Tom. Quincy’s voice turned his head.

“Want me to just lay this down?” He was still holding the ladder, sort of like a knight with his lance, ready for a joust.

“Yeah, please, thanks, gotta see if Grace is all right. Thanks. Yeah.”

The mumbling continued until Frank slammed into what he thought

was an open patio door. He rebounded, found the opening, and disappeared into the house.

Looking back outside Frank could see the ladder descend and then flop to the ground. Tom was splashing cold water on Grace's face. Rachael was looking at the whole thing with a lot of curiosity but not much comprehension. Frank peered out the kitchen window in time to see Quincy disappear through the wooded area.

"Lucky your neighbor had his wits about him," Tom wheezed. He was as red-faced as he'd been when he came to Grace's aid in the car accident. "Ow!"

Tom held his wrist and sort of leaped around in pain. Grace, water cascading from her face, looked up, but her vision was impaired by the water. "What?"

"I think I sprained my wrist bad out there. Just hit me."

As if this wasn't enough, Frank looked through the living room, out into the front yard, and saw Franklin Jr. making his weekly attempt to master roller blades. Dressed, as Frank had insisted, in every piece of safety equipment known to man, looking like a molded plastic being, and consequently unable to do much of anything but a slight shuffle before he fell, Franklin Jr. doggedly went out to try his fortunes on the front sidewalk each week and never made it farther than the driveway.

But now Frank realized Franklin Jr. was in grave danger. The best roller blade safety equipment in the world wouldn't protect him from flying bullets. Frank dashed through the living room, out into the front yard. As luck would have it, Franklin Jr. picked this very day to get the hang of rollerblading. By the time Frank made it through the front door, Franklin Jr. was literally on a roll, the shuffling giving way to a glide of sorts.

"Franklin Jr., you've got to come in now," Frank huffed as he headed for the boy. Franklin Jr. turned slightly at the voice, his eyes shining with accomplishment.

"Look, Dad!"

Of course, the turn of the head upset his fledgling balance, and the

roller blades flew out from under him. He landed squarely on his butt on the sidewalk. Frank reached him only seconds later.

"Are you alright?" Frank scanned the street quickly, saw no unusual activity, and looked back down at Franklin Jr. The boy was ecstatic.

"Did you see that?"

"Yes. Now, come on. We've got to go in."

"One more."

"No 'one more.' Obedience, Franklin, obedience."

"But I'm getting it."

Frank looked at his watch. 12:45. He didn't have time to argue or cajole or instruct now. He had to get Franklin Jr. in the house, pronto. He offered his hand, Franklin Jr. took it, but, when he tried to stand, the skates had a mind of their own, and the right one had a mind to slam into Frank's shin. Franklin Jr. flopped back down as Frank hopped around trying to quell branching pain coming from his shinbone.

It was while he was thus dancing that he saw the police car come slowly down the street. Pain be damned. He reached down and tried to scoop up the mound of plastic on the sidewalk. Franklin Jr. had put on a little weight since Frank had last tried to heft him, and that weight was almost doubled by the helmet, shoulder pads, elbow pads, and the skates. Frank heaved mightily and felt a little pop in his lower back, but, like those mythical mothers who lift Chevy Blazers three feet off the ground to rescue their trapped children, Frank took his completely unmuscled body to its physical limits, got Franklin Jr. off the ground, and lugged him into the house. It was fortunate Franklin Jr. was encapsulated as he was because Frank, eager to keep tabs on the police car as he was going through the front door, turned quickly, slamming Franklin Jr.'s helmeted head into the door jamb.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry."

Frank dumped Franklin Jr. on the living room rug, as his overburdened, undermuscled arms turned to quivering mush, his back suddenly reiterated its problem, and his shoulder reminded Frank that it had been incapacitated

not long ago. But again, Frank was able to sidestep the pain, as well as Franklin Jr.'s flailing body, and hotfoot it into Franklin Jr.'s bedroom to get a better look at the imminent action.

But the view out the window was absolutely normal. Frank was surprised. He had imagined a flotilla of cop cars by now, but he couldn't even see the one that went by when he was rescuing Franklin Jr. He checked his watch. Exactly 12:47. He had seen many times on *Cops* how meticulously the various elements on a raid synchronized their watches. Then it hit him that maybe it was *his* watch that wasn't synchronized.

He looked over at Franklin Jr.'s prayer clock, but it was just blinking 12:00, probably not even set. He dashed out of the room and headed for the kitchen because the clock on the microwave was the most reliable one in the house. As he went down the hall, he almost knocked Rachael off her pins as she was headed to the bathroom to get a towel for Grace. In the kitchen Grace and Tom were huddled over Tom's sprained wrist and both gave a little start when Frank flew into the room. He didn't notice this because the microwave was on the other side of the kitchen.

12:40. Frank breathed a sigh of relief. There was time now to make sure everybody was away from the windows, and to be ready to hustle them all downstairs at the first sign of chaos. But he had to get them all nearby and under his wing first.

Frank wasn't a natural schemer, but he was becoming a serviceable amateur, and it didn't take him long to realize a prayer needed to be said by all for the fact that Jesus had not toppled the ladder all the way to the ground. Rachael returned with the towel, so he could keep her in the kitchen. Franklin Jr., who was not normally allowed to wear his roller blades in the house, could be heard in the living room, struggling to either stand or get his skates off. Frank made a snap decision to leave Franklin Jr. in the living room. It sometimes took him ten or twenty minutes to get all the gear off. When the time came Frank could haul him downstairs, even if he was still half-armored.

“I think we should have a prayer circle to thank the blessed Lord Jesus for saving us all from serious injury.”

Grace, who had her face pressed in Rachael’s Adam-and-Eve-meet-the-Serpent towel, looked up, perplexed.

“Tom’s in pain, Frank,” she said, as if Frank had suggested they go out and test the wrist on a couple of sets of tennis. “Can’t it wait?”

Frank took a quick look at the microwave clock. 12:44. Actually, it could wait, would be better to wait. Frank calculated he could keep a prayer circle going ten or twelve minutes. He’d once presided over a fifteen-minute affair when Pastor Otto had his hernia operation, and the congregation, for some reason, turned to Frank to lead the prayer. If he started at 12:47 and mumbled softly, he’d be able to hear the helicopters or whatever and herd everyone to the basement.

“Okay. Let’s wait three minutes.”

Grace gave him a curt look of annoyance before she instructed Rachael to get the gel pack ice bag out of the freezer. Frank decided a quick look out Franklin Jr.’s bedroom was in order.

“I’ll be right back. In three minutes.”

Franklin Jr. was indeed struggling to get the skates off.

“Dad, can you help?”

“No. That’s a task you’ll have to learn to undertake yourself.”

“But I gotta do number one.”

The greater good, for some reason, leaped into Frank’s consciousness. As a phrase, and as a course of action. Franklin Jr. might not make it to wee-wee-land in time, but it was certainly more important to safeguard the family abode from the random violence of the events next door than to worry about the niceties of Franklin Jr.’s situation. Frank turned and dashed down the hall.

His first glimpse of Daria’s front yard through the bedroom window was a shocker. Instead of the one lonely car that had been there only minutes ago, there were now three other very nondescript vehicles, classic unmarked cop cars, and two police cruisers. Frank moved to the window for a better

view and was doubly shocked to see two uniformed officers standing near the entranceway, one smoking a cigarette, the other on a cell phone.

Even though the scene had a casual feel to it, Frank was sure something big was about to happen. He was ready to go herd the family when he saw one of the cops fold his cell phone, the other stub out his cigarette. Frank stared. Cigarette Cop unclicked a walkie talkie from his belt and spoke into it. He then turned toward the front door of the drug den and waited. Seconds later the front door opened, and Quincy, dressed in a snappy, pink buttoned-down shirt and khaki trousers, his hair still blowing wildly about, came out of the house, escorted by two cops in blue windbreakers, and was deposited so quickly into the back seat of one of the cruisers that Frank wasn't sure he'd seen the whole thing happen.

The cop car stayed there for a long minute or two. Frank strained to see Quincy, but the reflections off the glass made that impossible. Then Manley himself came out and gave some directions to the cops. Frank took heart in this. Here was the link. Frank's investigation had gone through Manley and now, with the bad guy safely tucked away...

Frank couldn't remember if Quincy was cuffed when he came out of the door. He was so busy noting the preppy attire and the incongruous coif that he forgot the handcuff detail. Manley seemed quite at ease, and the radically different dress Quincy displayed under arrest, from only minutes before in the backyard, made a struggle and handcuffs unlikely.

As he was trying to make all this information conform to his imagination, the topper floated out of the house in the form of Daria, dressed exactly as he had seen her the day of her disrobing, a luscious vision now from Frank's long lens perspective, walking barefoot down her walk, throwing on a t-shirt, approaching Manley. For a second Frank flashed to some *Cops* episode when a wife of an arrested scumbag attacked the arresting cops, but that memory blew away the minute Daria reached Manley, put a friendly hand on his shoulder, said something and got a cordial response.

Daria then moved from Manley to the cop car, and the back window rolled down. Quincy's face came out of the window frame, and Daria leaned

down and gave him what had to be a beautiful kiss. Frank couldn't see the actual lip meeting because, as she angled to kiss Quincy, Daria bent over slightly, blocked Frank's view, and gave Frank, and probably Manley, Cigarette Cop and Cell Phone Cop, a picture-perfect view of her bikinied behind.

"Frank?"

Grace was in the doorway. Tom, still nursing that sprained wrist, was standing in the doorway with her. She was holding the Adam-and-Eve-meet-the-Serpent towel over her arm as if she was about to take his order. Luckily for Frank, his body blocked their view of the neighbors, and, doubly lucky for him, he could see this immediately.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"We've been waiting. You said three minutes."

Frank took an obligatory look at his watch, not even noting the time, his brain sending out fervent messages to the rest of him to NOT LOOK OUT THE WINDOW AGAIN, EVEN IF YOU'RE REALLY, REALLY DYING TO DO SO!

"Right. Be right there."

But Grace wasn't moving, and Frank felt the invisible tug he knew he could not deny. He started toward the door, every molecule of his being screaming at him to dash back to the window and see what happened to Daria's behind.

On their way down the hallway to the kitchen, Frank had a stroke of genius.

"You know what, Grace, I'd like to do a reading from Franklin's King James Junior. I'll catch up with you."

Grace was trumped and moved down the hallway with Tom. Frank leaped back toward the bedroom and darted to the window. He darted so fast in fact that he thumped his forehead against the window. He had to clear his vision a few times because he thought he saw all the cop cars gone. Then he really did clear his vision, and, in fact, the cop cars were gone.

All that was left out in front of the drug den was a very peaceful green scene, made somewhat oddly tragic by Daria, still in her bikini, crying, being

hugged and consoled by the white-haired woman, who, if she wasn't Daria's mother, was acting very motherly. They soon turned and went in the house, leaving the neighborhood quiet, undisturbed, almost completely unaware that anything had happened.

Frank's confusion rose in clouds around his ears, circling the anxiety and adrenalin that now had scant outlet. Had he missed the action? Was that really Quincy being taken away as if he were a frat boy and Manley a campus cop? Frank began to question the reality of the whole last hour of his life. Did he really collide with Tom? Could Quincy have really dashed to his rescue in a Speedo?

Frank felt then like a man who had been standing on railroad tracks, a locomotive bearing down on him one second, the next, which should have been his last, watching the locomotive recede the other way, as if it had passed right through him. Grace called out his name from the kitchen. Franklin Jr.'s Bible made it into his hands. He turned again to the street scene through the window, but all was as calm as a still pond.

He took steps toward the kitchen, deflated to the nth degree, a rough beast slouching toward a prayer circle, reborn in ways he couldn't possibly imagine.

9

Launch

Frank found the assembled family and Tom in the kitchen, sitting quietly around the kitchen table. This was almost as disquieting as the non-bust bust. Where there had been dashing and screeching and ladders falling, there was now discipline and murmurs. Frank could hardly contain himself. He was still expecting cops to burst through the backyard bushes in pursuit of some drug-addled criminals, tackling them near the hedges. This still life in front of him helped to further detach his being from what is normally called reality.

Frank went through the motions of the prayer circle and began reading a passage from Franklin Jr.'s King James for Juniors bible. He stopped himself when he realized he was reading an answer Jesus had given to the question, "Why do you speak in parables."

"...because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

Frank didn't know why he had leafed to that page and found that passage, but the words went deep for him. The family hadn't seen or heard. How

would he explain what just happened to his flock? WWJD? A parable. He was growing in dangerous self-importance by the second.

"I've always wondered about that one," Tom said after a long minute.

He was sitting across from Frank at the kitchen table, his right wrist wrapped in an ace bandage. Grace nodded, but she didn't add anything because she was suffering what she would later describe as palpitations. Rachael, maybe picking up some subtle shift in her father's tone, his look, his comportment, stared at him without blinking. Franklin Jr. was still recovering from the embarrassment of having peed his pants in front of Tom, while trying to make it to the bathroom still half-clad in roller blade armor.

Frank got some wind in his sails and, in a surprisingly authoritative voice, began to enlighten those who didn't experience the bust, didn't know the history of the investigation, who could neither see nor hear nor understand, in other words.

"There was a humble servant of the Lord, a man who labored for the Master in a rather important position at Newtowne, who understood that he was charged with both lordship of his household and responsibility for his family's well-being."

Grace's palpitations took a back seat to her curiosity. Just what the heck was Frank talking about? At first, she thought the "humble servant" was Tom, and that Frank had read her secret thoughts. Tom, for his part, thought he'd sort of stayed too long at the fridge during a commercial and missed part of the show.

"This humble servant," Frank continued, "understood the ways of evil and the many guises of the Devil and was constantly vigilant. While others lived normal lives, he was always on the lookout for the Devil's work. And when he found that wily serpent's handiwork, he set about destroying it."

Frank was feeling very good about his WWJD moment, but anticipated a problem when it came to Manley's part in the whole thing. "One day he noticed evil almost right in his own backyard. He..."

The combination of the four blank stares he was getting around the prayer circle and his own evocation of the wooded area between his house

and Daria's proved to be a showstopper. Daria, in all her half-naked glory came rushing at him, dismembering thought, prayer, logic, and sense of place, i.e., he was suddenly as lost as if he'd been at the headwaters of the Amazon.

The room no longer added up. The humble servant was racing around trying to find some host body. Frank was pinned to the chair by image and desire. His heroism, the subject of the parable, was riding the bouncing coattails of the humble servant. Grace, Tom, the kids, the events of the day were only a weak nasal spray to the nasty virus that was the bikini-clad or unclad Daria.

Frank was so gobsmacked he actually crossed his arms over his face as if he were Tippy Hedren in *The Birds*. That didn't help. Satan had permeated the room so completely that Frank knew every breath he took was saturated with Devil's dust. His onlookers only saw a man cowering and shielding himself from, well, nothing.

Frank rose from the chair—make that lurched back and upward enough to leave the seat—reeled around so much that Rachael shrieked at glass-breaking decibels, and then Frank found himself in the sudden and devastating grip of guilt over what he'd done and a desire to go to Daria, to see her, to be in her presence as he once had been, to comfort her the way the older woman had comforted her.

To the accompaniment of Rachael's eerie squeal, and the incredulous gasps of Grace and Tom, Frank practically sprinted to the front door, wrenched it open with such a fury it was a miracle the handle stayed attached to the wood, and plunged into his front yard with more headlong speed than he'd ever mustered in his life.

Guided only by some unholy version of a Whitmanesque ecstasy mashed up with a devilish onslaught, he propelled himself toward Daria's front lawn, ignoring sidewalks and his own little hedgerow. This latter didn't ignore him, however, and when he blindly tried to breach the taut line of wiry branches, they fought back bravely and dumped him headfirst on the ground beyond. So out of control was he that the landing happened before he realized he

was falling, and he had made no preparations to soften the blow caused by the ground rushing up at him. In short, he had knocked himself out cold.

While he was out, the world, to that point in his life a lumpy patchwork of incomplete knowledge and jittery misperceptions, became a smooth blanket of such infinitesimal beauty and grace, a single point of comprehension not divorced from any of its elements, the antitheses of the Manichean universe of Mt. Olive, that he felt certain the oft-promised eternity of incomprehensible bliss had come calling.

Waking to Tom's beet-red features put the kibosh on that.

"Frank, Frank, are you... Owwww!" Tom had used his right hand to try to lift Frank, and the pain that shot up his arm reminded him very forcefully of his recent injury. He danced away from Frank's eyesight howling like a magpie. Grace replaced him in Frank's vision, palpitating all higgledy-piggledy, not knowing whether to attempt to bend down to her fallen husband or attend to the hopscotching Tom.

Whatever chemical imbalance had rocketed Frank out of the house, now titrated sufficiently to bring him back to what you might call his senses. The leaves on the trees above Grace seemed to wave hello. The day sparkled in Technicolor. Frank decided on a complete whim, to blame the whole episode on glucose.

He had once watched a colleague at Newtowne nosedive into a plate of beef stew in the cafeteria, due to what was later described as a glucose deficiency. This had stuck with Frank, and he thought, given what he could remember of the past couple of minutes, his exploit was roughly equivalent to a beef stew landing. With surprising accuracy Frank mimicked what he remembered of the colleague's return to the world, minus, of course, the dripping brown goo on his face.

"Where am I?"

He sat up. Rachael kept her distance and wrinkled her chin muscles at the yucky sight of her father, replete with his own peat moss version of brown goo dotting his features. Franklin Jr was just coming from the house and for some reason was donning his roller blade helmet. Tom's little ode

to pain was subsiding. Grace was standing very still doing her own form of glossolalia, attempting to channel Jesus and have him help her with the wild horses in her chest. "Where am I?" Frank repeated, like an actor whose stage partners had missed their cue. Steady Tom was the first to come around.

"Frank, my God, you're right here on your front lawn. What happened?"

"I don't know. How did I get here? Why am I lying down?" This was pure Newton colleague.

"You were doing a meditation, and then you just ran out of the house."

"I did?"

"Praise Jesus," Rachael threw in because she felt she had to say something.

"Yes. It was like..." Tom stopped himself, but his eyes finished the thought, that the Devil was in the mix here somewhere, by going from questioning slits to it's-dawning-on-me saucers.

"Like what?"

"No, that's wrong," Tom got out, though his eyes continued to widen in horror.

"What, Tom, what?"

"It was like you were possessed."

Grace's incomprehensible keening glissandoed into another octave, and then stopped abruptly. Obviously, despite all her heaving and caterwauling, she had been following the conversation, such as it was.

"No." Frank managed, thinking glucose might not have been a great whipping boy after all.

"Of course not. Frank, maybe it was epilepsy," Tom added, weakly.

"You think?"

"That wasn't epilepsy," Grace shot back. Something about her tone made Frank nervous. She left the denial hanging, but didn't offer an alternative. Did she really think he was possessed?

"I don't remember how I got out here," Frank said, when he saw he might have to further counter this possession thing.

His statement, though, was partly true. The image of Daria that had propelled him out the door and through the hedge to his crash landing had

sort of flash-frozen his brain. And he really had lost consciousness when his head smacked the ground. But if he were forced by, say, some sort of gun to his head, to reconstruct his past, he could have done it easily.

A car starting up behind him made Frank go horror-film-wide-eyed-and-wary. He didn't dare turn around, but he knew trying to stop himself from doing so was a losing battle. Unfortunately, just as the car started, Grace was subconsciously calculating the ramifications of a possessed Frank, and suddenly he had gone fright-mask and looked the part. Grace's calculations shifted into second gear with a couple more questions. Might this be a reason to distance herself from Frank? Could the Lord be giving her a nifty out from her "situation?"

All this came to her quickly, because in the 10 or 15 minutes between topplings, that of the ladder first, and then Frank, and in the midst of all her wailing, her heart had done more than try to beat its way out of her bosom. It had in fact gone cold for Frank and melted for Tom. Once again, we're in subconscious territory here, but in the repressed (and Grace was certainly a prime example of that category) the subconscious is a very powerful force, and the heart, not the head, is the consultant to listen to. It would take many moons for Grace to let all this surface, but when it did, she would realize that, for her, the whiff of Frank hosting demons was the evidence she needed to set herself free.

Frank had already been set free in a manner of speaking, free to do things he wouldn't even have imagined only weeks before, and now, one of those things was to swivel around and look behind him. The car that had been parked in Quincy's driveway was running, but he couldn't see who was driving from his ground level viewpoint. He stood but still couldn't see through the smokey glass. He took a couple of steps toward the car and then stopped abruptly when the front door of the house flew open and Daria, dressed now in a t-shirt and jeans, came rushing out of the house.

Frank's muddled thinking told him she was rushing to him, seeking solace in her time of need. Yes, he would have to comfort her in front of his family, and yes, it would be morally complex, given the fact that he was the

one at the root of her sorrow, but they would work that all out later. Right now, it was important to enfold her, perhaps bring her into the arms of the church on the spot.

She didn't even see him. She had the passenger door open in a flash, closed it so quickly the strap of her purse stuck out, and the car pulled ahead before Frank could take another step. Thinking about it later, Frank couldn't remember if he had waved goodbye, but he had certainly meant to.

He turned back to see a now somewhat familiar tableau, that of Grace, Tom, and the kids, lined up as if for a photo, giving him a quartet of looks of utter stupefaction. He had no words for them, nothing at least that would make any sense, no parable to put things right, no sloughing shrug, no salve for the wound. So, instinct and reflex took over and allowed him to burp out something he thought reasonably explanatory.

"Praise Jesus."

Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law

The days after that fateful Saturday were a mishmash of silences and tensions, outbursts and wound licking. Grace found her usual level of peripatetic activity, juggling home, home schooling, and church activities impossible. Her arm acted up again, her palpitations rose and fell during the day, and that tricky subconscious had her calling Frank “Tom” more than once.

In her anguish Grace remembered a long-buried incident. It was in fact the last time she and Frank had joined the sacred temples of their bodies. But it wasn’t the joining that Frank had remembered. It had come after that wild tussle with the Devil. It started in church one morning when Franklin Jr. had wandered off after the service and Grace had to retrieve him from the basement. She found him there having a little happy conversation with Tom Adams. Grace didn’t really know Tom but she took a quick liking to him when he smiled at her and said what a smart little kid Franklin Jr. was.

Grace carried that clip with her for weeks. It gave her a solace of sorts

when she looked at Frank and saw nothing but a shell of a husband. And one morning it gave her more than solace. It was a summer morning. Frank had slept outside the covers and Grace could see clearly the outlines of an involuntary erection under his pajamas. Since that Devil night Grace had been scrupulous about ignoring Frank's infelicities but something else kicked in that morning. Frank became Tom, Grace became Tom's wife Evangeline, and Evangeline pounced on Tom's hard-on full tilt. When Frank woke to find Grace once again sending the Devil back to hell he said, "Grace?" and Evangeline evaporated for Grace, Frank was no longer Tom, and she extricated herself from the Devil as fast as she could. She had been ashamed of her actions since then but now with Frank diving through hedgerows and babbling nonsense, that mistaken identity incident took on a warmer glow for Grace.

Frank, for his part, woke every morning with severe dream hangovers. Demons wearing pink button-down shirts and khaki pants, or Stars and Stripes Speedos, were forever chasing him in these nightmares. They would pop up on him no matter where he was. He was driving through a desert landscape and suddenly three would line the side of the road and one would jump up in the back seat of the car. They were dream-relentless, never giving up, until Frank got his eyes open and realized he was awake.

After a night of this terror Frank would find himself groggy in the changed world of the household. Grace, who had taken to sleeping in the guest bedroom, would be sound asleep as he gave Rachael and Franklin Jr. breakfast and then set them some pseudo-educational tasks to accomplish during the day (memorizing Luke 2: 1-28 kept them busy for three days). At Newtowne, Frank was useless, not that anyone noticed. He started to say something at his lunch prayer circle about what he'd been through, but the particulars still held so much anxiety and confusion for him that he wasn't able to make a coherent narrative out of the whole thing.

Tom seemed even more unglued by the episode than Frank. He hadn't even gone back in the house with the family. He just hightailed it to safety and drove home using only his left hand. At Mt. Olive the next day, he was

relieved to find out from Pastor Otto that a table in the Sunday School room had collapsed and needed fixing. Tom stretched the project out for the whole service. He did, however, cross paths with Grace and Frank by mistake, when he thought everybody was gone. They had stayed because Grace insisted Frank say something to Pastor Otto about what she was then calling “the Devil’s intervention.” But Pastor Otto had gone directly to his study to counsel Melinda Evans, a full-figured former runway model and heroin addict, who, from time to time needed extra assistance maintaining her relationship to the Lord, and the session, behind the closed door, went on for a long time.

Tom saw Frank and Grace before they saw him, and he thought about beating a retreat, but then Grace, deciding the weeping and moaning noises coming from Pastor Otto’s study indicated Melinda was in need of a lot of assistance, and it would be a long wait, turned to leave and locked eyes with Tom. It was a brief but significant moment. Frank turned then, didn’t see the eye-lock, and greeted Tom sheepishly. The awkward seconds ticked by, and they parted without ever mentioning the rusted gutter, much less “the Devil’s intervention.”

But the strangest thing about those first few days, the first two and a half weeks actually, was the radio silence from Manley. Not a peep. Frank thought Manley had sent a message when, two hours or so after the bust, a cop showed up on the doorstep. Grace had taken to her bed, and the kids were in their rooms. Frank was roused from a very troubled snooze by a loud knock. In his addled state he thought it was Tom coming back to finish the gutter. He was surprised by the cop, and it took him a little while to understand what the cop was saying.

“Officer Noble. Are you Mr. Tripping?”

“Am I?”

“You are?”

“Noble?”

“No, that’s me. Are you Mr. Tripping?”

“Yes. Sorry. Yes.” By this time Frank figured this was Manley’s emissary, and he stepped outside.

“Is your car parked over on Park?”

“Oh, oh, jeez. Yeah.”

“Sorry to tell you this but an eighty-three year-old woman, who’d had a glass of wine with her lunch, sideswiped you, gave the driver’s side door a nice little scrape.”

Frank wondered if this was code. Eighty-three-year-old women don’t drive for starters, and they sure don’t drink at lunch either. So, maybe this meant there’d been some complication, things hadn’t gone smoothly once Quincy got in the car, and the “gash” business was a way of saying Frank ought to be careful.

“Mr. Tripping?”

Frank had been staring. He pulled out, realizing the code theory didn’t wash because the cops couldn’t have known his car was over on Park. Having weathered his first bust, Frank was thinking faster on his feet than he used to.

“Yes. Too bad. Anybody hurt?”

“Just my partner. The woman was still sitting in the car when we arrived. He tried to get her to roll down the window, she stepped on the gas, hit reverse somehow, and the car ran over his foot. Lucky though.”

“Why?”

“Looks like complete disability, lifetime pension. And he’s only thirty-three. Anyway, here’s all the insurance information. You can drive the car. No problem.”

Frank took the information and was wondering how he was going to explain the gash to Grace. Noble turned to leave. Then Frank realized who he was talking to.

“Officer?”

“Yes?”

Frank rolled his eyes toward Daria’s house. The cop looked over at the

peaceful front yard, now completely devoid of cars. Then he looked back at Frank with a question mark.

“Tell me anything about what went on?” Frank asked, though in such *soto voce* the cop didn’t get it at first, and Frank had to repeat. “Any news from over there?”

What with Frank’s blank stares, his car parked a few blocks over when his driveway was empty, and now this eye-rolling and whispering, Noble figured he was talking to a nut-job. He decided playing along would release him faster than some sort of rational probe.

“No. But trust me, we’ll be in touch when we have news.”

He saluted, Pink Panther-style, and left. Frank worried that someone connected with Quincy might somehow see the salute and put two and two together, but otherwise he was pleased with the response.

Despite the fact that the bust had come midday on a Saturday, no one in the neighborhood but Frank was witness to the arrest. When Frank went to retrieve his car, he expected to see people out on their lawns chattering away about the excitement, but Sal Salerno, the only ethnic on the block, was the sole neighbor visible, and he was riding a power mower wearing noise-dampening earmuffs.

The gash on the car had barely scraped the paint, but Frank would still have to come up with a story. He got the car home without incident and parked it, so the wound wasn’t visible from the house. In church the next day Don Marriott asked some questions about the car in front of Grace, but Frank was able to parry them and avoid any embarrassment. He had the body work done on Monday and didn’t bother to go through the insurance hassles with the eighty-three year-old woman.

When Manley finally called, he reached Frank at work. The call was, literally, an answer to Frank’s prayer. He and the woman in the next cubicle over, Isabelle Sanchez, (who wasn’t a member of Mt. Olive but was born again and almost obsessively devout) had just finished their post-lunch prayer, and though the prayer was supposed to be about the work of the next few hours, Frank found himself asking the Lord why Manley hadn’t

called. So, Frank wasn't too surprised when Manley's familiar rumble came through the line.

"Mr. Tripping, Manley."

"Oh, hello."

"Wanted to inform you mission's accomplished, and we thank you."

"You're welcome. Uh, what's next?"

"Nothing you have to be involved in."

"I didn't see anything in the papers."

"Right. No reason to broadcast this one. We don't want the bad guys to know how close we are, if you know what I mean." Frank didn't but didn't want to sound stupid.

"Yeah. When's the trial."

"No trial. He copped. We seized everything. He'll be doing a good long stretch. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Uh, good."

"Mr. Tripping, there's something else."

"What?"

"The seizure included the real estate, of course."

"Yes."

"To thank you for your part in this, we're going to go a little outside the rules and offer you the property before it goes up for public sale."

"I'm sorry, what's that?"

"The house. Would you be interested in buying the house?"

"Quincy's house?"

"Is that the name he was using? Yeah."

Frank tried to remember what the house looked like when he visited Daria. It seemed bigger than his own, but everything about that visit had been exaggerated. Then he remembered how it had looked when the Sanborns were there, and he and Grace had been in the Sanborns' living room for Thursday Bible study. Grace had said something about the size of the house, the layout. Frank couldn't remember exactly what she had said, but it was something positive.

"I don't know. I'd have to ask my wife."

"Of course. We'll give you a few days. We cleaned it out this morning. You can go over and take a look. Keep it under your hat, but there's a key under the planter by the front door."

"Uh, okay."

"Would you like to know how much it's going for?"

"Sure."

"You sitting down?"

"Yes."

"There wasn't any mortgage on the place. I guess he used his filthy lucre to buy the thing outright. So, by state law all we can do is charge back taxes, fees, stuff like that. How does \$34,678 sound to you?" Frank didn't respond. "Mr. Tripping?"

Another man might have spent those few seconds running numbers, calculating that he could sell his own house for about \$225,000, pay off the remaining \$116,000 on their current mortgage, buy the house for \$34,678 and have \$74,322 left over. But Frank wasn't another man. He was using those seconds to wonder if the chaise Daria had lain on went with the property. Then he came to.

"Uh. Are you sure?"

"Positive. Court order. I'll give you a few days. Let me know. Take care."

Frank hung up and pushed his chair back. He stared for a long time at the invoice reports on his desk. Then he was aware that Isabelle Sanchez was looking at him.

"Are you all right, Frank?"

"Yes."

"Bad news?"

"No. Good news, I guess." Frank wasn't aware how loudly that answer would echo in the months to come, how his good real estate news would intersect, make that collide, with the Good News Pastor Otto preached.

"I've got to go to accounts payable," Isabelle said, a little confused. "But we could pray about it when I get back."

“Sure.”

Isabelle smiled sweetly, got up and left. Frank wondered how he was going to couch this good news in the prayer to come. Manna from heaven? It was certainly that, but it had come showering down because he, Frank Tripping, had risked much, done his duty and stayed the course. Then the numbers started bouncing around in his brain, and though Frank had always been flummoxed by doing sums in his head, the outlines of the size of the manna were evident. Frank started to get excited.

Things had started to come back to normal around the Tripping household. Grace had risen from her bed, seen a doctor, been told all was well, and began to assume her usual duties around the house. Rachael and Franklin Jr. found this comforting, and the images of their father launching himself out of the house like a drunk at pub closing time receded. Frank regained most of his God-given authority, and, when he did his Promise Keepers monthly assessment, was pleased to see his score a credible 89 percent. Tom hadn't returned to the house since that Saturday. The rusted gutter, after being scraped by the falling ladder, hung precariously from its straps, but no one seemed to notice.

When Frank came home after the call from Manley, the kids were sweeping the kitchen while singing hymns, and the ancient window air conditioner that cooled most of the house was clacking in the background. Frank asked Grace to join him in the bedroom and was on his knees at the bed when she arrived. She knelt as well and bowed her head wondering what was up now. Though she hadn't had a conscious thought about it since “the Devil's intervention,” the word “possession,” as it related to Frank's weirdo behavior, had been fluttering around in her subconscious ever since. It now did a little wing flap as Frank began.

“Lord, you have given us much and for that we are most grateful. We have committed ourselves to your cause, and you have rewarded us. We thank you now for your continuing care of your humble servants. Amen.”

“Amen.” Grace lifted her head. Frank stood, came around the bed, sat

and indicated Grace should sit too. She did, and Frank began the speech he'd been rehearsing for hours.

"Do you know how we have prayed for those druggies next door to be apprehended?"

"So, you know?"

"Know what?"

"There was a moving van of some kind over there today. I think they've moved out."

"They have."

"How do you know?"

"I...well, I caused them to move."

"You? How?"

"You know we had our suspicions, of course. Well, I acted on those. I went to the police." Frank had decided that he could relate the story without going into the very dangerous Daria territory. "Remember I had the kids watching the place. They were gathering information. I took that to the police, told them about all the cars and the long hair and what not, and they looked into it, and a few weeks ago arrested the leader."

"That Quincy?"

"Yes."

"I guess I haven't seen him or the hussy wife for a while."

"The detective called me today to tell me."

"Funny we didn't see it. Or hear about it from the neighbors."

"The cops are very professional. They said they didn't want anybody in the neighborhood to be involved."

"Praise Jesus." Frank would have amended that, but in the back of his mind he thought Jesus might not want to take credit for some of the episode.

"Anyway, the detective said that they seized large quantities of drugs and the druggies' property as well." Frank actually believed this. In the hours since the call from Manley he'd altered Manley's message to fit his own mental image of what the bust must have entailed, synched that up with the fact Quincy was caught so red-handed he "copped" and was doing a long

“stretch.” That could only have meant that piles of the stuff were hauled out of the house along with the pink-shirted ringleader. The post-bust prayer circle must have prevented him from seeing the bags or whatever leaving the house.

“Praise Jesus. We were really in danger, weren’t we?”

“It seems so. Anyway, because I, uh, we fulfilled our Christian duty, they have offered us first dibs on the house.”

“They’ve what?”

“They’ve offered us the house before they put it on the market.”

Had Grace been a cartoon character a bubble would have appeared above her head and images of the house would have been flipping past, each one more wildly elegant than the last, ending in a football field-sized living room, replete with chandeliers and a couch big enough for the entire congregation of Mt. Olive.

“Central air,” was what she managed to get out.

“What?”

“They have central air over there.”

“Oh, right. We have a few days.”

“We probably can’t afford it. It’s much bigger than our house.”

Frank waited a beat to relay the paltry price. When Grace heard the number, an involuntary trickle of pee soaked her underwear. She made Frank repeat the number before she even felt the wetness, and when he convinced her this was no joke, that the detective wasn’t playing any games either, that there was a key under the planter, and that they could take a look, she said nothing, dashed to the bathroom, changed underwear in lightning time, and was out the door heading for Quincy’s house before Frank knew what she was doing.

By the time he reached the house, Grace had opened the front door and had rushed in ahead. The room Daria had hosted him in was bare to the walls, only the carpet remaining. A faint outline of the sculpture was etched on the white wall, but other than that, there was no reminder of the former occupants. Frank could hear Grace cooing from the back

bedrooms. He started to follow her, but something held him where he was. A soft voice filled his ears. Little starbursts of images of Daria in the room popped around him. Unlike the frightening rush of nipples and lust that had been his downfall a few weeks earlier, there was an inviting presence now, a whispering welcome.

Then a full-blown Daria, in the t-shirt and cutoffs, came from the kitchen just as she had done on his investigatory visit, smiling warmly.

"Guess it's yours now, huh?"

"Guess so."

"Are you worried that you don't deserve it?"

"Sort of."

"Don't be. We all get exactly what we deserve. Isn't that right?"

"Praise Jesus." This came from a voice outside the realm of Frank's imagination, and he turned to see a flushed and very happy Grace, hands folded in front of her bosom giving genuine thanks and supplication for their good fortune.

Before Frank could respond Rachael had bounded in the door, all wide-eyed and wondering, Franklin Jr. right behind. Grace swooped them all into a circle and had them drop to their knees and give thanks. The prayer went on an inordinately long time as Grace detailed for the Lord what they would be doing with each bedroom, how, with the profit from the sale of their old house, they would be fixing up the kitchen and modernizing the bathroom (things she had noticed back when the Sanborns owned the place), how with the increased space they would be able to host the full Mary and Martha society meeting, and on and on. When the prayer finished, Rachael started to get the gist of it all.

"Are we moving here?" she asked a little tentatively.

"Yes, dear. The Lord has decided that we should replace evil with good."

"Evil?"

"We can tell you now, kids. This was a house of ill repute."

Grace tossed out what she thought was an accurate and biblically sounding name for what had gone down in the very digs in which they were

kneeling. Frank, who thought he knew what a “house of ill repute” was, now questioned his own understanding.

“What’s illrey pute?” Franklin Jr. asked.

“Bad things,” Grace replied, satisfying the kids, but leaving Frank with a question. “Anyway, we will fill this house with good things, the Lord will bless us with, oh, a nice sideboard over there and...” The litany began again, and it was only the light wind, shutting the door with a bang, that ended the prayer. Grace, startled at first, recovered with a smile and said that was the Lord Jesus leaving the family to their new home, walking happily down the sidewalk.

Frank looked out the front window and, in his imagination, thought Jesus looked distinctly like a woman in a t-shirt and cutoffs, a woman like Daria. She was graceful and confident. She stopped and turned around, looking the house over, realizing Frank was watching her, smiling a brave smile that said to Frank, “I’ll be back.”

Wretch

It took them no time at all to sell their house once they got the word around Mt. Olive. Paula and Nick Cavendish and their four children had been squeezed into a two bedroom across the street from Belglade Middle School and were ripe for a move.

Frank thought \$200,000 was a good asking price, but Grace, who by that time had figured a new car should be part of the deal as well, insisted on going no lower than \$235,000. Instead of any negotiations Paula, Nick, Grace and Frank prayed with Pastor Otto, and he informed them that the Lord thought \$220,000 was about right. Grace, who had been hoping the final price would be that, was secretly proud of having brought Jesus around to her thinking.

To Frank the house was a symbol of his heroism. He hadn't had the parade down Main Street he had sometimes, pre-bust, imagined, but Grace's gushing involvement in their new place, and Pastor Otto's low whistle when Frank told him how they got the house and what it cost, was laudatory enough for Frank. Only Pastor Otto and Grace knew of Frank's police work, but most could see something different in the way he carried himself.

All assumed his climb up the real estate ladder was the cause. All would assume in a very short time that there was a much more sinister reason for Frank's new public face.

The double move, the Trippings into Quincy's house and the Cavendish's into the Tripping's, brought the Mt. Olive congregation out in droves. It was a sunny September day, and the air between the two houses was filled with leaves and more "praise the Lords" than a Pat Robertson benefit broadcast. Early that morning, before anything had been moved, Frank walked through the stark, empty rooms. Grace had filled the place with Post-It notes telling the members of the congregation, who would actually be doing the moving, where to put the furniture, etc. She had been consumed by the project ever since she got the news. Frank had walked the empty house in the intervening months, trying to imagine what it was like when Quincy and Daria were there, but he stopped that practice when, one night, with a street light making a baby blue pattern on the carpet in the bedroom, a bed had sprung up out of nowhere, complete with deliciously messed up sheets and Daria, topless, in her bikini, rolling and stretching in the milky light. Frank's involuntary tumescence sent him scurrying to his house, and, when that hard-on persisted through bedtime prayers, Frank decided never to be in the new house alone again. But he gave the rooms one last look that moving day morning, and he was happy to note no Daria sightings, no hard-ons and the transition from drug den to family home about to be complete.

Tom Adams was in his glory on that September day. There had been a gradual reconnection between Tom and Grace, one each thought about a lot, but one no one else could see. Tom even took one morning off work to complete the gutter job, and neither he nor Grace bothered to mention it to their spouses. On the day of the move Tom was up before dawn, borrowed a friend's pickup, and had the first load of furniture from the Cavendish's old house at their new house by seven. If the name didn't have the unfortunate connotation of evil, those working with him would have called him the Tasmanian Devil of the day. He was everywhere, making two runs to everyone else's one, catching a piece of furniture just when it looked like it

was going to be dropped, not even stopping for the mac and cheese lunch the ladies of the Mary and Martha Society had laid out on the lawn.

He geared down his spinning top when Pastor Otto showed up around two, made everyone form a human chain stretching from one front door to the other, stood on a makeshift podium in between the two houses, and proclaimed loudly on the benefits to the neighborhood of this Christian stronghold. This witnessing went on for quite a while, attracting neighbors, some of whom were moved to join the chain, kids on bikes, and even, what good luck, a local news crew that happened to be passing by. Frank wondered about the serendipity of this when he heard the news producer apologize to Pastor Otto for being late, but the day was going too well to quibble.

By eight o'clock in the evening the two families were ensconced in their new digs, and everybody but Tom Adams had gone home. Tom was doing some touch-up work where furniture had dinged into walls. Frank kept telling him that was unnecessary, but he insisted, and Grace pulled Frank aside and said it was the Lord's will that they have things perfect for their first night in their new home.

For Frank the perfection lasted about a week and a half. Grace kept saying that Frank was the king of their new castle, but she was acting like a usurper queen, subtly overruling the master on everything from where to hang the family photos to the size of the new grill they bought for the patio. She was skillful enough and Frank was distracted enough for the undercutting to work.

Frank's distraction was subtle as well. Daria wasn't rushing at him anymore, but there was something akin to a perfume in the place that all the familiar Tripping trappings couldn't displace. She'd walked these rooms, and something about her lingered. That something suffused Frank's being, loosened his limbs, gave him a more fluid outlook on life. Frank had always been one of those handsome men who aren't aware they are handsome. If anyone had ever asked him about his looks, he would have said he was well-groomed. He had a full head of pleasantly brown hair, a stately nose,

and a loose, inviting smile. Now in his post-bust world Frank took a longish look at himself in the mirror after he'd shaved. In a very short time, he was coming to realize he'd gone from black and white to color.

But the transition, outwardly smooth and seamless, was riven with unseen hairline cracks because neither Frank nor Grace understood what the house held in store.

The first inkling of problems, make that a full-blown harbinger, came in the early evening of a beautiful fall day. With their expanded space and much larger backyard, Grace was finally able to host the Happy Homers, a sort of after school for kids who didn't go to school. Seven youngsters aged five to twelve were having good Christian fun when Frank got home from work. A couple of parents were there as well. He changed clothes and joined in. He had been home about an hour and was playing a lively game of Lions and Christians with the kids when Grace said she thought she heard the front doorbell ring. Frank went to check.

Expecting one of the other parents, Frank whipped the door open and smiled. But this was no parent. This was a parent's nightmare in fact. He was in his thirties, maybe early forties, but it was hard to tell because he was so ravaged. His eyes were sunk in pools of brownish flesh, his face was gaunt, he wore a flop hat, and his clothes looked like they'd been tossed around in a mud bath instead of a washing machine. He had his hands jammed in his jeans pockets as if he were trying to keep them from flying away. He was almost as surprised to see Frank as Frank was to see him, but he tried to hide it.

"Hey, man. Sig around?"

"Who?"

Frank was over his surprise enough to realize Flop Hat was a druggie who hadn't got the message about Quincy, but the name threw him. Flop Hat didn't seem all that worried though.

"Sig. Whatever he's calling himself these days?"

"Quincy."

"Sure. He here?"

“No, he’s, uh, moved.”

“Don’t mess with me, man. Who’s here?”

“Well, we are. We moved in about...”

Two things happened simultaneously to stop Frank’s explanation. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a car pull up to the curb in front and realized it was Dot Richards coming to pick up her daughter Elizabeth, and, at the same time, Flop Hat angled left and threw up in the bushes beside the doorstep. He was still hunched over when Dot got out of her car and started walking toward the house. Frank was wondering what he was going to do when Flop Hat straightened up, his lips glistening.

“Whew. Sorry man. Can I use the bathroom to wash up?” He didn’t wait for an answer and just blew by the stunned Frank. “Seriously, who’s here?”

By now Dot was near the door and saw Frank there, so Frank couldn’t just leave the doorway. And Flop Hat had so surprised him that the deranged dirt ball was on his way down the hall toward the bathroom before Frank knew it. He turned back to see Dot, always the exuberant sort, even more exuberant on the doorstep, flinging her arms wide as if she were in a Broadway musical and practically belting out her words.

“The Lord has lifted the light of his countenance upon us today!” She’d obviously missed the globs of retch now decorating the bushes. She smiled broadly and then blew by Frank as well.

Frank closed the door and followed her inside just as the kids were coming in from the backyard. The house was filled now with bubbling kids, chattering parents, and one time bomb in the bathroom.

“Anybody have to squeeze before they leave?” Grace chimed, obviously happy in the role of host. Nobody answered right away. “Aaron?” Grace aimed this at a squirming five-year-old. As he was deciding if he had to squeeze or not, perhaps trying to decode what Grace’s coy little euphemism meant, Frank jumped in.

“No.”

“No, what?” Grace shot back, surprised.

Frank was trying to come up with some plumbing problem in the

bathroom that might keep Aaron from squeezing alongside the hurling Flop Hat, when the hurler's voice, coming from the hall, cut through all the bubbling and chattering.

"What the hell is this?"

The stunned Happy Homers turned to see Flop Hat's ragged presence emerge from the hallway, looking even more ravaged now after what probably was a second toss of the cookies in the bathroom. He stopped, teetered and directed his ire at Frank.

"What's going on? Where's Sig? This is sick."

"Look..." Frank started, as parents and kids backpedaled away from the smell and the flying spittle Flop Hat was producing.

"I'm looking for chrissake. But, Jesus, my eyes are killin' me. What the hell's going on? Where's Sig? I'm really hurtin' here, man. I took the god-damn shitass bus all the way from Toolie. What's going on?" He was planted now, not moving, leaning against the wall.

Then Frank had a stroke of genius.

"Sig's outside. Come on."

Grace shot Frank a quick, puzzled look before Flop Hat lurched off the wall, nearly bowled over a couple of the Happy Homers, and followed Frank outside.

Once they were out the door, Grace slammed it shut and locked it. She turned to face a flabbergasted Greek chorus of Christian parents and kids, reeling in shock and personifying, with mouths agape, her own abject horror. Horror, that is, compounded by down-to-the-roots embarrassment. She could only begin to imagine how this assault would play on the Mt. Olive network. But that beginning was enough to tell her she had to distance herself from any involvement in the mess as quickly as possible.

"Lord, have mercy. What happened?" she managed, squeaking the question as if on the edge of tears.

Frank, meanwhile, walked toward the curb, not sure what he was going to do with Flop Hat now that he'd gotten him out of the house.

“What the hell was all that?” Flop Hat asked, spitting what was probably the remains of a retch onto the sidewalk.

“Homeschoolers. They do an afterschool program and...”

“Where’s Sig?”

“You mean Quincy, the guy who used to own the place? Tall guy with long hair and a beard? He’s in prison, I believe, for a long time.”

“So, who’s in charge?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“For chrissake. This is fucked. I...” He seemed gripped all of a sudden, wheeled away from Frank and threw up what looked like bile, a good part of it splashing off the front grill of Dot’s car.

“Hey, watch it!” Frank’s instincts had him launch this warning, but Frank himself was disturbed. Flop Hat’s flop hat had dropped off his hunched over head and revealed a patchy baldness that was not easy to look at. Then he turned on Frank with a wild-eyed vengeance.

“Watch your own fucking ass, man. I came all the way out here, and there’s nothin’ here, and you’re actin’ like you don’t know shit. You’re gonna burn in hell for this shit. You know that; you know that?”

“I’m saved. I...”

“Save this, motherfucker.” He flipped Frank one horrifying bird, struggled to pick up his flop hat and stumbled into the street. There were several neighbors dotting lawns within sight, and when Flop Hat saw them all staring, he screamed. “You’re all going to hell! Fuck this place!”

Frank watched him weave down the street, not as if he were drunk, but as if his legs would give out any second from the strain. Then Frank saw colored lights out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a police cruiser coming down the street. It passed him and caught up with Flop Hat halfway down the block. The car braked to a stop, and two officers got out quickly, approached Flop Hat with hands on their guns, talked to him briefly, and stuffed him in the back seat of the cruiser. They were gone before Frank had fully registered their presence.

“You all right, Frank?” This came from Nick Cavendish next door. He was

standing on the other side of the hedge holding what looked like a shovel. Frank couldn't tell if he'd just been out in the yard doing some digging, or if he'd brandished the shovel as a weapon in order to come to Frank's aid. Frank waved back to indicate he was fine.

But he didn't move for a while. He'd never seen anything like what he had just seen. So, this, he thought to himself, is what drugs do to druggies. He tried, as he knew Pastor Otto would want him to do, to see the Devil in this wretch. Given the way Flop Hat looked, acted and damned him, that shouldn't have been a stretch for a godly man like Frank, but something was keeping him from condemning the man. Even in his fury Flop Hat looked too human and pained to be sent to hell. Frank kept seeing him throw up, the piteous animality of the act. For a few moments Frank's whole world was focused on the images and sounds he'd just experienced. The neighbors, the cops, the kids and parents in the house were gone. It was just Frank and Flop Hat and some sort of deep mystery Frank could not begin to plumb.

Then he heard Grace and some of the other parents coming out of the house, and he turned and walked back. Grace left the others and, checking to make sure Flop Hat was completely gone, made a beeline for Frank.

"And what was that all about?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? He was talking to you. He was asking you questions. You must have let him in the house."

"No."

"Well then how did he get in?"

"He just sort of slipped by me."

"Slipped by you? Are you kidding me? The Devil comes to the front door, your front door, the front door of the house you are commanded by the Lord to protect, the house that is filled with His children, and he just slipped by you?"

"Grace."

"Don't Grace me. The children are scarred for life. The parents...well..."

The mention of the parents sent her back toward them, huddled in front

of the house. She joined them, and Frank watched her being enfolded by the group. Keeping a wary eye on the now highly suspicious Frank, the parents herded their kids toward waiting cars, circling Frank's force field as if he had just gone radioactive.

Frank didn't move to help them or explain. He was certainly bothered by what Grace had said and the looks from the parents. But he was bothered more by Flop Hat and by why he couldn't simply call a spade a spade, label the druggie the Devil the way Grace had. Frank wondered what was wrong with himself, how his faith had withered in the presence of evil. He searched for comforting or revelatory biblical passages to help him explain things.

But then a strange and new feeling came upon him. Maybe there was nothing wrong with him at all.

One Man's Meat

The cops may have hauled Flop Hat away, but his ravaged presence lingered like unhailed garbage on a summer day. Grace, mortified by having a wild man leap out of her bathroom and scare the living daylights out of the Happy Homers and their parents, especially since it was the first time she'd hosted the group, gave the event a significance wildly out of proportion to any rational assessment. In short, she went bonkers.

Which didn't help Rachael and Franklin Jr. all that much.

"Why, oh why, would your father let the Devil slip into our safe Christian home?" she asked rhetorically that night.

The kids, kneeling for prayers by their beds, didn't have an answer to the question. Franklin Jr., who had always had a sharp sense of smell had been close enough to Flop Hat to take in his vomit-perfumed breath, and all he now knew about the Devil was summed up in that rancid smell. Rachael hadn't smelled Flop Hat, but she had noticed his use of language, and her delicate ears were still ringing with the taking of the Lord's name in vain and one totally unacceptable word for number two. Neither Franklin Jr. nor

Rachael, however, understood the connection between the Devil's appearance and their father, a connection Grace's question implied.

Grace once again was being yanked around by that invisible chain called the subconscious. More than once in her short time in the new house she had, in her mind, magically whisked Frank away from the environs, installed Tom, and floated through a heavenly few seconds, only to be brought back to a grouchy reality by the sight of her real husband lumbering down the hall. Unaware of the origins of her grumpiness, she concluded that Frank was somehow to blame. Though she didn't say anything at the time and hewed to the male-is-the-master-of-the-house line, she was counting the ways Frank fell short of the mate she imagined she was worthy of. Flop Hat's sudden appearance ran the count way, way into the red zone in a matter of minutes.

Word of the Devil's incursion made it to the Mt. Olive congregation in nanoseconds. While Nick Cavendish was on the front lawn of his house with his shovel, his wife Paula was on the phone to Pastor Otto. He was not very comforting, advising her to defend herself at all costs. Using the phone tree that had been set up to oppose sex education in the local schools, Paula then spread the word about Flop Hat's horrendous visit. As with any news story, the initial take on events can mean a lot and be very hard to counter later.

"I don't know what Frank was doing out there with that awful thing. It didn't look like he was trying to get away from it, and it even looked like he was talking to it."

The nasty subtext, that Frank and Flop Hat were somehow involved with each other, was a taint difficult to ignore. If Pastor Otto had a central theme to his ministry, it was Vigilance. The enemy was not only everywhere, but he was wily, clever as all get-out, determined, endowed with superhuman powers, and all he needed was one little slip by the saved, and he'd have you by the throat in a second.

But Frank and the Devil? That was initially a difficult one to swallow. Frank and Grace had been showcase Christians ever since the miracle that brought them to the Lord was known. Unchurched and unsaved when they

moved to Belgrade, in dire straits because of some economic setbacks, both seriously overweight and at their wits end with a colicky Rachael, Frank, at the time an atheist as his father had been, was almost instantly converted when Jeff and Jill Eggleston, Mt. Olive stalwarts, made a routine welcome-to-the-neighborhood visit. Frank talked to them politely for a few minutes, without letting them in, then went back to the bedroom, where Rachael had been caterwauling for two weeks solid, and found her quietly cooing in Grace's arms. Frank and Grace took this miracle as a sign and joined the altar call the very next Sunday.

With the zeal of converts Frank and Grace became model Christians. They tithed, home-schooled, attended every service, prayer meeting and breakfast. Frank, the man who had complimented his wife on her diligence, was himself a paragon of steadfastness in the congregation. He almost never missed a gathering, even when the kids were young and attendance put a strain on him, and he was always at least ten minutes early. Grace, of course, earned the Christian Wife of the Year award. Frank and Grace weren't leaders, but they were exemplary followers, Christians who were not only saved, but were very carefully Vigilant.

So, all in all, the news that ricocheted around Mt. Olive about Flop Hat, complete with Paula's early reporting and the confirmation provided by other eyewitnesses, to wit, the astonished Happy Homer parents and the aghast neighbors, was troubling to say the least. Had Frank somehow lost his way? Had that ever-resourceful maggot of mayhem wormed deep into the heart of one of the Lord's chosen? Could poor Grace and those darling children be in grave danger?

The possible magnitude of the problem was difficult for the people of Mt. Olive to deal with. A tension-o-meter at the first service after the event would have exploded when Frank and Grace took their usual seats. Grace, suffering from a recurring, Flop Hat- induced, multi-level migraine to begin with, felt the pressure immediately. Rachael and Franklin Jr. felt it too.

Frank, however, thought the light coming through the fake stained glass windows looked nice as it fell on the altar railing.

The congregation, which had understood completely and applauded lustily Frank's turn to the Lord, had no way to figure out just what he seemed to be grinning about there in the service, other than to say he'd gone to the dark side. The fact that Frank himself was not fully aware of what had happened to him, in the fifteen or so minutes Flop Hat lurched in and out of his life, didn't help. Since Flop Hat's incursion, Frank had felt great, grinned his way through breakfast, howdied everybody at work, and slept like a baby.

All of which worked to his detriment, of course. Like an immune system marshaling its forces against invading bacterium, the members of Mt. Olive clumped defensively in the weeks after Flop Hat's appearance. There were parking lot conversations after service that had little to do with discussing the New Testament passage for the day. There were silent, eyeball to eyeball messages when Frank was in the room. The phone lines carried so many clucks and harumphs and tskses it sounded like the Kalihari had taken over Belgrade.

As the weight of opinion against Frank grew, as the stories about the Event took on more sordid details, which gave Flop Hat accomplices and long canines and even a tail in one telling, Mt. Olive naturally began to look to Pastor Otto for guidance. Something certainly had to be done. Despite the fact the congregation treated The Couple as a holy and sacrosanct indication of God's presence, there were times when one member of The Couple needed to be protected from the other. When, for instance, several years earlier, Jenny Monroe had stood up during Cares and Concerns in a Wednesday night service and boldly told the congregation that, even though she still loved her husband Bill very much, she had developed a deep affection for Nancy Hellman, a gym teacher at the high school, Pastor Otto saw to it Bill and the kids were whisked away from Jenny, now a She-devil, as soon as possible.

But Frank's case wasn't some no-brainer like declaring your love for a known pervert. In his sermon on the first Sunday after the Event, Pastor Otto hauled the usual suspects in front of the congregation for all to see, the rampant hedonism in the society, the godless flaunting their lack of

patriotism, and came down particularly hard on the unwashed drug users, reference to which caused a low mumbling to be heard among the pews. But unlike the bug-eyed finger-pointing that had accompanied Jenny Monroe's ouster from his good graces, Pastor Otto didn't name names, didn't call Frank out specifically.

There was some disappointment in the congregation about this, as if Pastor Otto had gone 10 solid rounds with the Devil and then refused to deliver the knockout punch when he had him on the ropes. That day's clumping included questions about the reasons for the pulled punch. The major consensus was that Pastor Otto had something else up his sleeve, a more potent Devil-scrubber than he had used against Jenny Monroe. The truth, however, was that Pastor Otto looked farther down the road than his congregants and saw something of a golden opportunity in the future. Delivering a hammer-blow to the Devil now might sacrifice long-term goals for short-term ones. But these machinations wouldn't come to light for a while.

The flip side of condemning Frank was that sympathy for Grace and the kids spiked and made itself manifest in gestures, phone calls, visits and invitations. A concerted effort, especially by the traumatized Happy Homers, to keep Grace protected and away from Frank resulted in her being passed around from house to house like a raver in a mosh pit. We've already seen how Grace reacted to Tom's ministrations in the aftermath of her near-death experience, finding the attention and the aid a balm for all her worldly woes. Imagine then how the outpouring of sympathy in the aftermath of the Devil's appearance amped up her sense of herself as someone in dire need of protection, as a victim.

While the cordon of congregants thrown up around Grace and the kids was something of a total church effort, Tom Adams seemed to be leading in his quiet way.

"I had it pegged as a possession a month and a half earlier. Saw it with my own eyes. Devil just picked up Frank and hurled him outside. I saw that. Praise Jesus. I saw that," was the way he phrased things at the men's prayer breakfast, whose time and location had been shifted suddenly, without

Frank being told. "It's a scary thing to be in the middle of all that. I don't know how Grace sleeps at night."

Not so oddly, Tom's wife, Evangeline, found Tom's interest in the whole case suspicious. It wasn't that she was seeing less of her husband, (childless, they had led sort of parallel lives for a long time) but that he was neglecting some of his more mundane church maintenance duties in favor of ferrying Grace and the kids here and there. Evangeline, in other words, smelled a rat. But there was little she could do about it. The party line at Mt. Olive was that Grace needed all the help she could get, and if that meant the carpeting on the side aisle of the sanctuary didn't get nailed down properly, so be it.

Where, you might ask, was Frank as this geyser of aid for Grace erupted? Was he wounded, hurt, confused, sidelined, searching? Well, not really. There were times he thought all the nights and weekends he was spending alone were unusual, but if Grace and the congregation had raced away from Flop Hat in one direction, he had sort of ambled off in another wholly different one.

As soon as Flop Hat tossed his cookies into the bushes, Frank knew the man had something to do with Daria. Vomit in the bushes, after all, was the last thing he remembered seeing before the door opened and his few minutes with Daria had begun. The association was strong enough to keep Frank from slamming the door on the druggie or grabbing him when he walked into the house. And then, when Flop Hat began ranting and asking for Sig, what the Happy Homers and Nick Cavendish and the neighbors saw as a pitchfork-toting Beelzebub, Frank saw as someone who probably got the same polite treatment from Daria that Sandy, the druggie who came while Frank was there, got.

So, in the aftermath of Flop Hat's appearance, when Grace was shrieking around and the Happy Homers were racing to their cars, and the over-the-fence speculations of the neighbors played almost loud enough to be heard half a block away, Frank couldn't get Daria out of his head. In the space of a few minutes, he had gone from WWJD to WWDD.

Those still back in WWJD land knew for certain that a true soldier in

the war on the Devil would have grabbed Flop Hat by the seat of his pants and had him face down on the front lawn, handcuff ready, when the police, responding to the 911, arrived. Frank's WWDD was a little more complex. Was Daria, for instance, a druggie herself? Did they sit around and shoot up or whatever they did? And if so, why did Daria look so normal, and Flop Hat so wasted? But at the very least Frank knew that Daria would have most likely welcomed him in, that Flop Hat had expected such a welcome when he rang the doorbell. Frank, filled with these questions, hadn't slammed the door on Flop Hat, and couldn't slam the door on the memory of him, because that would be like slamming the door on Daria.

And he didn't want to do that. He wanted to do the opposite. He wanted to see her, have her hand him another root beer, watch her eyes blink, have that perfume waft through his being again, and ask her myriad questions. But he had no way to reach her, and so, like his WWJD counterparts, he had to settle for speculation and the educated guess.

Until she showed up on his doorstep, that is.

13

You Don't Know Me

Grace and the kids had been out of the house for about fifteen minutes when it happened. Tom had picked them up to take them to the Prayers-in-Schools rally in Fleming. Frank had been all set to go to the rally himself, but the night before, a Friday night, after Popcorn, Pepsi and Prayers, Grace had pronounced the garage “a filthy hole” that needed cleaning. Frank didn’t think the garage was all that dirty, but he was becoming adept at translating Grace’s now somewhat oblique language.

“I’d hate to miss the rally but...” he offered.

“We all have to make choices.”

“Right.”

“One less voice for Prayers-in-Schools, but one step closer to godliness here,” Grace intoned, not able to even look at Frank.

“You’re not saying we need to be closer to godliness, are you?” This was, for these days, a rare challenge by Frank.

“Vigilance, Frank.”

“Of course. Let us pray.”

Frank bowed his head and began the evening prayers. Grace was satisfied

that she had gotten her way, that the rally wouldn't be muddied by Frank's presence, that she would be sitting in the front seat with Tom on the drive (they had already set this up), and that she and her kids would be safe. She did not bow her head all the way. For over a week now, ever since it occurred to her that the Devil might use prayer time as a moment to work some of his black magic, she had kept one eye on Frank throughout his mumblings.

Frank wasn't aware of this because he had transformed evening prayer time into commune-with-Daria's-spirit time. While packets of pro forma words spilled out of his mouth, his head was filled with the floating presence of the person he had come to see as the real master of the house. This was not a memory thing. He wasn't having the hot pants glimpses of breasts and bent-over buttocks that he had had in the old house. Here was the Daria of his visit, the sparkling eyes and the hand on the arm and even the wild sculpture on the wall. And in the moments before he hit the sheets, gave Grace a peck, and drifted very quickly into a peaceful sleep, Daria was at her most comforting.

He was getting ready to start on the garage that Saturday morning when the front doorbell rang. Bracing for Flop Hat again, given that anyone else he and Grace knew would be at the rally, he went to obey the ring.

She was facing away from the door when he opened it, looking up and down the block. She turned quickly, and Frank noticed two things immediately. She was carrying a black plastic garbage bag, and she wasn't even close to the smiling, relaxed woman of his memory. Daria now looked tightlipped and anxious. When she spoke, her tone was dark and sarcastic. She seemed to know Frank would be there.

"Earl. I know the family's gone and the neighborhood's done an *On the Beach* number. May I come in for a minute?"

She didn't wait for the answer. After a quick check to make sure she hadn't been seen, she ducked past Frank much the way Flop Hat had done. Absorbing her tone and anxiety, Frank closed the door quickly and turned to her, realizing only then that he was holding a dustpan. He didn't know what to do with it. But Daria turned to him before he could decide.

“Would you please stay here for about two minutes. I need to get some things and then I’ll be gone.”

“They, uh...”

“Took everything?”

“Right.”

“Not really. I mean in some ways they sure as hell did, but I don’t think the cocksuckers got everything out of here. Will you just stay here for two minutes? Please?”

“Yes.”

Daria gave him a long look, the way you would if you’ve just told a dog to stay. Convinced he was going to hold where he was, Daria turned and headed quickly down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

Had Frank really been a dog he would have whimpered. He wanted to follow her in the worst way, but that look had rooted him to the carpet. The dustpan drooped in his hand. The seconds ticked away. Frank’s mind was awash with the sight of Daria, the smell of the plastic garbage bag, the word “cocksuckers.”

More seconds ticked away, and Frank began to wonder if he’d imagined the whole thing. Daria had been such a presence in the house that maybe he had just whistled her up instead of cleaning the garage. The evidence seemed to suggest she wasn’t really there. The house had been stripped, there was nothing of hers to retrieve, and she didn’t seem like the Daria of his memory. After what felt like a decade or two, he decided to see if there really was a Daria in the house, and he started toward the hallway.

They almost collided as Daria came rushing out of Franklin Jr.’s bedroom, the garbage bag now puffed out in her hand.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t move,” she growled, brushing past Frank. He turned and followed her toward the front door.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what you were up to.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“It’s my house.”

“Right, but it’s still none of your business.” She had reached the front

door and turned back to him. "If you can't obey a simple thing like standing still, I don't imagine you'll be able to obey this but, I wasn't here. Got it?"

"You weren't here?"

"Let me spell it out for you. Don't tell anybody I was here. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Any chance you're going to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Not tell anybody I was here."

"Yes. If..."

"If what?"

The "if" had been out of his mouth before he knew what conditional clause would follow. But as God had done eons ago with Abraham, Frank's mouth magically filled with inspired words.

"If you tell me who Sig is."

"Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"Who else?"

"Nobody really."

"How did you hear the name?"

"A man came to the door and asked for Sig."

"What did he look like?"

"He was skinny and wore a hat that..."

"Have you got a pencil and paper?"

"Yes, why?"

"I'll write down a number for you."

She gave him the look again, only this time it meant move, go get the paper and pencil. He obeyed so well he returned with a Post-It and a pencil, still holding the dustpan. She snatched everything but the dustpan, scrawled a phone number on the Post-It, and shoved it back at him.

"What's this?"

"If anybody else comes, tell them to call this number."

"Anybody else?"

“There shouldn’t be but...Do me a favor, will you?”

“What?”

“Keep that number to yourself too. I know I’m asking an awful lot from somebody who can’t even stay in the living room for two minutes, but I haven’t got a choice. You have a choice. You can tell people I was here, tell them about the number, or not. Go with the second choice, okay. For me?”

Her features softened as she half pleaded and now approximated the look Frank held in his memory.

“Okay, but I’m pretty much in the dark about all this.”

“It’s your cross to bear, Earl. You got this house for peanuts, you have to take some unwanted extras, I guess. And do me one other teensy favor. If, by chance, anybody like that guy comes to your door asking for Sig, treat ‘em kindly. They’re not well.”

She put a hand on Frank’s right arm for emphasis. Then she ripped open the door and left.

Strike Two

Her touch lingered on the skin of Frank's forearm as he watched Daria walk quickly to a nondescript compact car at the curb. Then the scant few minutes of their time together lingered in Frank's mind for hours.

In those hours he replayed moments from the visit. In Frank's memory they took on layered meanings, interpretations, celebrations. He fixed on, for instance, the sincerity with which she asked him to be kind to any future Flop Hats who showed up on the doorstep. Frank was intrigued by this. They were drug addicts after all, weak souls who had succumbed to the Devil's snare, and yet Daria was asking him to give them due compassion. This, coupled with some of the less than steely feelings he had had when Flop Hat wretched out by the street, further opened up a new perspective on the demi-monde for Frank. Druggies needed a sort of tough love exorcism, not some touchy feely coddling, according to Pastor Otto. Yet Frank now began to see there might be more to this whole thing than the Devil having latched on to a loser.

Complexity can be a kick in the head. Frank had seen a videotape of a sermon by Billy Mike Tompkins, a fiery interpreter of the Lord's Word, who

called complexity Satan's Glue. "While you're totin' up all the this's and that's, that old wily Snake has done stuck hisself smack dab in the middle of your brain, and you cain't for nothin' get him outta there."

Daria was, indirectly, sort of the anti-Billy Mike. With her eyes and her touch and her words she was practically preaching to him to think about things, roll them over, see different sides, understand the obvious might not be as obvious as it seems. And with no one to talk to about this development, the flurry of differing opinions he was now experiencing made Frank quite susceptible to Satan's Glue. But it didn't feel that way. Maybe it was the difference between a slick videotape of a very angry man demanding Frank vacuum choice and variety from his being, and the supple, in-the-flesh features of a woman who told him to be kind to druggies and had touched his arm for emphasis.

Chewing over the larger issues raised by Daria's whirlwind return, Frank neglected both his cleaning effort and obvious questions, such as how did she know how much they paid for the house? Why did she still call him Earl if she knew how much he paid for the house? And, most obviously, what was in the garbage bag? All those details took a back seat to Daria's aura, her allure even when she was half scolding him. In short Frank was smitten again.

Grace, of course, picked up the vibe as soon as she and the kids returned from the Prayers-In-Schools rally. She was on something of a high herself, then, after a day in which she felt like Tom's wife, one in which she was surrounded by very sympathetic friends. The rally itself was a huge success. Buses from all over the state had converged on Fleming High School, the scene of a disgusting appearance of the Devil only two weeks earlier. The principal of FHS, defying a directive from the local school board, had banned any type of school-wide meditation/prayer/prayer gatherings, etc., during school hours. Pastor Otto had been the star of the rally when he took the mike and declared, "An education without prayer hasn't got a prayer!" Grace was still humming this ditty to herself when she walked in the door and found Frank, still in the garage, in an oddly buoyant mood.

"Hey, how was the rally?"

“You’ve been working on the garage the whole time?”

This sort of surprised Frank. Yes, he had been standing there contemplating the oil stain, and yes, he’d poked at some tiny cobwebs and splashed some Windex on the small window facing his old home, but if an efficiency expert had asked him to detail the past four or five hours in his life, all he could have come up with was the myriad details of Daria’s visit. It was when she saw the blank stare response to her question that Grace a) knew something was up, and b) suspected that something was the Devil. She got out of the garage as fast as she could and found Franklin Jr. in his room.

“Do you smell anything, Franklin? Anything like you smelled That Day.”

Franklin Jr. knew what she meant. He had been playing with his Loaves and Fishes Lego set at his desk, but he abandoned that quickly, got up and started sniffing his way through the house. It wasn’t just that Franklin Jr. had been repulsed by Flop Hat and had remembered the smell. He had a very good nose and, in another life, would have given Robert Parker a run for his money. On his tour through the house, he picked up a perfume he didn’t recognize, but he didn’t say anything about this because he associated perfume with some little tinglings he got that he knew he should keep to himself. Then a strong smell came to him near the front door.

“Garbage bag.” He said, dropping lower to pick up more of the scent.

“What?”

“There was a garbage bag here. And some other funny smell.”

“The Devil?”

“I don’t know. Strange. Maybe some dirt stuff Dad was throwing out.”

“He wouldn’t go through the living room if he was throwing out things from the garage. And you don’t have that other smell?”

“No.”

Although Franklin Jr. couldn’t catch his scent trail, Grace was certain the big L, as in Lucifer, had been in the house in her absence that Saturday. The last thing Tom had said to her, as he handed her tote bag to her in the driveway was, “are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” Grace had assured him she could handle the house. But Frank stood there

so oddly in the garage, and Franklin Jr. picked up such a strange smell, that she wasn't sure now. She was almost going to make a call to Tom and say she'd overestimated her abilities, when Frank finally came in from the garage. He seemed more himself.

"So, the rally?"

"You already asked."

"Yes, but I don't think you answered. Many people?"

"Lots."

"Who was there from Mt. Olive?"

Innocent question that, but Grace parsed it through a scrim of building paranoia and wondered if telling Frank who had been at the rally amounted to a betrayal of those people. For Frank's part he was only dimly aware that his relationship with the church had gone all haywire, and he genuinely wanted to hear who among his friends had attended. Grace decided she didn't want to give them up.

"I thought I'd make chili dogs for dinner."

"Okay. Do you think it worked?"

"What? What worked?"

"The rally. Do you think it's going to change their minds?"

Frank was fishing. Now it was he who picked up the distance vibe, and he was trying to reel Grace in a little. But there wasn't even a tug on the line.

"Frank, I'm not a reporter. If you want to know what happened at the rally you should have gone."

"But..."

"And cheese fries. Rachael said she's dying for cheese fries." Rachael hadn't said anything of the sort, but Grace was on a full backpedal sprint now, and she just wanted to get out of verbal range of Frank.

Frank stared for a moment, trying to decide if he should continue, but the signs were pretty clear. Stay away, they said. Get lost. Go contemplate the oil stain. He turned and, without thinking about it at all, headed for the front door. He got there and turned the knob and had the door open before he realized what he was doing. Or, rather, realized he didn't know

what he was doing. Where was he going? Why was he going out the door? He didn't have any answers but, feeling Grace's eyes on his back, he figured he ought to follow through. He went out the door and walked a few steps down the walk.

He stood there in the failing fall light and was intoxicated by the musky perfume of the evening, the smokey decay of the leaves. Normally he would have celebrated the good feelings the dusk engendered with a "Praise the Lord" or some such, maybe even bowed his head and given thanks. But nothing like that came to him. In fact, absolutely nothing came to him for a long minute or two.

Then a car drove in the driveway, a time-worn Toyota Frank didn't recognize. He didn't move as the car stopped and a thirty-something woman, in a skin-tight waitress uniform, covered by the skimpiest of jackets, got out of the car and came toward him. She was not all that good looking, there was something wrong with her skin, and she was nervous.

"Are you Sig?" she asked very softly.

"No."

"Oh, sorry. This is my first time. Is he inside?"

"No. He's not here anymore."

"Oh." Her face fell and the blotchy skin practically pulsed. Frank didn't have to be reminded to be kind to her.

"I have a phone number for him, though."

"You do? Do you work with him?"

"No."

Frank fished in his pocket for the folded Post-It. He had been careful to put it out of sight because he didn't want to have to explain to Grace what the number was all about, as if he could. He read her the number and asked if she could remember it. She said she couldn't, that she wasn't good with memory "these days."

Frank had already committed the number to deep and indelible memory. Moments after Daria left, as he was peeling the Post-It off the pad, he burned the digits into his brain. They were, after all, his one connection

with Daria. He now gave the Post-It to the Waitress and felt her rough, scaly hand as she took it.

“And this is where I can reach Sig?”

“I don’t know. But someone at this number can help, I’m told.”

The Waitress looked from Frank to the house but didn’t move. She seemed to be on the edge of tears.

“This isn’t a trap, is it?”

“A trap? I don’t think so.”

“It took me so long to get my courage up, you know. I don’t want to... well, you know.”

“Yeah.”

Frank of course didn’t have a clue, but Daria’s request to treat these people kindly was in his ear now, and he probably would have agreed with anything she said.

She gave the Post-It another look but didn’t say anything more. She turned and walked back to her car, got in, and drove off quickly. Frank had the odd sensation of having just done a good deed. He took a minute more to see if he could revive the meditative moment he’d had just before she arrived, but he found himself thinking about her too much. He turned to go back in the house and, out of the corner of his eye, caught Paula Cavendish staring at him over the hedge. He waved. She didn’t wave back.

Deliver Us

Paula Cavendish wasn't the only one staring at Frank. As soon as her husband wandered trance-like out the front door, Grace, relieved to be away from him, but curious what he was up to, had tiptoed through the living room, as if footfalls on the carpet would somehow disturb Frank's activity in the front yard, and peeked out the window.

She got there in time to see Frank "sniffing the wind," as she would later say, and watched with mounting horror as a car pulled into the driveway, a woman clearly marked with the Devil's hand got out of the car and approached Frank, who "seemed to know her." Rachael came out of the bedrooms then, and Grace shielded her eyes from the ugly scene outside while she continued to watch. The hussy drove away, and Frank waited a few seconds before turning back to the house. He waved to Paula Cavendish as if nothing had happened.

Grace told Rachael to go into the bedroom and scampered back to the kitchen, wondering what she was going to do. She stopped by the stove and said a quick prayer for aid. Then, as she would say later, over and over, the Lord made the microwave door open and gave her a sign. There was a

malfunction in the microwave, and often, when people came in the kitchen, the door popped open. But Grace ignored this fact and came to the conclusion that the Lord was saying “open the door and leave.”

But how, and where? She heard Frank come in the front door. Her heart began to rev up for more palpitations. She thought she could hear him coming toward the kitchen. She was trapped. But then she heard him stop and head for the bedrooms. As hard as it was for her not to go screaming in protection of her little ones, she managed to stay in the kitchen and dial Tom’s cell phone. He would know what to do.

Frank meanwhile was both blissful and blissfully unaware of the domestic tornado coning up in the kitchen. His Good Samaritan feeling had continued as he came back in the house, the fact that he had indeed obeyed Daria this time augmented that feeling, and, as he headed to the kitchen, he thought maybe it was time to just come clean to Grace, to let her experience his transformation as he was experiencing it.

But a few steps later a thought that should have come hours earlier finally hit and stopped him in his tracks. What was in the garbage bag? And from where did Daria get whatever was in it? And did that have anything to do with the Waitress? He turned toward the bedrooms, musing on these questions, thinking the answers might bring him closer to an understanding of Daria and her world.

Franklin Jr. was back to playing with his Loaves and Fishes Lego set when Frank came in the room. He had a bevy of hungry followers dotting the blocky hillside and was about to put Jesus down in front of them in order to perform his miracle. He had been thinking about his father as he worked on the project. That perfume he didn’t tell Grace about was still in a pocket of his nostril and was giving him those little tinglings. Did Frank have something to do with that perfume and those tinglings? Franklin Jr. was just completing such a question to himself when Frank showed up in the doorway, smiling.

“Hey. Whatcha up to?”

“Loaves and Fishes.”

“Looks good.”

Frank was distracted as he said this. His eyes couldn't help wandering the room looking for disturbances in the field. Franklin Jr. was, without a doubt, the neatest nine-year-old in the history of nine-year-olds. He didn't have to be told to put his toys away or pick up his clothes. In fact, if Grace or Frank were in the room and happened to move something and not put it back exactly where it had been, within a millimeter of where it had been, that is, Franklin Jr. would know and let them know he knew. Franklin Jr.'s hypersensitive nose was probably just one of the offshoots of his nearly pathological neat-freakishness. But for Frank, now, this was a definite plus. “Notice anything out of the ordinary?” he asked as casually as he could. “I was in here looking for, uh, my keys, and I didn't want to disturb anything.”

Franklin Jr. could sense this was a lie, but the possibility things were out of order in his room made him ignore this and race around to various checkpoints making sure all was as it should be. It was, apparently.

“No, nothing wrong. Your keys?”

“I don't know. Just an absentminded professor today.”

Frank was still raking the room with his eyes as he said this, unnerving Franklin Jr. further. He had stepped into the bedroom, a few feet in from the door frame. Then suddenly a rush of Gracedom flew down the hall past Franklin Jr.'s room and startled Frank. When he turned, it was gone. He poked his head out the door in time to see his own bedroom door close. He heard the lock on the door handle turn with a snap.

Grace thanked Jesus that she had insisted on the lock on the bedroom door. Tom, on the phone minutes earlier, had told her to lock it while she packed. Grace had protested that she couldn't leave the kids in harm's way while she got ready to jump ship, but Tom had equated locking the door to parents putting on their oxygen masks first when a plane was nosediving into the ocean.

Tom wasn't very far away when Grace reached him. In fact, he was just down the block sitting in his idling van.

“I was worried, Grace. I knew you had strength, but I saw Frank possessed

that time, and it scared me to think you might have to deal with that all by yourself.”

“Praise the Lord, Tom. I didn’t expect him to be so bold.”

“The Devil doesn’t care. Right in the driveway, you said?”

“She just drove up, and Frank just stood there as if nobody could see him.”

“And she gave him something?”

“No, he gave her something.”

“What could it be?”

“I don’t know. The keys to the house?”

Tom had had enough. The weeks of trying to protect Grace and the kids while perched just outside the family were over. He had a plan, one he had worked on for a while, and it was time to put that plan into action. The first step was to take the reins, shelter the vulnerable, establish himself as their protector and guide.

“Grace, the Lord does not want you to suffer this. This is not some test you have to go through alone. I am going to come and get you and the kids.”

“Praise Jesus.”

It was at that point he told her to start packing, that he would come to the door and deal with Frank, that while he was dealing with Frank she should get the kids out to his van, and he would take them all to his house for the night.

Grace may have been racing around the bedroom packing, but she didn’t outdistance her subconscious. In the rush of it all she managed to take a few precious moments to decide which nightgown to take, deciding on the aqua and gold number because, she knew, it flattered her, complemented her hazel eyes. Somewhere in the back rooms of her thinking was a meeting in Tom’s bathroom, an unplanned one, of course, but a meeting nonetheless, in which she would be dressed in her nightgown. She would need to look good for that.

The moment over, she crammed the rest of her overnight clothes in a small suitcase, went to the door, undid the lock as quietly as she could, and

peered out through a crack. She saw Frank walking toward the front door and realized it was time to make her dash for the kids.

Things certainly come in bunches, Frank had thought to himself when he had seen the bedroom door close and lock. From Daria to the Waitress to this woosh of wife he'd just witnessed, the past few hours had been full. He looked back at Franklin Jr., who had experienced the presence passing the door as well, and who would have really liked to go see what his mother was up to, but who was frozen by his father blocking the doorway.

"What was that, Franklin?"

Franklin Jr. shrugged as best he could. Frank smiled, amused at the sudden, incongruous turn of events. Then he looked out Franklin Jr.'s window and saw Tom's car come in the driveway. Tom jumped out as if he were dismounting a galloping horse. Unlike the cowboys of old, however, Tom caught a toe as he leaped and went headfirst into the shrubs next to the driveway. Frank started out to help him.

But Tom recovered quickly and was practically at the door when Frank opened it. Tom couldn't have realized that his thinning hair was tufting wildly on top of his head, thanks to a sort of comb-up done by the shrubbery. He could see that his windbreaker was smudged on the shoulder, but that didn't matter. He had a rescue to accomplish.

"Hey, Tom. You alright?"

"Yeah, I..."

"Forget something?"

"No, I..." Tom was stumped. He had a fully worked out plan, true, but, being a man of few words, he had neglected planning the few words he would need during the rescue. Frank, who was used to conversations with Tom in which you had to tease talk out of him, was at a loss now, not having much to go on. Frank was also dealing with the fact that Tom's appearance made him look like he'd dropped from the sky.

"Grace or the kids leave something in your car?"

"No. Frank. I'm taking them with me."

"Taking who with you? Where?"

“Grace and the kids. Someplace.”

“Okay. Grace didn’t say anything to me about it. But I’ll get her.”

“No. You stay here. I’ll get her.”

But he didn’t have to. Grace, suitcase in hand, kids with their backpacks in tow, burst out of the house, much as she’d wooshed down the hallway a little earlier, and blew past the now half-flabbergasted, half-curious Frank.

“Grace, what? Where are you going?”

Once past Frank, Grace did a handoff to Tom, giving him her suitcase, pushing the kids toward him, not even noticing Tom’s smudged shoulder and cotton candy coif. Emboldened now, safe in the presence of Tom the Good, she wheeled on Frank and let loose.

“We know, Frank. We’ve known for a while. You can’t pretend. You’re in the Devil’s grasp and you’re lost to us.”

“The Devil’s grasp? Grace what are you talking about?”

“No, you’re not going to get me to stay and listen to you. Your soul is lost, Frank. We can’t be under this roof with you one more night.”

“Where are you going?”

“I...I can’t tell you that either. I don’t want you to follow.”

“Rachael! Franklin! What’s going on?!”

The kids glared as Tom hustled them into his car. Frank was getting the idea now. Grace was leaving him and taking the kids. It was all happening so suddenly, though, that it didn’t seem real. Grace fired off one last salvo.

“The worst part is you tried to bring the Devil into our home. You will burn in hell for that, believe me, Frank. You will. If I were you, I’d get down on my knees and pray to the Lord with every ounce of your lost soul that you haven’t corrupted our innocents.”

Other than the fact these were the most florid and lengthy sentences Frank had heard from Grace in a long time, he was utterly at a loss to say what they meant. He had come a long way in the last few months, and the equations he once made between the godless and the Devil’s spawn just didn’t register now as they had before. Sure, he had once figured Quincy for something truly evil, but that was a long time ago. And to make the leap

Grace was asking him to make, i.e., that he, Frank Tripping, was part of the Devil's cadre, was nigh impossible.

But there was no denying Grace and the kids were being hustled away from him. As he looked around in the dim light, he realized a good portion of the neighborhood was watching the spectacle of Grace and the kids high-tailing it as well. He decided to take Grace's advice, as one way to counter what she was saying, and to give the onlookers a visual that might throw a little doubt into their minds about what they were seeing.

He dropped to his knees and bowed his head in prayer. He was about to intone, "Dear Lord," but the words didn't come, and he heard the car doors slamming, the engine starting, and the tires squealing as Tom backed up. He dropped the idea of imploring the Lord, who, he figured, knew exactly what was going on and where Frank stood in the matter. No, his prayer, such as it was, went out in another direction, up to a satellite, perhaps, or out over some wires.

"245-661-3180."

This was, of course, Frank's version of speaking in tongues, and, like those who used a language of the unconscious to channel the divine, Frank had simply allowed himself to go beneath conscious thought in his time of need and whistle up the phone number Daria had given him.

When the car noise died and things seemed calm, Frank lifted his head and stood. There may have been eyes on him, but he didn't care. Once again, the fragrance of the night caught him and held his attention. His mind drifted. He'd worry about Grace and the kids later. Only one conscious question came to him, and it wasn't as upsetting as it may sound.

He wondered if he was still saved.

After the Fall

Frank was in trouble, and, like a lot of people in trouble, he was completely unaware of the mess he was in. For instance, while he saw his public kneeling as a gesture of compliance and reconciliation, the neighborhood spectators thought this a mocking monstrosity. And while he thought Grace's bizarre exit was just some sort of temporary insanity, akin to the time early in their marriage when she called her brother to come and get her because she was convinced Frank was forcing her to overdose on Twinkies, to Grace there was no temporary in any part of her flight. She was gone for good, and she was already plotting ways to make sure Frank was *done* for good.

Frank, in other words, was fiddling while his own personal Rome was going up in flames. The night after Grace and the kids had been swooped away by Tom, after Frank had spent several long, blank hours roaming the house, standing in the backyard, chewing absentmindedly on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and finally falling asleep in the Barcalounger, Daria's breasts bloomed again in a dream.

Frank was standing where he stood the day of the sunbathing. Daria

repeated her performance in her backyard up to the point at which, in the real rendition, she untied her bikini top. In the dream, though, she stopped, turned, and walked smiling to where Frank stood.

“Hi. Could you give me a hand here?” she asked, and before Frank could answer she turned her lovely back to him. “Could you untie me?”

Dream time can be so wonderfully languorous. Daria was in no hurry, and Frank let the erotic tension of the moment build as he felt the glow of lust foaming in his blood. When he finally did reach out and untie the very loose knot of some delicate fabric, the untying went on for minutes, it seemed. Then the separated pieces of the bikini string fell to the sides, and Daria’s smooth, shapely wings and muscled spine remained on view while Frank’s whole body filled with pleasure. The landscape of this splendid dorsal changed, rippled, the wings spreading as Daria hunched forward to slip the bikini top off. Expectation, the true motor of the erotic, revved in Frank now, and his breathing rose with every second Daria remained as she was.

Finally, slowly, Daria turned and in an instant was standing facing him, nude to the waist. In the reality Daria’s breasts had been quite a distance away, but in the dream they were out of the bikini and only a scant few feet from Frank’s eyes. Frank, of course, was pretty inexperienced when it came to either indirect or direct contact with women’s bodies. Grace was the first woman he had ever slept with, and she let him know right away that there’d be no “nudie shows” in their marriage. So in the dream, the calm presence of this half-naked woman, who was standing in front of him and not on some page of a National Geographic, was very new and very exciting.

“Thanks,” Daria smiled and followed Frank’s gaze down to her breasts. She cupped each one in a hand and lifted them to even greater glory. “I better get some suntan lotion on these, don’t you think?”

Thinking wasn’t in the realm of possibility for Frank-in-the-dream at that moment. But the feel of squishy suntan lotion being rubbed all over those now-lifted breasts made Frank become deliciously, flowingly liquid, and he stayed that way as Daria, in very slow motion, mimed how she was going to apply that skin-saving cream.

Frank was only mildly surprised to wake up and find his underpants puddled with sperm. He'd had one other nocturnal emission in his life, when he was about thirteen. He had woken up in the morning thinking he'd wet the bed, vaguely remembering how Miss March had wandered into a dream of his, and went off to brush his teeth trying to put two and two together. Unfortunately, before he was able to do that, his mother had gone into his room to make the bed, as she always did, and discovered the tell-tale signs of a wet dream. When Frank returned, she asked him if he was "touching himself," and he had no clue what she was talking about. She glared. He gulped. She said she wasn't going to tell his father this time, but if she found this filth again, if Frank couldn't keep his hands where they belonged, couldn't turn off the hose, there'd be hell to pay.

This sort of enlightened sex education stayed with Frank and kept his hose dry thereafter, but Daria's breasts had opened the spigot, and, as he mopped himself up, Frank could not conjure guilt nor could he see how this was going to cause him eternal damnation. Standing naked in the bathroom this certainty grew, and as the warm washcloth circled his scrotum, his penis grew as well. In times past when this condition occurred, Frank would turn the water ice cold and apply a frigid washcloth. But this time Frank let his member swell and, saints preserve us, realized, almost giddily, that he was in the house alone.

He went streaking. He ripped open the bathroom door and didn't have to worry an iota about anybody seeing him. He pranced to the bedroom and watched his semi-hard cock bounce like a diving board. Grace's packing detritus was still scattered on the bed. Frank jumped on top of it and rolled back and forth, delighting in the feel of his naked body on the covers.

He jumped up and went to the bedroom door. He got down in what he thought was a sprinter's crouch, gave himself a ready-set-go, and raced down the hallway to the living room, feeling the slap of his slab against his thigh. Pure fun. He contemplated taking this freedom out to the backyard, but some internal governor nixed that one. Instead, he faced the front living

room window, made sure the street was empty and started doing the only exercise he really knew anything about, jumping jacks.

If you're going to do one exercise to celebrate a newfound freedom like Frank's, jumping jacks is a good one. All the limbs are involved, and that fifth limb, lagging the action so that it rises as the body falls, provides a lovely counterpoint to the main movement. But from another perspective, nude jumping jacks in the living room on the morning after your wife and children have left you can seem appallingly insensitive and/or the clearest indication yet that Satan has you by the short hairs.

This last was the perspective of Betty and Harold Critch, who had monitored much of the goings on at the Tripping residence from their house directly across the street, through a pair of high-powered military-issue binoculars Harold had brought back from Vietnam. Betty had been the first to train the specs on the Tripping house that morning and, at first, couldn't figure out what it was she was seeing. There was a little glare on the window glass, and through the great magnification the up-and-downing behind the glass made her a bit woozy. She handed the binoculars to Harold, who steadied his hands and twirled the focus dial.

"He's doing jumping jacks in the altogether!"

Seventeen minutes later Pastor Otto would hear about Harold's discovery, but by then Frank was, in his own mind, beyond the reach of Mt. Olive's scolding tongue. The jumping jacks had been so out of character that even Frank stopped in mid jump and wondered what he was doing. Then, as if he'd been dropped in an alien universe, he did a full turn and looked around the living room with a fresh eye.

Grace may have packed her bags and fled, but she was there in every nook and cranny of what she liked to call the Loving Lord Room. The only pizzazz in the bland furnishings were the prayer pillows she and the kids had made using garish candy-colored yarn to stitch such admonitions as "Give us this day our daily bred" (sic), which Franklin Jr. had done pre-literacy. The Amish had nothing on Grace in her dislike of the "extraneous" and the "luxurious." Reading material other than the Bible was extraneous.

Knickknacks? Why? Pictures on the wall other than family photos and the large “Last Supper” that hung over the sofa might distract.

But Frank wasn’t revulsed by this the way you might imagine someone in the throes of complete life overhaul might be. It had all made sense to him a short while ago, and it all made sense more or less now. But whereas before Frank had been content with this grey atmosphere, he now was restless, and as he turned around, Grace’s Loving Lord Room became Daria’s chaotic gallery. Her wild sculpture appeared again on the wall, bumping Jesus, et al. The unholy mess of magazines she had to plow through to find a place to sit magically reappeared. The room bloomed Eden-like, and Frank, standing naked as Adam in the middle of it, felt a newness creep into his life that was vague and formless and yet certain. Things were going to change.

Intelligent Designs

Pastor Otto had spent a restless but oddly invigorating night after hearing about Satan's latest manifestation, and Tom's heroic rescue of Grace and the kids. Ever since the first rumblings of problems at the Tripping home, Pastor Otto had included Frank in his prayers, asking for divine guidance for both Frank and himself. God hadn't said much about Frank, but recently He had been nudging Pastor Otto toward the thought that this cloud might have a very nice silver lining. The Trippings, Pastor Otto knew, had gotten their new house for a song. If there was a divorce in the offing, what would happen to that piece of property, one that would, the Lord had indicated, be perfect for a laborer in His fields?

He was almost out the door to counsel Grace the next morning when the call came from Harold Critch. It's one thing when a member of the flock goes astray, as say, when Darnell and Cindy Atkins hosted a swinger's party, but it's another thing when that wandering sheep seems to flaunt his fallenness. (Darnell and Cindy had repented immediately.) Despite the

above-mentioned silver lining, Pastor Otto had been ready to give Frank the benefit of the doubt when he was preparing to leave for Tom's to see Grace, but with the news that Frank and his willy were bouncing all over the living room in celebration of Grace's leaving, it appeared there was no hope.

Grace was still red-eyed from a night of sobbing when Pastor Otto arrived, and Tom flitted about like a nurse on speed, bringing Grace more tissues, getting cups of coffee for all, making sure the kids were occupied, and amening Pastor Otto whenever he was in the room and had caught his breath. His wife, Evangeline, was not as active in her role as refugee rescuer. She could read the room very well and found Tom's ministrations almost unseemly. But she was also seeing opportunity in the situation. Her marriage had been pretty empty for a long time, and her passion was for golf. If, as it appeared, Tom was shifting his affection, Evangeline imagined this might be a good time to defect, to finally accept her sister's invitation to join her in her Florida condo. Pastor Otto's presence signaled a seriousness that Evangeline welcomed.

"Grace, I'm sorry but I have to ask you this question," Pastor Otto began almost immediately. "Despite all that has gone on with Frank, is the love still there?"

"Oh, heavens, Pastor."

"I know, I know. But there are marriages in which the Devil divides, and yet the one who remains saved still believes love exists."

"How could it? You cannot love the Devil and expect the glories of the hereafter, can you?"

"No, you can't."

"Well, I want eternal life."

"I'm sure you do."

"And whatever feelings I once had for Frank have just flown away. If you could have seen what I saw, Pastor. The brazenness of it. The putrid smelling Devil himself in our house, allowed in by...by him. And then the, well I hate to even say the word, but the whore, who just waltzed up to Frank and talked to him as calmly as you and I are talking. I am just so thankful, so

eternally grateful that both my heavenly Savior and my earthly savior were with me. If Tom hadn't had the presence of mind to wait a while before going home, who knows what might have happened to me and the kids."

"Let us pray," Pastor Otto intoned as Tom returned with donuts. Tom dropped to his knees still holding the box. "Protector and Guide, we thank you for your watchful eye and for the wisdom you placed in the heads of Tom and Grace. By your grace and your grace alone the Devil has been kept at bay. Show us the way, now, Lord. Give us a sign, tell us how we can defeat this pestilence, heal Grace's wounds, and continue her in the faith. Amen."

Tom and Grace seconded the amen in complete unison and then looked at each other for a few seconds longer than necessary, an exchange Pastor Otto did not miss.

"Do you think you can face Frank at all, Grace?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Well, there will be things that have to be settled. Do you feel the marriage is over?"

Grace stared wide-eyed at Pastor Otto, as if the words, the thought behind them, were new and shocking to her. Then a torrent of blubbling mangled her features, turning her nose crimson, her lips almost purplish. Her lower lip threatened to flutter away from her face, and she held out her hand so that the quickly-mobilized Tom could stuff a few tissues in it, a handoff that seemed as smooth and practiced as trapeze artists in midair.

"I'm sorry," Pastor Otto cooed as he moved a little closer. "We're going to have to face these things, however."

An outside observer might question the use of "we" in this colloquy. Grace certainly didn't. She welcomed Pastor Otto's intervention. And Tom too assumed that Otto The Wise would be by their side in the tumult to come. But Pastor Otto, listening to himself, felt he'd made a slip of the tongue. God had certainly set him on a path, but it was his duty as a servant of the Lord not to screw it up. He was relieved to see that neither Grace nor Tom flinched at the "we." He continued.

“I need to make sure we’ve done all we can to keep your God-ordained union intact.”

“God wants me to stay married to the Devil?”

“No, of course not. But, First Corinthians, 11:3. ‘I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.’ Man is made in the image of God and woman is the glory of man. Frank is still your husband and therefore your head. When and if you sever that bond, you will become headless. We in the congregation will embrace you still, but becoming headless is a major decision. Heedlessly becoming headless is a desecration of the sanctity of marriage. However, headlessness caused by the godlessness of the husband is acceptable.”

“That’s certainly my case.”

“I’ll say,” Tom said, staring at the floor. “I’ll witness to the cause of Grace’s headlessness, if it comes to that.” He looked up, and his eyes drifted to Grace’s. A riot of subtext ping-ponged between them.

Pastor Otto wondered briefly if he’d painted himself into a corner. He’d conjured the Corinthians passage in order to show Grace he was being cautious about a possible divorce, but with what was going on between Grace and Tom a dilemma arose. Should Grace extricate herself from the marriage, and should she receive her head from Tom, where was Tom’s wife going to find her head? Like Reverend Billy Mike, Pastor Otto didn’t like complexity. He liked simple goals.

His quickly gelling goal now was clear; he wanted the Tripping house. All this divorce talk and these troubling looks between Tom and Grace were starting to get on his nerves. He just wanted to get Frank and Grace split, their property divided so that he could sweep in and purchase the house “to exorcise the satanic soul of the place” and coincidentally take it over as a manse.

“Okay, first things first,” Pastor Otto said finally, having settled on a plan. “The Lord called me to lead Frank to his salvation. Then the Devil somehow wormed his way into Frank’s life. I think it’s my duty to meet with Frank,

on neutral ground of course, and see if I can get him to relinquish the Satan inside. If I can't do that, I can at least try to get him to leave his base of operations so that we can cleanse the house."

"Oh, Pastor. That all sounds so dangerous. I'm shaking just thinking about ever having to go into that...that place again. And here I thought it was the Lord's wish that we steward that property." Grace had come down from her sobbing and was somewhat normal again.

"I have the Lord beside me, Sister Grace. There is no fear in faith. The Lord did want you to care for his property, and you did the best you could. We will return the house to the Lord one day, trust me on that. Let us pray."

Tom dropped to his knees again, and the prayer hummed along. Pastor Otto asked the deity on duty that day to give all of them strength and guidance to fight the fight. In this he was deeply sincere.

While he was intoning this prayer for courage, he was psyching himself up for his confrontation with Frank. Like a defensive lineman who has to go through an offensive lineman to get to the quarterback, Pastor Otto realized he was going to have to go through the Devil to get to that nice piece of property. With this realization came a little twinge of fear. And a little touch of malapropism.

"Lord, help us not to waver in our endeavor. Keep us on the straight path. Don't let us philander in our efforts..."

Too late he realized "flounder" should have been the verb there, but Tom and Grace didn't seem to notice. He finished the prayer and came to the realization that, after decades of talk about tussling with the Devil, he had now set himself the task of actually going mano a mano with Mephistophiles. To gird himself for battle he grabbed a couple of donuts before he left.

Earth to Frank

Around the same time Pastor Otto was meeting with Grace and Tom, Frank, fully clothed but barefoot, was in his backyard luxuriating in his newfound sense of himself. His thoughts rewound him to his post-bust lurch out of the house and his blackout of sorts in the hedges. He had seen the horror on the faces staring down at him, but he had just kept going, and now, here he was, on the other side of some divide, happy.

This sort of transformation is supposed to happen when one is saved. The scales are supposed to fall from one's eyes, and the newfound faith is supposed to lift one up on golden wings. Things had changed radically for Frank after the colicky Rachael miracle, after he'd given himself to the Lord, of course, but they were mainly external things such as community and job and the aural landscape of his life, which, post salvation, became dotted with the near constant "praises" and such.

But there had been less alteration of Frank's internal babble. Even after he was saved there was the Question Guy who couldn't let any experience Frank had pass without comment and query. "Whatcha doin' Frank?" "Think

that's the right thing to do, Frank?" "Don't you think you're supposed to pray now, Frank, huh?"

But the Question Guy and a lot of other negative internal buzz didn't follow Frank through his new transformation. With the grass poking up between his toes, the unseasonably warm Indian summer day filling his nostrils with a woody essence, and, for the first time in a long time, a nice cup of coffee in his hand, Frank was questioning nothing, not even that the decade old coffee he'd found in the back of a cupboard was pretty stale. Neither was he making calculations nor worrying about things to come. He was simply being.

That is until a rustling in the bushes, the very bushes he had hid in to spy on Daria, brought him back to his surroundings. He looked in the direction of the sound in time to see the back of Paula Cavendish's head scoot toward her own house. What goes around comes around, he thought. Spy versus spy. Once that particular train of thought hit, Frank followed it to the question of why Paula would take up his observation point. What was she spying on him for? He wasn't dealing drugs. He had had a few odd experiences recently, but did they qualify as spy-worthy? He and Paula, after all, still belonged to the same church.

Frank's obtuseness was akin to that of Jesus and Martin Luther, both of whom didn't think they were leaving their faith, but simply deepening it. Frank went back inside thinking maybe he should call Pastor Otto and try to explain things to him. It turned out he didn't have to call. Ten minutes later the front doorbell rang, and Frank opened the door to a very high-strung and wary Pastor Otto.

"Pastor, please come in."

"I'm sorry, Frank, I can't."

"Okay, I'll come out."

"No. You stay there," Pastor Otto barked quickly. He was treating Frank with the same caution one treats a pit bull, an indication he truly believed all his own hyperbolic cautionary rhetoric about the Devil. "I'm just bringing a message."

“What’s that?”

“Grace cannot continue in the marriage.”

“Grace cannot...?”

“She wants a divorce.”

“Why?”

In the past such a question would have clicked Pastor Otto into a haughty and hortatory demeanor, condescending to instruct one of his flock on the obvious. But because, as noted above, Pastor Otto was experiencing real fear here, he took the simple question to be indicative of some sort of satanic sang-froid and became even more frightful. He held out his right hand, fingers splayed, palm forward, a barrier.

“We are not fooled nor deceived nor will we waver! Deliver us from evil!”

Frank looked around to see who the “we” was, if there were others outside, say in the bushes or the driveway. He saw no one. His mind was revving up, trying to make sense of all this. The language of the saved, which Frank had absorbed and conversed in for many years, was becoming tinny and distant and almost incomprehensible to him now. But after a stunned minute he got it.

“You think I’m...”

“Stop!” Pastor Otto was breathing hard now. This manse acquisition mission was turning out to be a lot harder than he had imagined. But it was all his imaginings that were making it hard. Frank was growing horns and a tail in Pastor Otto’s mind, and even the seemingly innocent questions Frank was asking became, for Pastor Otto, the wily workings of the serpent. “Will you consent to a divorce?”

“Wow. I think I should talk to Grace about this.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“She doesn’t think I’m...”

“Will you consent to a divorce?”

“Pastor Otto, there’s been a mistake here. There has to be.”

“There is no mistaking the mark of the serpent.”

“Me? The mark of the serpent? But I’m saved.” This came out of Frank’s

lips quite naturally, despite the question he'd had the day before. That question then resurfaced in the face of Pastor Otto's obdurate stare, and Frank added, "Aren't I?"

Pastor Otto, in his increasingly confused state, found his normally trusty river of biblical quotes dry and could only come up with the hoariest of hymns, the lines of which he got slightly reversed. He sang them boldly to show the enemy he wasn't afraid.

"I once was saved, but now am lost," he warbled.

"Huh?"

Pastor Otto now realized his mistake but knew any retreat was an opening for his opponent. Fearing even more of a trap, he figured he ought to let loose one more shot and leave.

"Out demons!" he screeched, his hand again becoming a shield. Then he took flight.

Frank watched him stride to the driveway, hop in his shiny Buick, and back quickly into the street. It occurred to Frank that there had been a lot of hurrying and quick exits recently. What was going on? He closed the door and decided to give Tom's house a call to see if Grace was there.

Tom answered knowing it was Frank on the line.

"Frank, there's not much to say. Grace and the kids are safe, praise Jesus, and Pastor Otto is coming to talk to you."

"He just left, but I don't understand what this is all about."

"Don't try something like that on me. I saw you, and I know what you're up to."

"But Pastor Otto seemed to think I was possessed or something."

Silence on Tom's end. Frank could hear a noise in the background that sounded like Grace's signature sniffing. Like a drug slowly wearing off, Frank's particular cloud of unknowing was giving way to the realization that his newfound POV on the world was being misunderstood by those around him. It was as if he'd hopped in the car thinking the family was all with him, zoomed down the highway, climbed to some alpine wonderland,

rolled down the window, drawn in the new cool air, turned to share his appreciation with his loved ones, and found they were still in the driveway.

Frank didn't push things. He mumbled something about later and hung up, knowing he had some serious thinking to do. It occurred to him first that Pastor Otto had not really been himself, that he'd been scared and stuttering. That was an indication something was really going on here, that what he was facing wasn't a simple mistake.

Then there was the divorce talk. Frank remembered a night a few years ago when Grace had gotten news that her wayward brother, Sam, was getting a divorce, his second. Frank's instinct at the time had been to include him in their prayers that night, but Grace had vetoed this, saying anyone even contemplating divorce wasn't worth the prayer time. She then gathered Rachael and Franklin Jr., who were too young to understand what divorce was in the first place, and harangued them for a good half hour on the sanctity of marriage and the horrors of divorce.

Frank had found this a bit over the top at the time and had the odd feeling that perhaps some of the admonitions were meant not for the kids but for him. But the episode came during a particularly zealous period in the Tripping household, and Frank understood then his wife's need for overstatement as the extra mile that would take them deeper into the life of the Lord.

With this in mind, Frank wondered if Grace really did want a divorce or if the message was getting manhandled by the messengers? There had been a lot of confusion, after all, and Frank had known Grace to be, well, a little inarticulate when in the grip of strong emotions. He had heard her crying in the background, a sure sign she was going to have trouble expressing herself. Perhaps she had meant to say that she couldn't imagine getting a divorce and it came out something like, "I...imagine...divorce." Frank's experience with Grace was such that, had he heard that, he would have been able to fill in the blanks and know her true feelings. But Tom and Pastor Otto might have taken the sentence for a complete thought and leaped to a false conclusion.

This kind of cogitating sobered Frank some and took him from the rather lofty land he'd been jumping-jacking in for the past twenty-four hours to the valley of normalcy below. He figured action was what was needed now, just as he had figured action was needed when he first suspected Quincy and Daria. Over the next fifteen minutes he gathered scraps of the old Frank and pasted them back on the new Frank and decided to do the manly thing and talk to Grace directly. He put on shoes and socks, got in the car, backed out of the driveway slowly (not wanting to make his exit look like one of the screechers he'd been seeing recently) and drove off to Tom's, completely forgetting that it was 10:38 a.m. on a Sunday.

The fact that Tom's car wasn't in the driveway didn't click Frank into the fact that everybody was at church. He had spent the drive over reorienting himself after realizing that maybe his demeanor, the way he'd been carrying himself, his preoccupation with Daria, might be the cause of everybody's misperception of him. He had looked at himself in the rearview and tried on a few looks, one more somber than the next. Then he shed all of them for a sunnier gaze, one that he felt would give Grace confidence he was the Frank of old.

It was this mask he was wearing when he knocked on the front door of Tom's house and waited for a response. None came for a long time, but then the door opened and Evangeline stood there, behind the screen door.

"Frank, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Evangeline. I came to see Grace. Is she...?"

"They're at church, Frank."

"Oh, right." Frank looked at his wrist but his watch wasn't there. The little untanned spot where his watch was supposed to be didn't tell him much, but he stared at it just the same, feeling some heat coming at him from Evangeline. When he looked up there was heat alright, little jets of steam wafting from her ears.

"Frank, what the hell are you doing?"

"Oh, I forgot my watch."

"No, in general, what the hell are you doing?"

While Tom was ubiquitous at Mt. Olive, Evangeline was almost hidden, a cipher in the congregation, the childless wife, an office manager during the week, a small, introverted soul around the church on the weekends. Her mild profanity in her question to Frank told him maybe she wasn't the wet dishrag everybody thought she was. Maybe there was a spine in that little body. Frank cleared his throat before responding.

"Well, I don't know how you mean?"

"I mean," she said, opening the screen door and stepping through, "Why are you making it so easy for Grace and Tom to get together?"

"Huh?"

"I don't know what you've been up to, but all your shenanigans have thrown the two of them together, and I'm losing my husband."

"Tom?"

"That's my husband, yes."

"What do you mean you're losing him?"

"He's fallen in love with your wife."

"Grace?"

"That's your wife."

"Fallen in love with Grace? How do you know?"

"Donuts. He's bringing her donuts. He's running around like a madman, just the way he did when we were courting. It was okay when I lost him to the church, but I can't stand this. And now because of you she's right here under my nose, and he's only got one thing on his mind: What does Grace need? What have you been...?"

The sentence got washed out in flood of tears, and Frank gulped, afraid that anything he might say could send Evangeline's slight frame into some sort of collapse.

"Jeez, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You didn't know? How could you not know? Grace wants a divorce!"

"But, Tom?"

The incredulity in this was genuine. The idea of anyone birddogging Grace was pretty far out to begin with, but the notion of Tom knocking on

the back door just would never fit. Frank's question, however, had been a little too muscular.

"And what's wrong with Tom? You don't think he's desirable?"

"Desirable?"

"Oh, I see it in her eyes. She wants what I got in a bad way. But maybe she wouldn't have come sniffing around if you hadn't...hadn't...I don't know. What have you done?"

Without realizing it, Evangeline, in her question, had pushed Frank's button, and he snapped. Whatever thread of naivete and obtuseness had kept him from some normal reaction to all that had been going on recently, broke, fled, left him, and he let fly.

"I haven't done anything. I'm me! I've been me for a long time. And I was a hero if you want to know the truth. Everybody else was twiddling their thumbs, and I stuck my neck out for my family, for the neighborhood, for you maybe even. I don't know what's going on, but it's not me doing it. Grace can't want a divorce. She hates divorce. What have you done to her, that's what I want to know."

Evangeline was taken aback by this mini tirade, which seemed doubly forceful coming from the almost always placid Frank. To her credit Evangeline didn't just fire back some defense but let the thrust of what Frank said filter through her hurt and anger. Tom and Grace had been referring to Frank as possessed, in the grip of the Devil, and while Evangeline hadn't gone along with that completely, thinking that their labeling Frank as such helped them in their quest to be together, she nevertheless had seen him as a black hat in this melodrama. Now she wasn't sure. She softened.

"Nothing, Frank. Nothing. We haven't done anything. At least I haven't."

"Well, Grace wouldn't want a divorce. I'm sure of that."

"I'm afraid she really does."

"No, she just must be upset. Or maybe Tom..."

"What?"

"I don't know. Maybe Tom has put some ideas..."

“No. Don’t say what you’re going to say. If anyone’s to blame here, it’s Grace. She’s...”

The grind of tires and screech of brakes in the driveway stopped her and whipped both their heads around. Tom, in full rescue mode, hopped out of his car, this time not catching a toe, and charged over the front lawn toward them.

“Back away from her, Frank!”

It was a scene right out of *Cops*. The handheld camera behind Tom would be shaking as he stormed his own front door, barking commands, taking charge.

“Come on, Evangeline. Go Frank. Now!”

Evangeline and Frank obeyed slowly, stunned by the very unexpected onslaught. Had they known Capt. John S. Seely, U.S. Navy, (Retired), a shut-in who lived caddy-corner to Tom and Evangeline down the street, had beamed news of Frank’s arrival to Tom’s cell the minute he spied Frank getting out of his car, they might not have been caught off guard. But, of course, that was not the case.

“Tom, I just came to...” Frank managed before Tom reached them and yanked Evangeline’s arm so hard she would, eventually, have to rack up three-hundred-dollars-worth of treatment at the chiropractor’s to get it back to normal.

“Don’t ever come to this house again, do you understand?”

“But Grace, the kids?”

“They’re safe, praise Jesus. Go away, Devil.”

“Tom, you know me. I’m no Devil.”

He said this to Tom and Evangeline’s backs as they humped it to Tom’s car. Frank knew there was about to be another tire-squealing exit and thought briefly that he ought to go out and direct traffic. But after Tom got Evangeline into the passenger seat, he stomped back to the house instead of getting in himself. Frank was still on the front stoop, his head spinning. Tom fished keys out of his pocket as he approached, and, when Frank started to make another protestation, Tom held his hand up much as Pastor Otto

had done earlier. Frank stopped, Tom hastily locked the front door, and beat a wordless retreat to his car, and to his squealing exit.

In Tom's car Evangeline played the role of the thankful wife saved by her gallant husband but she was truly thankful for Frank. Whatever was going on with him might just allow her to grab her clubs and head for the Sunshine State. She thought she had done a good job as the aggrieved, cuckolded wife and would continue playing that part until she could hightail it out of Belglade with her reputation as a fine Christian woman intact.

Once Tom and Evangeline had roared off, Frank stood there for a long moment. What echoed wasn't the surge of the car down the street but Frank's own outburst, the fact that he'd called himself a hero. It was the first time he'd done so out loud, and though Evangeline didn't have a clue what he was talking about, just saying the word, in reference to himself, was oddly comforting.

Yeah, things with Grace were about as mixed up as they could be, and all this Devil stuff was bizarre to say the least, but there was, back there in recent history, a shining moment in which he had gone out on the dusty street, as all the townsfolk were cowering, and faced the gunslinger. Maybe, he thought now, he had made a big mistake in being so humble about his accomplishment. He thought he was protecting Grace and the kids by not detailing his part in Quincy's downfall, but if they had known what he had done, he'd certainly be more on the angel side of the spectrum than the Devil side in their eyes.

This thought sent him back to the car with a nascent plan, an unformed strategy that revolved around making Grace, at least, aware not just of the outlines of his deed, but the real danger he had faced, thus putting everything right between them again.

He was nearly at his car when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed an object flying over the six-foot hedge separating Tom and Evangeline's house from their neighbor's. He turned to see a Frisbee bank and then land with a little spin on the driveway. Only a few weeks earlier he would have seen this as a sign, some sort of message from God, one he would take to

his prayer breakfast and have all around the table nod at and chew over, but now, as the Frisbee lay there, it was just a Frisbee.

He heard some young voices behind the hedge, worried voices, kids afraid to retrieve their toy. Frank walked back to the driveway, picked up the Frisbee, remembered what a fun object it had been for him years ago, fingered the rim, cocked his wrist, and sent the plastic plate spinning back over the hedge.

Sandwiched

On the way back from Tom's house Frank thought he caught a glimpse of Daria going into the convenience store next to the Burger King on Pleasant. He inadvertently ran a stop sign craning his neck to see if it was really she and narrowly missed being plowed over by a moving van crossing the intersection. A second look told him it wasn't Daria.

As he continued, he imagined meeting Daria by chance. "Hey, how's it going? You know, funny things are happening. I'm doing what you told me to do, following your advice to the letter, and—get this—my wife is trying to divorce me, I think, and some people at Mt. Olive, including my pastor, think I'm possessed." Then he remembered he had that phone number, and he thought about giving it a call when he got home. But something else intervened.

As he'd done a couple of times since moving into the new house, Frank almost pulled into his old driveway. He had to stop and back up a little, and that's when he noticed a Harley parked rakishly in his new driveway. Frank kept his eye on it as he pulled up behind. Then he noticed that the front door of his house was slightly ajar. Had he forgotten to lock it?

Frank got out of his car and went to the door. He called in weakly, the way one might in a nightmare, wanting to be brave while your vocal cords were perfectly content being chickenshit. There was no answer. Frank thought about calling the police, but the phone was on the wall in the kitchen. He heard a cough come from someplace deep inside and decided to wait for the cougher to come out.

After a very long three minutes, and a few more loose hacks, Frank poked his head in the door, prepared to bolt if need be, and again called out. This time a booming male voice answered, but whatever he said was unintelligible. The voice sounded like it came from Franklin Jr.'s room, however, so Frank took a few steps into the living room.

Suddenly, in a rush, a presence emerged from the hallway.

"Yo, Sig."

The voice came first, deep and rumbling, a wave about to break, then hair. Lots of it. Wild brown stuff shooting up from a head, more wild brown stuff radiating out from a chin, a Miracle Gro moustache in the middle of it all. This crop sat atop a rotund, barely-clad body tufted with even more of the wild brown stuff. And it was moving toward Frank at a frightening speed. Not only was it moving toward him, but it was holding out its hair-blazed arms in what could only be construed as some sort of welcoming gesture. Then it spoke again.

"Man, this is some kind of cover you got here."

And the presence was on Frank, and before Frank could speak or move, the presence had wrapped him in a smelly bear hug that truly did the term justice. Smothered in fur, Frank couldn't breathe much less speak. Then suddenly the presence released Frank and stepped back quickly.

"Sig?"

His face was becoming clearer to Frank now, and Frank could see the presence squinting to beat the band, straining to see what was in front of him.

"No, I'm..."

"Shit. Sorry man. Lost my glasses in Willamette, been a hell of a ride. How you doin'?"

"Fine, but I'm..."

"This place is somethin' man. How things goin'?"

Frank didn't know what to say. He was being mistaken for someone other than Sig, but he didn't know who that was, and he wasn't sure what might happen if he enlightened the mound of myopia in front of him. He decided to play along.

"Good, good, things are good."

"Yeah, shit, tell it. Hey, the bike's in great shape. Sig done me good on that. I got out day before yesterday and hopped on her, started right up, just as if I'd been ridin' her the past two years. You new?"

"Sort of."

"Sig tell you I was comin'?"

"Uh..."

"Wait, how could he? He didn't even know. Forgot. Supposed to surprise him. He gonna be back soon?"

"I don't think so. I mean, Sig's Quincy, right?"

Almost before Frank got this out, he knew it was a mistake. The near-blind hairball had been, to that point, civil and jovial because of certain assumptions he'd made. Frank's question must have torpedoed those assumptions, and Frank could see an immediate change in the presence's demeanor. He squinted harder, went into something like a crouch, and inched toward the door. In Frank's favor was the fact that this huge biker's watery eyesight couldn't tell whether Frank was a fightin' man or not.

"What the fuck's goin' on?"

"Don't worry. I..."

"What the fuck's goin' on?" The presence was taking bigger steps now, crabwalking toward what he thought was the door, but which was really the front window.

"Sig's not here. I'm the new owner of the house."

"Fuck."

He slammed into the window, reoriented himself and groped for the door. When he found it, he angled his frame through the doorway and lumbered

outside searching for his bike. Frank was frozen in the living room envisioning some sort of weapon hidden on the bike that the presence would brandish as he sped off. The bike cracked to life, revved, and screeched.

Frank raced to the door in time to see the presence, really a flag of hair, atop the Harley, gunning it out of the driveway, sort of, taking a short cut over the sidewalk, hitting the street and coming very close to a head-on collision with, of all people, Paula and Nick Cavendish on their way back from church.

Both vehicles stopped dead inches from each other, and, even from a distance, Frank could see the bug-eyed horror on Paula and Nick's faces, the screeching of their four kids in the back. The presence, of course, couldn't see much of anything and wheeled his evil machine around the Cavendish car before opening the throttle and rattling windows up and down the block.

For the Cavendishes this nightmare near-accident was right on cue. At the service there had been no-holds-barred talk of Frank's fall, complete with Tom's claim that he had rescued Evangeline as Frank was trying to "seduce" her, and Rachael and Franklin Jr.'s sobbing when they realized they might be the "Devil's spawn." Nothing could illustrate the Devil next door to the Cavendishes more than this bat out of hell tearing out of Frank's driveway.

Frank, turning back to the house, was on a different tack. He found himself worried about the blind biker's fate out on the roadways. Had his question sent this handicapped Hell's Angel to some fiery death? Frank turned and walked back into the house with this on his mind, not worrying about how such an image might play in the Cavendish car.

"And then, as calm as you please, he turned and walked back into the house," is how it played and how it was expressed over the phone lines when Paula and Nick got their voices back and were able to spread the news. Of course, after a few more iterations, Frank was jumping up and down with glee before returning to the house, then he was dressed in a bright red shirt, and then, instead of going back in the house, he clawed his way up the walls, perched ape-like on the roof, and howled to a moon only he could see.

Frank's fate was sealed. He had to go. A flood of phone calls crested and broke over the Mt. Olive community, and all realized their own safety both as individuals and as a congregation was in imminent danger.

Tom had to break the news to Grace as she lay prostrate on the den couch, too exhausted by the events of the morning to do much more than breathe. Tom worried the picture of Beelzebub's hairy helper racing out of her former dwelling would stop this last action Grace was capable of, but he went ahead and told her anyway. She survived, but only because Tom held tightly to her trembling hand.

In the aftermath of the presence's appearance, Frank decided he didn't want to speculate about Sig any longer. He dialed the number Daria had given him. The phone rang for a long time but no one answered. Frank, realizing he was hungry, wandered around the kitchen for a while, opened the refrigerator, smelled something rotting but couldn't see what it was, and decided the old reliable peanut butter and jelly sandwich would be fine. He was in the middle of making one when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"You just called my number?" It was a woman's voice but it sounded deeper than Daria's.

"Uh, I guess so." And Frank repeated the number. There was silence on the other end of the line for a long time, long enough for Frank to think maybe they'd been cut off. "Hello?"

"I'm here. Who are you?"

Dilemma. Who was he? Good question at the moment. In fact, Frank was, in a way, calling to see if Daria might have some clue who he was now. But Frank knew the woman simply wanted his name. That too was a bit tricky. He had his real identity and his Daria identity. He decided to go with the latter.

"Um, Earl." Another long silence. Frank didn't question it this time, just waited. When the voice returned it had softened, and he was sure he was talking to Daria now.

"What do you want, Earl?"

"I want to know who Sig is. I've been getting..."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That you've been getting more people coming to the door asking for Sig. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Well, yes. And coming in the door and..."

"I'm sorry. Just give them this number."

"I don't mind doing that but things are getting complicated over here. My wife has moved out, taken the kids. She and the whole congregation at Mt. Olive think I'm possessed or something. I'd really like to have some more information.

Daria didn't respond right away. Her first thought was that Earl deserved the treatment he was being given. He had scooped up the house the cops had stolen from Quincy. But hearing about his situation softened her toward Frank. He wasn't one of the bad guys.

"Daria?"

"Yes."

"Is Quincy Sig?"

"You know Earl, I think you ought to ask him that yourself."

"How?"

"Go out and visit him."

"Visit? Where?"

"Stanhope Correctional. Do you know where that is?"

"Is that the one just past Farmington?"

"No, that's Philmont. Stanhope is outside of Calumet on Route 117. Do you know it?"

"Yes. We go by it on our way to..." but Frank stopped himself for some reason, feeling self-conscious now about saying he and the family used to go to Christian Rodeo in Calumet.

"I'll make sure you're on his list. Wait a couple of days before you go. You call him Quincy, but his name is Dan Winter."

"Dan Winter," Frank repeated.

“And write this goddam number down. Got a pencil?”

Frank didn’t, but he knew he would remember the number, just as he would remember every word out of Daria’s mouth. He told her to go ahead.

“AT7US511204. Got it?”

Frank repeated the number to her and then remembered that the sign outside Stanhope announced it as a Federal Prison. He asked about that. Daria acknowledged it was, but her acknowledgement was grumpy, and Frank felt the conversation was over.

“What’s your last name, Earl? You’ll have to have ID.” Oops.

“Well, uh, my last name’s Tripping. And my first name is Franklin. Earl is just...”

“An alias.”

“I was going to say nickname.”

“Go with alias. We may have to be honest with each other in the future.”

The future? It took a few seconds for him to respond.

“Okay.”

“Remember, give it a couple of days. Visiting hours are nine in the morning to three in the afternoon, but they start herding everybody out at two-fifteen, so you might want to get there early. And don’t go on the weekend. It’s a zoo.”

“Okay.”

“He’ll be expecting you.”

There was another long silence on the other end of the line, and Frank waited for more, but nothing came. After a while he realized Daria was no longer there. He clicked off and stared at the knife he’d plunged into the peanut butter jar just before the phone rang. He thought he saw it quiver, as if it had been thrown there a second ago. But he blinked and there was no quivering.

There were questions, though. Frank wondered about the Federal prison. What was Quincy, or Dan, that is, doing in a Federal prison? Federal prisons were for terrorists, tax cheats, and Martha Stewart. Drugs were state crimes.

Frank, whose knowledge of things legal was paper thin, thought he had at least that much down. But this was new information to him.

And then, “We might have to be honest with each other in the future.” What had she meant by that? What future? Frank could feel Daria’s hand on his arm. He could see her eyes looking up at him. They were back in her living room again, and she was comforting, even though she was asking him to come clean so they could be honest with each other.

The conspiratorial overtones of all this were more exciting than off-putting or anxiety-producing, and, as he finished spreading the peanut butter and dipped the knife into the strawberry jam, Frank found himself drifting toward That Morning in the Backyard. But all this questioning and reveling were interrupted by a clank at the front door, one Frank realized, after a while, had been caused by the flap on the mail slot. He finished spreading the strawberry jam, slapped the sandwich together, and went to investigate.

A business envelope lay on the floor, and Frank had to do a little sandwich juggling to pick it up and turn it over. There was no address on it but the return address was one he recognized, that of Nick Battaglia, a member of Mt. Olive, a Christian lawyer who offered his services at reduced rates to anyone who would sign a notarized document saying he or she was saved.

Strawberry jam oozed out of Frank’s sandwich and plopped on the floor as he opened the envelope. Frank cauterized the ooze with a lick but was too interested in the paper he was unfolding to worry about the spill. The page was nearly blank. At the top under Nick’s letterhead and logo (“God’s Law First, Man’s Law Second”) was a one-line sentence that read, “Grace will be filing for divorce, and I will be representing her.” It wasn’t even signed. Frank saw something move out the front window and looked to see Nick himself getting in his SUV, slamming the door shut, and racing off. Frank didn’t see a worried Paula Cavendish, on her front porch, anxious for Nick, fearing Frank or one of the Devil’s other minions would come flying out of the house to attack the godly lawyer before he could get away.

Nor did Frank remember the strawberry jam blotch on the tile near the front door. He put a heel in it on his way back from the front window, lost

his footing, and for some reason clutched both his sandwich and the letter rather than use a hand to break his fall. He came down on his right elbow and heard the bone crack before he felt the pain race up from his elbow to his brain. Then that same brain hit the tile itself and Frank, sandwich still in hand, went out like a Palooka in the first round.

Devil May Care

Frank woke in what he thought at first was sunset light, but which he soon realized was that of sunrise. Then he came to see that he was still holding Nick Battaglia's rather brief letter in one hand and a now-stale peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the other. He lay still, looking up at the ceiling, studying the pattern of light and shadow cast by the sunlight glinting off the kitchen table. To Frank they formed silhouette portraits of Rachael and Franklin Jr., and, in the space of a couple of heartbeats, he understood the depth of the problem in front of him.

If Grace and Tom and Pastor Otto and the rest of the congregation had come to the mistaken conclusion that Frank was the Devil, if Grace had indeed turned this mistake into grounds for divorce, not only would his kids be separated from him, but they would be bombarded with images of their father as some Satanic messenger destined for the horrors of a fiery hell, images Frank knew Pastor Otto was adept at evoking.

As if to underscore this, the light playing on the ceiling shifted, and the imagined portraits of his children disappeared. Seeing them wisp away, Frank was galvanized. He couldn't just hope Grace would come to her

senses. He had to act. First and foremost, that meant getting up off the floor. That proved to be more difficult than he suspected. His stiff neck could barely lift what felt like a 200-pound head. When he did get that throbbing barbell off the ground, he leaned on his right elbow and realized it had swelled to about twice its size overnight.

Frank, thinking about all the spills he'd been taking lately, wondering if they were in some way connected to all the changes going on, and, realizing there were some hard times ahead, thought he might be smart to don Franklin Jr.'s armor during his waking hours for the next couple of months. But that thought only made him miss the kids even more.

During the next couple of hours Frank gimped around the house engaging in pain management, trying to gather himself enough to mount some sort of response to that opening legal salvo from Battaglia. He knew no attorneys other than Nick and the rather brusque woman who had represented the bank at the house closing. He found her card and called her. When she realized what he was calling about, she made her clipped demeanor at the closing seem languorous in comparison, and promptly hung up.

Wincing with every page turn, Frank went through the Yellow Pages, and, after about ten dead ends, hit an attorney who said he'd be glad to take the case. His name was Lester Swallow, and he was courteous and comforting in the way lawyers sighting an easy retainer can be. He said he knew of Nick Battaglia.

"Holy roller, ain't he?"

"Uh, yes."

"He the one makes people pray to Jesus before he'll take 'em on?"

"Yes."

"You one of them, or just your wife?"

"I was. They think I'm the Devil now."

"What'ja do?"

"Nothing, really."

"Come on. I'm gonna hafta know. Get caught with a hooker? Proposition some little boy online? Beat the little woman? I seen 'em all."

"I talked to a couple of druggies."

"Talked to 'em or, shall we say, participated?"

"Talked. They came to the door looking for someone else."

"Hmm. Okay. We'll leave it at that. I'll talk to Battaglia and call you back."

Frank hung up, shuffled down the hall to look again and see if Grace had left any yummys anywhere, and searched only briefly before the phone rang and he had to hobble back to the kitchen. It was Swallow.

"You're right. They do think you're the Devil. I look forward to hearing the truth about your transgression."

"What I told you is the truth. We moved into this new house and these addicts showed up and..."

"Save it. We'll get it all down later. They're moving fast. Can you come in about four this afternoon?"

Frank said he could, took down the address, and heard Swallow say he wanted his first payment that afternoon, in a money order. After he hung up, Frank wondered if this was standard operating procedure for attorneys, and then went back to search for Percodans.

The rest of the day was a pain-induced blur. Swallow worked out of an office in one half of his two-car garage. When Frank told him about Manley and the bust, his only reaction was disappointment that he didn't get Quincy's business. He said things didn't look all that good for Frank in that the law was stacked against him. Grace didn't have to prove much of anything, just her desire to leave the marriage. He said he hoped they brought up the Devil thing because the court might look more favorably on Frank if they knew he'd been married to a religious nut-job.

Frank protested this insensitivity, but Swallow seemed to have a tin ear for such protestations. Frank asked about the kids.

"You get along with 'em?" Swallow asked, as if they were afterthoughts.

"Uh, yes. Of course."

"You're lucky. Look, if I can't get you visitin' rights, I'll give you mine." He laughed, but Frank thought the laugh was forced.

"You mean I might not even get visiting rights?"

“Your wife’s lawyer said she wouldn’t let you get within a country mile of ‘em. But don’t worry. They all say that. Wait’ll she’s been dealing with the little whelps by herself for a while. She’ll give you some hours with ‘em.”

Frank made it home as dusk was settling. He stayed in the car for a while after he turned off the engine, in part because he wasn’t looking forward to the zinging pain in his neck and elbow that was sure to come with getting out of the car, and in part to stare at the dark, cold house in front of him. Question Guy made a brief and uncharacteristically mild appearance, asking Frank if the personal sea change he had gone through recently was worth it. Frank answered that he wasn’t really in control of what had happened.

Then, before he left the car, he offered up the first prayer he’d prayed since his new self had appeared.

“Frank,” he said to the empty car. “Fear not.”

Now Face to Face

Frank had totally forgotten Monday was Monday and hadn't called in sick to work. Monday night he developed a doozy of a fever, slept fitfully, and watched Tuesday pass by from his sweat-drenched pillow, again neglecting to phone in.

The Mt. Olive contingent at Newtone, which is to say a large majority of the employees, breathed a sigh of relief both days, even though they had made plans to keep Frank isolated and to protect those who were not saved (a small group thanks to Maggie Lansing's faith-based hiring practices).

Just before Frank's fever broke on Tuesday night, a very heavy rain rattled the windows for about a half hour. Frank was going in and out of consciousness during this drumbeat and interpreted the percussive drops as chanted words.

"AT7US511204," was what he kept hearing over and over, a maddeningly abstract and opaque incantation in Frank's fevered state.

Later, when his body had cooled, and his mind regained some semblance of its old self, Frank realized that the letters and numbers were the prisoner ID Daria had given him for Quincy. Though in the phone call he had sort

of agreed to visit Stanhope Correctional, he now wondered why he would ever do such a thing.

He woke up late on Wednesday, better, but not well enough to go into work. He called HR at Newtowne, was put on hold by a voice he didn't recognize, and then Maggie Lansing came on the line. When Maggie had hired Frank, she had gushed at his qualifications, mainly, of course, that he had been led to Newtowne by the same people who had led him to the Lord. Assuring Frank he'd be laboring in a godly environment, she whipped out the requisite signup papers and then whisked him around the office, trumpeting the virtues of the new hire.

When she spoke to a still slightly feverish Frank on that Wednesday morning, however, she was the complete and utter opposite of the Maggie who had hired him. Ice formed on Frank's receiver as he heard Maggie's chilled voice berate him for not calling in sick earlier. His apology and disrupted attempt to explain did nothing to warm her, and she unceremoniously fired him in the next stinging sentence.

"We have filled your position," she lied. "We will send any personal possessions in your station to your home address." Period.

Frank couldn't help noticing that parts of his life were becoming very succinct. Grace's rapid departure, Pastor Otto's minimal pastoral visit, Nick Battaglia's one line letter, and now Maggie Lansing's two sentence dismissal. He put the phone down and, seeing it was a sunny day outside, went to the front door and opened it. As he did, he remembered another succinct recent episode—Flop Hat's visit.

As Flop Hat, in Frank's memory, once again railed and retched, Frank dug deeper into the scene. The anger, Frank could see, was desperation driven. Addiction's craving was not a pretty sight. Maybe, Frank thought, Grace and the other horrified parents had the proper reaction to the incursion. Daria's talk of kindness to Flop Hat and others like him might just be self-serving, her way of deflecting her own guilt about supplying the addicts with their poison.

As he thought about this, Quincy's prison ID came to his lips again. Daria

had given it to him when Frank had questions about Sig and the whole operation. Now that he had more questions, Frank tried to imagine actually going to Stanhope and confronting Quincy. He laughed at himself when, in his mind's eye, he saw Quincy in the visiting room, wearing only his Speedo.

Then he remembered that Quincy had come to their aid when the ladder had nearly dumped Tom. Grace's banshee screaming then was in part due to Quincy's appearance, but as he thought about it, Frank realized that Quincy had simply come to help a neighbor, and he, Frank, had half realized this at the time.

He turned and went back into the house, thinking he'd table the questions and turn his attention to the divorce, what he might do to halt its progress. But the questions about Quincy and the mechanics of his drug dealing dogged Frank for the next two, jobless, days, and, obeying his own admonition/prayer to "fear not," Frank found himself on the third day, wheeling into the Stanhope Correctional Facility's parking lot, wincing some from his still very tender elbow as his arm worked the shift.

Stanhope (Frank liked the sound of that second syllable as he read the sign over the door) was not imposing in a Hollywood prison film sort of way. There was only one gate inside the front door, the floors were a new shiny linoleum, the guards were two uniformed women who carried on a conversation about how their preteen sons were going to get carpal tunnel syndrome from playing video games as they checked Frank's ID, had him sign in, and patted him down minimally before escorting him through the gate.

Once past those bars Frank didn't have the cliched "I'm trapped" feeling he'd heard about, nor was he intimidated by the trustees sweeping the hallway. They nodded politely. One, a silver-haired, tanned man with the chiseled features of a C.E.O., directed Frank to the visiting room with a graceful gesture suited for the boardroom. Even the visiting room itself defied expectations. Instead of a room with plastic chairs, screaming kids, soda machines and desperate spouses, there were semi-private tables and chairs, separated by tasteful screens, an inmate-run snack concession stand

that featured homemade goodies, and a photo corner where inmates and families could get a digital souvenir of the visit.

Frank told the guard in charge who he was visiting, repeating the number fixed to his brain, even though he wasn't asked for it, and was shown a table that was lit beatifically by sun pouring through a window slit above it. He sat, ready to wait for them to retrieve Quincy, looked around at some of the other visits going on, and turned back when a man addressed him. The man was a little fleshy, clean shaven, with closely cropped hair, and wore a white shirt. Frank didn't know who he was or what he had said. Then Frank realized this was Quincy, and he'd asked if he were Earl.

"Uh, yes, but my friends call me Frank."

"Oh, I thought it was the other way around. I thought your nickname was Earl," Quincy said, sitting, indicating Frank should do the same.

Frank sat, and Quincy smiled. Frank had a hell of a time imagining that this pleasant-faced man across the table had at one time been the object of his crusade. The wild images of a *Cops*-like bust hadn't fully left Frank's brain, and they often featured a violent Quincy screaming and mixing it up with the police. But those images were light years away from the inmate whose hands were now folded saintlike in the buttery sunshine on the table.

"Well, it goes back and forth," Frank managed, not knowing exactly what he meant by that.

"The friends or the name?"

"Both."

Quincy chuckled, clucked, nodded, all in agreement.

"I hear you. There's that line in Dylan, 'friends will arrive, friends will disappear.' Look at you. Out here to see me. That's friendship to me. I mean we just met a minute ago, but I can tell we'll hit it off. You seem like you're out of your element, but I like that about you. Know what I mean? Isn't that friendship?"

Frank didn't have a clue what was going on. In his life, and especially in his life recently, you didn't just meet someone and launch into such talk. On the farm, growing up, when you met someone, you appraised the weather.

At Mt. Olive and Newton, you held back until you could determine if the person you were meeting was saved. But here was Quincy launching into some ruminations bordering on intimacy before they'd passed three sentences together.

"I always thought friends were people you could count on," Frank ventured, falling back on a sort of grade school understanding of the subject.

"For what?"

"Uh, I don't know. Friendship, I guess."

"Yeah, but hell, friendship comes in all colors, and sometimes it can turn black, you know."

Something about the way he said this made Frank think they had left the world of musing and Quincy was being more pointed, perhaps referring to Frank himself.

"I guess."

"I mean, I don't blame whoever it was put me in here. Whoever it was had something going on that they needed to deal with. Probably was somebody who called me their friend but needed to blow the whistle for some reason or other."

"Really?"

"I don't know. I spent a little time thinking about how the whole thing came about, but that's a waste. I knew it was going to come, knew I'd be back in here, and it's no use spending the precious minutes left sleuthing it all out."

Frank couldn't tell if this was real or feigned indifference, or if it was even more pointed than the talk of friends. Quincy was so easygoing and sunlit that it was hard to see him obliquely telling Frank he knew who had sent him away. But Frank couldn't be sure and didn't know if he'd successfully covered his guilt in the matter.

"You still have some, uh, friends who come to the house," Frank said finally.

"Hey, yeah, I know. Daria told me. I'm sorry, Earl. For a tight little circle, we're piss-poor on communications. I think Daria tried everything she could

think of to get the word out, but there are some people who just show up, and it's hard to reach 'em. Sorry."

"They keep asking for Sig."

"That's me."

"I thought your name was Quincy."

"Why did you think that?"

"I'm not sure. Neighborhood..."

"Scuttlebutt?"

"I guess."

"That's the name we used on the deed. Somebody probably saw the records. It was sort of a joke. I used to love that old TV series, you know, Quincy, M.E. So we used that name. We wanted to keep a low profile, buy us a little time."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Do you know why I'm here, Earl?"

"Drugs?"

"Sort of. What did Daria tell you?"

"To come and see you."

"Do you know who Daria is?"

"Your wife?"

"No. She's my sister. Maybe you should tell me what you do know, what you think you know."

Quincy's manner had put Frank at such ease that Frank almost blurted out, "Well I know your sister likes to sunbathe without a top on," but he restrained himself. And then, realizing he'd gotten a little detail like who Daria was wrong, he wondered about the big details and was afraid to say anything.

"Well, there was a lot of... We all thought... I mean, nobody knew but... I don't know."

"You thought we were drug dealers?"

“Yes.”

“What did you think we were pushing? Pot, coke, pills, meth?”

“I don’t know much about those things.”

“And what was it made you think we were dealers? All the visitors?”

“Yes.”

“And I suppose a lot of people on the block thought the same thing.”

“Yes.”

“How could you not in this day and age, right? Eight years of Bush and Cheney and the rest of them, and you got this us-against-them society. You watch dumb TV, and it seems like the cops are banging down doors in every neighborhood in every city in the country. Doesn’t matter if it’s some nice place like your neighborhood. Look out. Here come the druggies, huh?”

“Yes.”

Frank saw an image of his former self, plunked down in front of the TV, soaking up the jiggling cameras of *Cops*, making a direct correlation between what he was seeing on the screen and his next door neighbors.

“Let me ask you a question, Earl. What are you doing here?”

“I, um...”

“Because I believe you’re what they call a godly man, and you probably go to church at the one over on Monroe that everybody in the neighborhood seems to go to.”

“Mt. Olive?”

“I guess. Doesn’t matter. Are you saved?”

“Um...”

“It’s okay, because I am too.”

“You are?”

“I accepted Jesus into my heart when I was sixteen, and to my knowledge he hasn’t left yet.”

“But...”

“In fact, I don’t think he ever could. I mean what kind of Jesus comes into your teenage heart, helps you find peace and love when the world’s

going to hell in a handbasket, and then bolts just because you break a few laws? That's not a real Jesus, is it?"

"No."

"When were you saved, Earl?"

"Twelve years ago."

"Was it an overpowering feeling or did somebody talk you into it? Personal crisis? Booze, porno, death of a parent? What brought you to the altar?"

"Colic."

"Colic?"

"My daughter was colicky. Jesus cured her."

"Well, that's a new one."

"You're saved?" Frank couldn't help drenching the question in incredulity.

"Aren't we all, Earl? I mean I had my moment; you had your moment. We went down the aisle, gave our lives to Christ, accepted him as our one true Savior and all. But wasn't that just a recognition of the fact that he saved everyone once and for all? And wasn't *that* even a bit over the top? I mean, Jesus knew that all God's creatures were saved for all time no matter what."

"What about the Fall?"

"Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer. Doesn't matter."

"No, I mean..."

"I know. I was just kidding. I don't believe in the Fall, Earl. Doesn't make a lick of sense, unless you're trying to organize a religion and you want to keep people in line, want to make them feel so bad about themselves they'll do whatever you say."

"You don't worry about your soul?"

"Of course I do. That's why I'm in here."

"Huh?"

"Earl, I had a choice. I could take care of myself, a nice ride into the sunset, or I could listen to the calls for help I was hearing all around and risk living out my days in prison. I say there was a choice, but I didn't have to go eeny-meany-miny-mo for very long."

"Living out your days? You have a life sentence?"

“Sort of. Technically it’s seven to fifteen. But I have a pretty aggressive little cancer running around inside me, and I don’t think I’m going to hit three, much less seven.”

“I didn’t know.”

“How could you? I look normal. Feel pretty good. And I decided not to get that ‘I have cancer!’ tattoo for my forehead.”

He gave Frank a welcoming smile. Frank tried to return it, knowing he had to shake off his own befuddled look or Quincy might become suspicious.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

Yes it was, Frank thought, but his mind trolled back to earlier information.

“What do you mean a cry for help?”

“That’s a little too dramatic, probably. People who were going through some of the same things I was going through, chemo and such, asked if I could supply them as well as myself. What are you going to do? You’ve seen some of them. Pretty wiggled out, you know, not the kind who can find a connection easily. But they’re just as sick as the ones who can and so... You talked to Daria, right?”

“Yes.”

“She tell you anything?”

“About?”

“Our business. Not business really but...she tell you anything about what we did?”

“No.”

“Well, for the record she was opposed to it. But also, for the record, she was a saint in helping me, helping a lot of other people. I hope you don’t hold anything against her.”

“No. But what would I hold against her?”

“We were, technically, selling drugs, Earl. And I was on parole for having sold drugs before. But we were pharmacists, not pushers. The people who came to us needed marijuana for medical purposes, and we supplied them. Ever since goddamn Nixon ramped up his war on drugs people can’t

seem to think straight about pot. But I know from my own experience that its medicinal benefits are great. It's just a plant, after all. But the Gestapo love to bust you for that plant. So, sometimes we sold those sufferers pot, sometimes we sold them a processed version, brownies, butter, that sort of thing. For people who couldn't smoke. I say sold but you've seen some of our 'customers.' We didn't make any money, even though we grew our own."

Frank realized he was now staring bug-eyed, but there was nothing he could do about it. His brain was way too occupied with new information, guilt, and imagining Quincy and Daria in white coats dispensing medicine, to tell his eyelids to close to a normal distance apart.

Pastor Otto floated up in front of him at that point in a fragment of memory, haranguing a prayer breakfast with a tirade against illegal drugs, punctuated by a dismissive scoff at "medical marijuana."

"See how wily and clever the Devil is? Medical marijuana. What will he come up with next, harmless homosexuality?"

Frank had probably given this about as much consideration as anyone else in the room, nodding yes to the observation, amening, perhaps praising Jesus that their spiritual leader was sagacious enough to smell out these tricky tactics. And that was pretty much that, as far as Frank's understanding of medical marijuana. But now that he was face to face with a man he'd put away for doing such Devil's work, Frank had to examine the situation a little more carefully.

"It can't cure cancer, can it?"

"No, no it can't," Quincy said, eyeing Frank, realizing the depth of Frank's ignorance, wondering where to begin the education. "It's something of a palliative."

"Oh."

"It helps with pain and nausea," Quincy continued, realizing "palliative" was just over Frank's vocabulary horizon. "You ever know anyone going through chemo?"

"Yes." Frank's cousin's husband had gone from gun enthusiast to ghost in about a month and a half under what the family called "the treatments"

and was so thin at his death that they buried him in his thirteen year-old son's suit.

"Well, if they'd been allowed to add marijuana to their drug regimen, they might have had a less horrible time with it. I'm not sure what I would have done if I hadn't had dope going through chemo. Don't get me wrong, I was a pretty regular user before I got cancer. I wasn't like some people who never tried it before and need to be convinced. I just kept going with my own daily toking. But if, say, I'd been in a hospital and couldn't get it, I don't know if I could have gone through with the whole thing. It's one living fucking hell."

"You, uh, need it now?"

"Well, I'm not under chemo now, but with my kind of tumor it relieves the pressure." He leaned in closer and winked. "Don't worry. There's plenty in here."

Frank involuntarily looked quickly around, as if the Feds were going to sweep down on them and nab Frank for conspiracy any second. When he looked back Quincy was grinning.

"Earl, I'm not sure what sort of personal bravery or curiosity brought you here, but I think you ought to be commended. You're really out of your league. You buy a house, some strange birds come to your door, you've probably got a family and a pastor and maybe a congregation all telling you what Devils the previous owners were, you saw some of that yourself, and yet you take time off work to come out here and see what's what. I think that's admirable in this day and age. What extra gene you got there, huh?"

"I don't know. But I didn't have to take time off work."

"No?"

"I got fired."

"Sorry to hear that."

"And I didn't have to tell my family I was coming out here."

"How come?"

"My wife left me. She's filing for divorce."

"That leaves your pastor and congregation."

“There’s a problem there too.”

“How about earthquakes, boils and locusts?”

Frank smiled. Some clouds had parted for him. It had all come out so easily. Tears formed in his eyes. He was experiencing being in the presence of a genuine healer, someone who unpretentiously was able to peel back layers of defense and negation in another and allow them to go deep within themselves. His elbow throbbed a little with his increased heartbeat, but there was no longer the pain. He had come straight out with his problems knowing, somehow, that Quincy would listen without judgment.

Quincy realized Frank had come a long way and was in new territory. He backed off some, made small talk while Frank gathered himself, got a soda with Frank’s money, and asked if Frank would like to have a picture taken together. Frank said yes, paid the five dollars and stood with Quincy in front of the bedsheet backdrop the inmate photographer used. Frank didn’t flinch when Quincy draped an arm over Frank’s shoulder just as the picture was being taken.

Back at the table Quincy decided to push things a little more.

“You know if you have questions about, uh, what got me in here, you might want to talk with Daria. She’s going to stay around for a little while before she goes back home.”

“Goes back home?”

“She lives in San Francisco. She just came to help me. She’s an artist.”

“I saw something on the wall.”

“Yup. I’m not into that sort of thing, but she’ll talk your ear off explaining the significance of it all. If I were you though, I wouldn’t raise the whole Jesus thing with her.”

“Why?”

“Well, she doesn’t quite have the perspective I have. We both got saved together, and we both spent a lot of time in the church in our late teens. Then we both came to realize there was a lot more to, well, life than what the church and the Bible have to say about it. But for me it was a kind of

gradual awakening. Hers was pretty sudden, pretty upsetting. She was propositioned by the minister.”

“Oh.”

“Took her a long while but she’s worked through the violation. The religion still sends her up a tree, though, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think she wanted to talk to me.”

“I know. She thought you had something to do with my being sent back.”

Quincy smiled again. Frank thought about a quick confession, then snagged on something.

“Uh, what do you mean, sent back?”

“They didn’t really bust me. I was on parole from a medical marijuana charge in California. The pot wasn’t enough to send me away, at least the pot they found, but there was enough to revoke my parole.”

“But they said there was a lot of other...”

Quincy waited with a blank expression, and Frank couldn’t tell if he was waiting for Frank to finish the sentence or about to ask how Frank knew details of the bust.

“They always do, Earl. Drug wars aren’t any different than any other kind of war. The first casualty is the truth. Rumor and misinformation rule. You know, pot’s going to rot your brain but alcohol’s good for you, that sort of shit. Or all drug dealers are gunslingers. Nonsense. But I’m too close to the end to worry about that. I helped when I could. My conscience is clear.”

Frank’s wasn’t. His conscience was sludge, and his Mt. Olive moorings were just a dot in the rearview. The slim sense of himself as a hero wisped away. Compared to a man who risked a death behind bars in order to alleviate the suffering of others, Frank thought of himself as a weaselly no-count.

When a guard came in the room and coughed conspicuously, the inmates understood time was up, and the visit ended abruptly. Frank had the weird sensation of wanting to stay, to follow Quincy back to his cell, to keep talking. Quincy must have sensed this.

“Feel free to visit again. And if I were you, I’d call Daria. I’ll put in a word.

You might help her. She's really pissed off, and if she sees somebody like you as a...friend, maybe that'll help her be less bitter."

They shook hands and then Quincy pulled Frank into a semi-hug. The moment was awkward but touching.

Frank was a jumble of guilt, shattered expectations, and questions as he went to his car in the parking lot. He knew he wouldn't be able to think of himself as heroic in relation to Quincy's bust anymore. Quincy and Daria were the heroes. Quincy had made an oblique attempt to absolve anyone who had blown the whistle on him by saying his return to prison was inevitable. But Frank didn't feel absolved in the least. He felt guilty as hell.

He was about to put the key in his front door lock when he remembered Quincy had said, "The pot wasn't enough to send me away, at least the pot they found..." That qualifier could have meant a couple of things, but Frank was pretty sure it meant that there was more pot they didn't find. And that thought took him directly to Franklin Jr.'s room, where he had been sleuthing when Grace's great escape had commenced, and where Daria had filled up her garbage bag with, Frank was sure now, marijuana.

And then it dawned on him what he had to do, if he could. He had disrupted what seemed to him now a mission of mercy. Redirecting the Flop Hats to Daria's number, treating them with kindness was all to the good. But should he be doing more?

He had no particulars to latch onto, but he had the image of the frightened, sick Waitress approaching him, pleading for help and understanding, and he knew there was something more he could have done for her than just give her a phone number.

Even though he didn't know what it was he would be doing for such people, he could see himself doing it. He would be like those aid workers he'd seen in videos at Mt. Olive, handing out food and water to villagers in Africa, only he would be handing out pot, and the Flop Hats he'd be handing it out to wouldn't have to recite the Lord's prayer before they got their medicine.

An old feeling came upon him, the same feeling he'd had when he had

squeezed through the bushes in back of Quincy's house on the disrobing day. He felt the lovely certainty of purpose. He had a mission.

Saddle Up

Pastor Otto had a mission too, of course. The Lord wanted him to move the manse to better real estate. Not only did the Lord want this, He had placed the perfect piece of property right in front of Pastor Otto's nose. There were obstacles on the road to that fine house, but there are always obstacles to any righteous crusade, and Pastor Otto had mobilized all his pastoral talents for the task.

To prove his dedication to himself, Pastor Otto canceled his weekly counseling session with Melinda Evans, the aforementioned full-figured former runway model and heroin addict, in order to meet with Tom, Grace and Nick Battaglia. He didn't want to be blatant about his mission, but when Tom, sitting next to Grace, feeding her Kleenex and the butterscotch candies she'd become addicted to, suggested Nick should simply tell Frank's lawyer to tell Frank to vacate the house in a week, Pastor Otto jumped on that as a strategy and prayed the Devil would comply.

But when, a couple of days later, Nick reported that the lawyer said Frank wouldn't leave until the divorce was settled, Pastor Otto convened a War Council, all men of course, to draw up plans of action, legal strategies,

snooping, and harassment that would, hopefully, chase Frank from his redoubt. This group, some selected for their proximity to Frank's house, some for their tenacity and former involvement with things slightly illegal (i.e., the smoke bomb in the abortion clinic in Toolie), were in the middle of heavy strategizing when the need for their work became even more urgent.

Emily Nosman, the church secretary, was in the office late that night and fielded a phone call from a woman who said she was calling from the White House. Emily was so flustered she didn't get the woman's name, but she was able to scribble notes about what the woman was saying. The conversation lasted about three minutes, and when the woman hung up Emily dashed the notes down the hall to the War Council.

The notes read: President Belglade...Nov. 21...find church...blessed...relief...wholesome...home...pastor...search for best...next few weeks.

Pastor Otto was a bit annoyed when Emily burst into the meeting after he had told her in no uncertain terms they were not to be interrupted. But when she breathlessly launched into a flurry of words, two of which were "White" and "House," he dropped his annoyance and stood quickly, as if his Commander-in-Chief had just come through the door. Emily had a tough time deciphering her notes well enough to form cohesive sentences.

"The President of the United States. I mean somebody. I mean he's coming to Belglade. Called. The President. No, I mean, somebody from the President is coming first and then..."

You get the idea. Sentence fragments like these, ones that would challenge a seasoned codebreaker, tumbled out of Emily's mouth for a few minutes and had the group alternately nodding yes and scowling confusion. Finally, Emily ran out of gas, geared down, and was able to get the basics across.

The president, George W. Bush himself, was going to be in Belglade in a month and a half, he was looking for a representative church to highlight on the visit, was hoping he and his wife might even spend the night with the pastor, and an advance man was going to be visiting Belglade in the near future to determine which of the fifteen or so churches in the area

would be appropriate. The advance man would be undercover, and his visit wouldn't be announced.

In an instant Pastor Otto's internal software began to assess the possibility that the President of the United States, a born-again Christian, might indeed choose Mt. Olive over the other churches in the area. The variables whipping through the program included size, political connections, size, media friendly outreach programs, telegenic worshippers and the pastor's accommodations. Not the biggest congregation in the area, the honors there would go to Holy Waters, an African-American congregation on the south side, but big enough to be in the hunt. Pastor Otto had given the blessing at several quasi-political gatherings recently, and his "Education without prayer hasn't got a prayer" had been picked up by the statewide evangelical crusade for prayers in schools. Mt. Olive's flock were a handsome lot by Belglade standards, and beaming couples, such as Jill and Jeffrey Eggleston (who had in effect, effected the Rachael rescue) and Don and Helen Marriott (Frank's former back hedge neighbors), could be called on to light up any TV screen. Pastor Otto hit enter in his internal software, and the results were semi-favorable for the home team, i.e., Mt. Olive. They had a shot.

But that manse variable was a big problem. His current digs were paltry compared to, say, the sprawling McMansion Ed Graves of Holy Water lived in. Frank and Grace's house would be perfect, but its fate was way up in the air. Pastor Otto, still standing with the War Council waiting, saw Mt. Olive's glorious quest for the president's blessing quite possibly derailed by Frank's intransigence.

As visions of the President ballooned in his mind, paranoia foamed up as well. He wondered if *the* Devil, the big one himself, not just his minion Frank, had targeted Mt. Olive, knowing the president was coming to town, using Frank to keep Mt. Olive out of the running.

"He's got to go," Pastor Otto finally managed after a few minutes of this sort of thinking. "We have a glorious opportunity to bring the Word to a national audience. Imagine the President of the United States, in our pews,

at our Coffee and Christ hour, bowing his head with all of us, listening to my sermon..."

He halted for a brief second imagining this last, staring off, seeing himself in the pulpit, gaining several inches in height, regaining his full head of hair.

Then, coming back to the room, "...uh, helping us bring the unwashed to the Lord. But what if we are denied that opportunity because one of our number has...has..." He checked himself, realizing he didn't want to make his land grab too obvious. "...has found favor in Lucifer's lair? What if this representative of the president witnesses some of the horrors our sister Grace or our brother Nick have witnessed? What if Frank has indeed been sent for just this purpose?"

The "what ifs" led the War Council to some pretty dark thoughts, and then drew them to a two-pronged plan of action. Nick Battaglia was enlisted to work with Grace and help her get a court order that would in effect make Frank's house off limits to him. But because the courts couldn't be trusted to act either quickly or favorably, the War Council decided to undertake a campaign of observation and incursion.

The Cavendishes and Betty and Harold Critch, he with the high-powered binoculars across the street from Frank's house, would be the primary observers. It was hoped they would spot some sort of activity that could be reported to the police. In tandem with this scouting there would be a campaign of intimidation undertaken mainly when Frank was out of the house and mainly in the form of break-ins, disruptions of services, threatening letters, etc. Nick Battaglia did raise some objections to this activity, but Pastor Otto reminded them all of the gravity of the situation, and Nick, true to his stationery's logo, agreed that God's law superseded in this instance.

Word of the plan of action rippled out quickly, and clever Tricia Nugent, who always sort of had it in for Frank ever since she heard him refer to her pasta dish as "spaghetti soup," added a women's component to the effort. Of course, women couldn't be on the front lines of this sort of endeavor, it was too dangerous, but they could team up to call Frank constantly and harass him no end. Within an hour of thinking of this the women of Mt.

Olive had organized a phone campaign that would work around the clock and, because Dot Richards worked at the phone company, could continue even if Frank changed his number.

As he hit the pillow that night, a very charged-up Pastor Otto told Inez, dozing next to him, "Mt. Olive is on the move."

Who Do They Say I Am?

Frank had spent a good part of the several days since his visit with Quincy scouring Franklin Jr.'s room. There wasn't much to scour. The neat freak kid had everything lined up, nothing hidden under the bed, in the closet, in the drawers. Frank had lifted the area rug and checked each and every floorboard. He'd spend an hour or so doing this, get frustrated, and go do something else.

When Swallow called to say Grace wanted him to leave the house, Frank was in a frustrated, post-scouring mood, and, after hearing Swallow say he didn't have to move out, declared he was staying put. His mission, as vague as it still was to him, would be in some way based in the house. And Daria might be the one to tell him the particulars.

He waited until he thought Quincy might have been able to speak to Daria and called the number she had given him. The phone rang ten times, but no one picked up. He thought he might have dialed wrong, dialed again, same result. He sat in the kitchen staring blankly at the door jamb. A bit like Isaac Newton's legendary apple, the door jamb all of a sudden spoke to Frank. Not literally. He wasn't hearing voices, yet. But the smooth,

uninterrupted flow of the wood, from the floor to the top of the door, reminded Frank of the door jamb in Franklin Jr.'s room, one he'd stared at a long time, and one he now remembered wasn't a smooth, single piece of wood, but had been either pieced together, or sawed into at two places in the middle.

Frank was in Franklin Jr.'s room in a nanosecond. He looked carefully at the jamb and saw the wood had indeed been neatly sawed. He grabbed the jamb between the two cuts and gave it a tug. It loosened, and another couple of tugs had it off. Frank peered into the cavity between the two wallboards and could see that the stud had been cut away and a box of sorts extended into the wall. He reached his hand into the box and felt something plastic and pillowy. He pulled this out, brought it into the light, and came face to face with the first bag of pot he'd ever seen in person.

It was, in the common parlance, shake, leaves not buds. Turning the baggie over in his hand, finally seeing the substance in person, Frank wondered what the fuss was all about. He reached in the hole to see if there was more and pulled out a beige Tupperware container. Inside it were five small brownies, a little stale to the touch. Frank realized that these weren't your mother's brownies and weren't sequestered as some sort of diet ploy, but he wasn't quite sure what these would do to one if one ingested them. He fished around in the hidey hole, found nothing else, and replaced the section of the door jamb.

Holding the baggie in one hand and the Tupperware in the other, Frank went to the kitchen. He put the booty on the kitchen table and stared at it for a while, as if it would do something on its own, ignite, maybe, or give instructions. He wondered briefly if Daria had left these specifically for him, or if, perhaps, her leaving them was a sign of some sort. But that was old, Mt. Olive thinking. The pot was simply there.

Then he imagined Flop Hat and the Waitress at the table with him, staring at the find.

"Fear not," he said out loud. Flop Hat and the Waitress nodded to this.

He had one of the brownies half finished before he realized it was he who

was eating it. Confusing his own chewing with Flop Hat's, he had been lost for a while. Then he felt the food being mashed by his molars, and he came back to reality. He hesitated for a moment, imagined spitting the brownie into the garbage, thought that looked ridiculous, and continued until he had chewed and swallowed the whole thing.

Some corners you turn without knowing it, but Frank was well aware of the 90-degree bend he'd just made. He wasn't certain, of course, that he had chewed and swallowed a drug, the brownie tasted like a regular brownie, but he couldn't see any other reason Quincy and Daria would have hidden the morsels. And he wasn't sure either if the one brownie he had swallowed contained enough pot to do anything to him.

But this lack of certainty was not the point. He had assumed the brownies were laced with drugs and laced with enough to effect their whatever, high, or something. In that decision itself lay the change in him. Mt. Olive, his spiritual home for years, his moral compass, was quickly becoming an irrelevancy. There were other things in his life now crowding out the Christian clatter. Walking through the prison gates had been more like stepping into freedom for him than stepping out of it. He decided to pop another brownie.

The bag of pot and the Tupperware container missing two brownies were on the kitchen table a half hour later when the doorbell rang. Nothing much had happened in those thirty minutes. Frank wasn't sure exactly what a high would feel like, but as he took a swipe at the dirty dishes in the sink, and then had gone back to make his bed, he felt nothing out of the ordinary. He did notice, as he went from the bedroom to the front door, that the doorbell was more sonorous than usual, the notes of the chimes melding as they rang out, and when he swung the door open, the whooshing sound it made was amplified. But these little oddities took a backseat once he saw the woman standing at his doorstep.

She was slight with long, artificial-looking blonde hair, a sallow complexion, but fine cheekbones and riveting green eyes. It was hard to tell how old she was, the range being anywhere from her twenties to her forties. She

wore a baggy, heavy knit sweater, even though the weather was pretty mild, and she stood somewhat awkwardly, as if a joint or muscle was injured, and she was compensating. She tried a smile but couldn't cover her anxiety.

"Sig?"

Frank's answer was a little late coming. It wasn't that he was thinking what to say, he was just finding it a little difficult to speak.

"No, but, uh, come on in."

The woman hesitated, gave a furtive look down the block, turned back to Frank, gave him a long onceover, and came through the doorway.

"I was only supposed to talk to Sig," she said as she passed Frank.

"He's not here right now, but I might be able to help you."

Frank, of course, didn't have a clue about how he might help, what the whole business was about, even what this woman wanted, but Frank was finding he wasn't in charge of Frank anymore. Words and thoughts were coming from some central headquarters, and he was just passing them on.

"Good, because I'm really hurting. I was dealing with Alice Sharp until she moved, and she told me about Sig, but I copied down the address wrong, and I spent a long time getting the right one. I finished my stash last week, and I'm in week four of my second go-round with this shit. If I hadn't found you today, I don't know what I would have done."

Frank had started to move toward the kitchen, and the woman was following. He was picking up the gist of what she was saying, but his mind was zinging around wondering if money changed hands in these transactions, what he should say, whether or not he should come clean. He was a little surprised to see the bag of pot and the brownies on the table as they entered the kitchen. She was too. Frank noticed this and decided that fiction was not his genre.

"Look, my name's Frank. I know Sig but I don't know him, I mean, I don't work with him. Actually, he's in jail. Prison. I just saw him. I bought this house a little while ago. My wife and I did. She's in jail too. I mean, she left. With the kids. But I know what Sig did, and I found this in the bedroom,

and I think it's what you're looking for, and I'm sorry you have to look for it. But...what was I going to say?"

The woman looked at him for what seemed, oh, two or three hours.

"Do you have any papers?"

Frank and Grace didn't get the newspaper because Pastor Otto had preached several times against the evils of the ungodly press. Frank wondered if some construction paper the kids used would do for whatever this woman wanted. His befuddlement must have been completely obvious, however. The woman continued.

"Rolling papers. To make a joint. Sorry, but I'm in bad shape. I'd just take one of the brownies, but I need quicker action."

Frank felt the truth serum bubbling in his veins again.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

The woman was puzzled at first. She thought Frank might be joking, but she quickly realized that wasn't the case. She would have just thought him an innocent, but for the past few minutes she'd been suspecting, from speech and the disconnected thoughts, that he was stoned. That didn't jibe with not knowing what rolling papers were. But she was not in a position to work this all out. She was feeling nauseous, and a blessed bag of pot was perched on the kitchen table.

"Okay. They are cigarette papers. Small package. Maybe Sig left some?"

"Let me go look," Frank said after a few seconds of deliberation. He left the woman quickly and went to Franklin Jr.'s room. He undid the door jamb, stuck his hand in and found nothing. But as he was doing this he heard the woman in the bathroom throwing up. Frank stood there holding the door jamb piece for a long while, his mind stuck on some of the themes from the past few months. He began thinking about the vomiting that had gone on. Then he went to rapid exits and screeching tires and then...

"Hello. Mister?..." The woman's voice brought him back, and he met her in the hall. She was holding a nearly empty roll of toilet paper. "Did you find any papers?"

"No."

“Would you mind if I used this,” she asked as she held up the roll.

“No.”

“Have you got any aluminum foil?”

Frank nodded yes and started for the kitchen. He was walking normally, but all of a sudden he got the illusion of speed; it felt as if he were running past the doorways, the linen closet and dashing into the living room. He slowed considerably, and when he did, the woman bumped into him from behind. They both apologized, and Frank continued to the kitchen.

As he looked around trying to remember where they kept the aluminum foil, he felt a little lightheaded, but strangely happy, as if he'd just gotten some good news. Then he realized he was staring, pulled himself back and found the foil in a drawer. The woman asked for a paring knife and a lighter, and Frank was able to find those without too much difficulty.

Then he watched with fascination as the woman took the tube from the toilet paper roll, poked a small hole near one end, ripped a piece of aluminum foil off and jammed it into the hole so it made a small bowl, used the point of the knife to make tiny holes in the foil bowl, took a small wad of the marijuana, stuffed it in the bowl, covered one end of the tube with her palm, lit the pot, and inhaled deeply as she opened the palm-covered end to let air in.

She held her breath for what seemed to Frank like a very long time, and when she finally did exhale, only a very little amount of smoke came out. She waited a few seconds with her eyes closed. Frank, rapt at the craft and the almost ritual-like activity he'd been watching, waited like a kid at story time. When the woman finally spoke, she kept her eyes closed.

“Praise Jesus.”

Then her eyes opened quickly, and she looked over at Frank. Without thinking his Mt. Olive self took over and he nodded to her.

“Amen.”

“Oh, good. I didn't want to offend. Some people don't understand.” She was visibly changed now. She took another deep breath, gauged where she was, packed another bowl and took another hit.

This time Frank got quite caught up in the orange glow of the burning weed, wishing, for some reason, that it would never go out. But it did, and the woman felt comfortable enough this time, after she'd exhaled, to lean her head forward and undertake what Frank assumed was a silent prayer.

When her head came back up, she smiled, successfully this time.

"You're a Christian?" she asked. All Frank could do was nod yes. "Which church?"

"Mt. Olive."

"Oh."

Something in the small deflation she exhibited when Frank mentioned Mt. Olive brought him back from a little dream state and reminded him that Mt. Olive was harboring Grace and the kids, that he was now living in the house by himself, that he had downed a couple of drug-laced brownies a while ago, and that he was sitting with a stoned woman who had just made a pipe out of a toilet paper tube. The woman, to top it off, was a Christian.

"Do you know Mt. Olive?" he finally managed to ask.

"Yes and no. The Pastor's wife, Mrs. Otto, she was like my social studies teacher in junior high school. She tried to bring all us kids to the Lord, but I thought she was kind of phony. I wish I had accepted Jesus then instead of..."

She trailed off and Frank imagined all sorts of things happening between Inez Otto's attempt to bring her to the Lord and when she really did find Him. He could certainly understand what she meant about Inez seeming phony. Though Frank had never said anything to anyone about it, he always had the impression Inez watched a lot of televangelists wives and practiced their behavior in front of a mirror. She said all the right things, but they never sounded the least bit genuine.

The woman completed her thought to herself, then smiled over at Frank.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Do you like it over there?"

"Actually, I'm not sure I still am allowed to go there."

"How come?"

"There's some sort of misunderstanding."

"Like what, if I might ask."

“They think I’m possessed.”

“Oh.” This time it wasn’t deflation Frank detected, but he could see she was set back by the admission.

“I’m not, though,” he added reassuringly.

“No, of course not.”

“Really.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve sort of been accused of the same thing. I got saved at Grove Street Baptist seven years ago. My husband was a member there and everything was fine until I got cancer. The first round of chemo was killing me, and my sister got me some pot, sent it from California. It was magic. Then I made the mistake of telling my husband, he insisted I tell the congregation, and they made me stop using it. So, I tried and I prayed, but one night Jesus just leaned down and whispered in my ear and said pot was okay. I was very happy about that and told the congregation. The pastor there, Reverend Neely, denounced me on the spot, made me feel horrible. My husband wouldn’t speak to me for days. So, I left the congregation, then left him, or he left me, and I did hear some of them said I was possessed.”

There was quiet in the kitchen after she finished. Frank was transfixed. The long explanation had sent his thoughts in all different directions, and he had trouble reining them in. Though there were some parallels to his own situation, he was mainly thinking about the woman, imagining the persecution she’d suffered. Then he realized that, had he been her husband, he might have done the same thing, only a few months ago. And then he remembered Daria’s admonition, and then the phone rang and then, as if by magic, he heard Daria’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Earl, you called a while ago?”

It took a while to construct meaning from that simple sentence, to figure out who was saying it, to remember who Earl was, and to think of something to say, with the woman nearby.

“Yes. I think. Is this...?”

“Yes. Dan said you might call. He wants us to talk. Do you want to talk?”

“Uh, yes. But not right now.”

"Are you free tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Yeah."

"Do you know the Willow Tree Coffee Shop on 72? It's the only place I know in this goddammed town that has decent coffee."

"Yeah."

"Oh, but you don't drink coffee, do you?"

"I do now."

"Changed man, huh?"

"I guess so."

Frank was staring at the top of the woman's head from the back, noticing the ruler-straight part in her nearly white blonde hair. He completely lost the thread of the conversation, and Daria spoke again.

"Sorry. How's 11 a.m.?"

"Eleven? Uh, good."

"See you then."

And she hung up. Frank put the phone down and sat at the table again. The woman smiled a little sheepishly, as if she felt she'd intruded on his conversation, as if she herself might want a little private space. The phone call receded quickly for Frank, and he wondered what was next in this marijuana business.

"So, where were we?"

"I don't know," she answered a little dreamily. "It's getting dark."

Frank looked out the window and was surprised to see no light in the sky. He got up and turned on the light over the kitchen table. There had been some wonderfully happy moments for Frank under this light. When the kids were younger Frank would, at dinner, often pull himself back from whatever was going on around the table and just marvel at the two little people there chattering away. Then, as he sat with the woman, he remembered that was at the other house, the one next door, the one that now seemed distant.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No, I don't want to push my luck."

"What do you mean?"

“The pot can keep things at bay, but if I start stuffing my face, I’ll lose it. Go ahead though. Don’t let me stop you.”

Watching the woman say this, Frank realized he must be feeling the effects of the drug. Her mouth moved, words came out, and Frank could make sense of them on one level. But there was another level to the whole scene running at the same time, and he wasn’t sure what was happening on that plane.

“Your name’s Frank?” she asked finally.

“Yes, why?”

“Sorry. I could hear part of your phone conversation. I thought somebody called you Earl.”

“It’s a nickname or an alias or something.”

“I understand. I never give my real name when I’m doing this.”

“What name do you give?”

“Lilly.”

“Okay.”

“But why don’t you call me Lacey. That’s my real name. And you told me yours, and you’ve been real sweet.”

“Okay.” Frank was now very hungry, the sort of hunger he hadn’t experienced since the day of the Rachael rescue, ravenous hunger, rip-open-the-cupboards hunger. But he didn’t move. “You’re on chemo?”

“I guess you could say that,” she laughed. “We say we’re undergoing chemo.”

“Oh, yeah. Undergoing.”

“My second round. I had the first last year, then I lost both my boobs, then they found some in my uterus. They’re trying to knock that out, but I doubt they’ll be able to get it. So, the big U’s gonna have to go too.”

“I’m sorry to...”

“The Lord giveth. The Lord taketh away. I figure it’s part of His plan. The upside is I don’t have kids, so I won’t be passing some mutant gene on to the next generation.” She looked over at Frank quickly. “I bet you’re a creationist, aren’t you?”

“Creationist? No, but I don’t think this all just happened randomly, like they say.” Frank had this bit of parroting out before he knew it. His conditioning on questions dealing with evolution had been quite complete.

“Really?”

“Well, no. I just say that like everybody else. I’m not sure. I don’t know much about that stuff. But...” Truth telling leaped to the fore again. “...I don’t think it was God’s plan to give you cancer.”

“Neither do I. That’s just something I say. At first, I figured it was my fault. My husband and the good folks at Grove are sort of responsible for that. One lady came right out and asked what I’d done wrong when I told her I had cancer. But I’ve gotten over that. I didn’t do anything wrong. At least not enough to have my lovely breasts chopped off. Sorry. Do you mind me talking like that?”

“No.”

“I feel comfortable talking with you. Yeah, that was the killer. I don’t mind losing my hair. In fact, I’ve always wanted to be blonde like this wig. I like the way I look in it. But to go into the hospital with these perfect 36 B’s and to come out with some scar tissue was almost too much. I had enough sleeping pills to end it all, but that seemed silly. I’ll die soon enough.”

Frank’s hunger was really poking a hole in his stomach now, but Lacey’s tumble of words, the confessional tone, made him not want to interrupt.

“Are you able to work?”

“Some. I’m a court reporter. I sort of freelance. And I actually get a little alimony. I hated taking that. I don’t believe men should be forced to take care of women, but in my circumstances I really couldn’t stand on principle. Did you say you just got fired?”

“Maybe.” Frank couldn’t remember what he’d said two minutes ago. He did remember there was a whole box of Cheez-Its in the cupboard, and he could taste those little square, salty, pellets from across the room.

“Maybe?”

“I mean, maybe I said something. I have been fired, I think. I worked at Newtowne.”

“Whew. You went whole hog, huh? Mt. Olive and Newtowne. They keep the reins on pretty tight, don’t they? I heard Newtowne’s sort of a prayer group that does a little business on the side.”

“Well, you have to do some work.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to offend. I’m having a difficult time with the faith, and I guess I just assumed you were too.”

“I am. Are you hungry? Oh, sorry, I already asked you that, didn’t I?”

“You know, another toke and I think I will be. This has helped a lot.”

She started to pack another bowl, and Frank stood, dying to jet to the Cheez-Its, but feeling he needed to be polite as well.

“I don’t have too much around.”

“Anything’s fine. I’m not at all fussy, especially these days. People think because you’re undergoing chemo you have all these weird cravings, as if you were pregnant or something. But it’s not like that with me. I’ve never been picky, and I’m not going to start now.”

“I’m not much of a cook.”

Lacey took a long draw on the pipe, held the smoke in for what Frank thought was world-record time, and exhaled so slowly no smoke could be seen exiting her mouth.

“I can handle the basics. Let’s take a look.”

They found canned soup and some hotdogs but no buns. Frank pulled out the Cheez-Its and was pleased when Lacey’s eyes, now red-rimmed, lit up. They moved easily around the kitchen getting the dinner ready, and, as they were doing so, Frank remembered something Pastor Otto had said about the world outside the church: “It’s godlessness knows no bounds.” He had nodded agreement to this like everyone else in the meeting, but it now occurred to him that 100 percent of the people he’d met outside the church in the last few days, one a prisoner, one a cancer-induced pothead, had been part of the faith. Maybe it was godliness that knew no bounds. Maybe...But then the thread of his thought drifted away as he concentrated on the mouthful of Cheez-Its he was now delightfully mashing between what felt like very powerful teeth.

The soup and hot dogs went down, and Lacey had a bout of nausea that sent her back to first the toilet bowl, then to the toilet paper tube bowl. She smoothed out after about fifteen minutes and then seemed a little lost.

"How much is this?" she asked running her fingers over the bag of pot.

"I don't know. It's yours, I guess. Finders keepers."

"Really? I should pay something."

"I didn't."

"True."

"What would you normally pay for this?" Frank asked, turning the bag over in his hand.

Lacey gave the baggie a long look. Her sadness seemed to deepen, and it was clear to Frank she wasn't making some sort of market calculation. He imagined the sight of the baggie reminded her of the fact that she had to buy it, and that she had to buy it because she had cancer and that the cancer was...

"Three hundred dollars if you got it on the street, like for getting high, maybe two hundred from a good pharmacist type. Alice would have charged me about a hundred. She was a good person."

Lacey's eyes glistened with nascent tears now, and Frank wasn't quite sure what to do. He looked up at the clock and realized they'd been together five or six hours. He saw his own reflection in the sliding glass doors, then saw Lacey's back in the same reflection.

"You came by car?"

"Yeah. Barely. The thing's on its last legs."

"You can't drive, can you?"

"You mean stoned? I have. But..."

"You're welcome to... You can stay here."

"Thank you. I'd really like that."

Frank suddenly felt as if he were about to cry himself. He couldn't imagine why except that previously he couldn't have imagined extending even such a simple courtesy to a stranger, at least not after his marriage. Frank, now, at this moment in his new life, had leapfrogged WWJD and simply

responded to the situation and the woman in front of him and the whole, easy endeavor made his heart glow within.

Frank was starting to think about where Lacey could sleep when the phone rang. At first Frank thought he might just let it ring and not interrupt the calm he felt, but its insistence, and Lacey's look over at the phone, got him off his chair.

"Hello." He could hear a cheeriness in his own voice he hadn't expected. The response came from whatever is the opposite of cheeriness.

"You're the Devil. Give your wife a divorce and get out of town."

The voice, a woman's, was familiar, but he couldn't place it. The bitter tone and the angry words caught him by surprise, and, before he could say anything, his caller hung up. Frank stood with the receiver still at his ear and realized Lacey was looking at him, obviously having heard the spew from across the room. Frank put the receiver on the cradle.

"Like I say, I'm having a few problems," he explained as he walked back and sat down.

The sliding doors rattled, and they both looked to see raindrops spattering the glass. Lacey stared at this as she spoke.

"My mother, bless her soul, thought I became a Christian just to please my husband, but she was wrong. I really felt something when I made the altar call. And I still do. But I don't have any desire to go back to church. When I'm alone I really know Jesus, know who I am, know that everything's going to be all right. When I'm in church it's all about other people and what they expect." She turned to Frank then with a smile. "What about you?"

"I haven't had much time to think about it, I guess..." A little wave of gladness broke over Frank then, nonspecific and warm, bubbling around him. It wasn't that he had been threatened by the changes that had come his way, but it was nice to not be isolated. "I don't want to go where I'm not wanted."

"Amen."

"I don't think I want to leave the house, though."

"Is that what your wife wants?"

“Yes.”

“Do you mind if I ask what this is all about?”

“No, but to tell you the truth I’m not completely sure myself.”

Frank didn’t go any farther because the wave of gladness crested, and thinking took a backseat to feeling, and he found himself in love with the moment at hand. Lacey sort of zoned out as well, and the only soundtrack to the scene was a few little drumrolls of raindrops on the sliding doors. Lacey’s voice then slid over the beat.

“You don’t have to.”

“What?”

“Be sure. There’s nothing sure. All goes up and down. You might know today and tomorrow you might not. There’s nothing constant in life. Nothing.”

A short while back, say six months before Lacey delivered this bit of stonedom, Frank would have greeted such a thought with a retreat to something like, “Jesus is my rock and my salvation,” to assure himself of the safety his faith afforded. But now in the continuing arms of the brownies’ not so secret ingredient, Frank found an odd assurance in this observation on the uncertainty of existence. Right on. It’s all a roller coaster. Enjoy the ride.

The phone rang again, and real time returned. It was a different voice but the same exact message. As he hung up Lacey sympathized and scowled at the now-evident campaign the church was waging. Frank talked about a couple of similar campaigns he’d been a part of, one directed at an abortion doctor, one about...he couldn’t remember the second one.

His thoughts turned to where Lacey was going to sleep. He brought this up, and Lacey insisted she sleep on the couch in the living room. Frank said one of the kid’s beds would be okay but Lacey was adamant.

They talked for a while more. Frank found himself fading in and out of the conversation. Lacey’s eyes drooped as well, and after Frank gathered up some linen, took it into the living room, let Lacey use the bathroom and started to turn off the lights, he was completely ready for sleep.

"You're a very kind man," Lacey said as she came out of the bathroom. Frank was about to reply but the phone rang again.

"I think I'll just disconnect the phones for tonight. That okay with you?"

"It's your house. Sure."

Frank went back in the kitchen, turned on the light and looked at the wall phone. He wasn't sure what you did to disconnect a phone like this. He was puzzling over this when he remembered Tom bustling around the kitchen impressing Grace with his home repair skills. Lacey came in the kitchen then.

"Could I get a glass of water?"

"Sure." Frank found her a glass and got the water. "You wouldn't know how to disconnect a phone would you?"

Lacey looked at him for a long time, as if he'd spoken in code and she was trying to figure it out. Then she looked over at the phone, took a sip of the water, and put the glass down. In no time flat she had the whole phone lifted off the screws that held it to the wall and had pulled out the connecting cable. She held it up to Frank as if a trophy.

"Now let them try to harass you."

Frank smiled. There was a phone in the bedroom, but that one had a cord that went into a wall jack, and he knew he'd have no trouble with it. Lacey gulped the water and put the glass down. Frank didn't know what kind of protocol there was to having a house guest like this. He and Grace never had people stay overnight.

"Well, I'll see you in the morning," he finally got out.

"Probably not. I'm a very early riser, and I've got...I've got a treatment tomorrow. I'll have to go home and psyche myself up. But, uh, thanks a lot for this," she indicated the pot, still on the kitchen table. "You're a lifesaver."

"You're welcome."

Frank nodded a little awkwardly and, after Lacey had turned and walked into the living room, he turned out the light and walked down the hallway. He caught his reflection in the full-length mirror and stopped, giving himself a long look. Just a few weeks ago he had avoided mirrors. They would show

him an uninspiring lump of flesh, a little slump-shouldered and old for his age. But now the mirror held a thinner man, one with some evident vigor, a handsome face and a spring in his step. He smiled at this man. He thought about the last word Lacey said, “lifesaver,” and remembered a Promise Keepers rally he had attended where, in one of the small group meetings, the talk had centered on “being a lifesaver.” The metaphor had been batted around so much Frank had felt he didn’t want to save anybody’s life ever. He had prayed himself out of this heretical thought, but the feeling had stuck with him. Now, though, he liked the sound of being called a lifesaver. WWDD and WWJD, he realized, were one and the same thing.

Those With Eyes

Harold Critch dozed off at his station after his wife Betty had clucked her last cluck of the night and gone to sleep. He had told the War Council he would maintain his watch until there was no more activity in the Tripping house, but his 78 years caught up with him, and his chin hit his chest around 9:30.

Harold was a little disoriented when he came to later, and so, when he clamped on the night vision goggles Jeffrey Eggleston had brought him earlier in the day, the scene across the street at the Tripping house was, well, trippy. Harold at first thought the whole greenish, fuzzed out landscape looked a lot like the in-utero sonogram of his granddaughter, something he had never been able to decipher.

But after a few minutes he picked out Frank's front door, clicked the goggles into a zoom mode, and framed what he figured was the big living room window. It was through this window, with his own binoculars, that Harold had caught Frank doing naked jumping jacks. Harold didn't see any jumping Frank or flapping penises this time, but once his eyes adjusted to the watery image, he realized there was some movement in the living room,

a being of some sort crossing in front of the window, bending, straightening up, then standing still for a few seconds.

Harold couldn't tell who this was or what he or she was doing but he was pretty certain it wasn't Frank. The strange car that had been there earlier was still in the driveway, and so Harold assumed whoever owned the car was the figure he was tracking. Then, after standing for a while, the figure appeared to remove the top half of its head. Harold nearly whipped off the goggles at this horrific sight, but duty told him he had to stay the course. He hoped his seven-year-old triple bypass would hold.

After the thing put the top half of its head down it proceeded to remove what looked like a shell, lifting it over its head. Harold would later report that it was like a sweater but much too big for one, and that what he saw after the shell had been removed convinced him it couldn't have been an article of clothing. The thing, shell-less, stood there for a moment, turned sideways, and showed itself to be a ghostly skeleton, feminine, Harold would have thought, except for the fact it was absolutely flat-chested.

Then the beast (Harold went quickly to this moniker) sank to the floor and went out of sight. Harold felt his heart pounding and adrenalin prickled his skin. He thought about taking off the goggles and alerting the network, but he figured the beast and Frank would interact soon, and he needed to see that in order to make a full report. He imagined a dance between them, like one he'd seen in a drawing of the Devil swirling around with his minions. He felt his eyelids getting heavy, the goggles themselves drawing his face down, but he clenched his jaw against all this for as long as he could.

Which wasn't all that long. About a half hour after the beast had beheaded itself and de-shelled, Harold was back in the mud of a heavy, heavy doze. He stayed that way until Betty woke him at dawn. You can imagine the disorientation this time, waking to daylight coming through night vision goggles, haunted by some half-remembered vision of a headless Lucifer, seeing the car in Frank's driveway gone, and trying to explain this all to another septuagenarian, one dressed in a Mickey Mouse bathrobe. By the time Harold became oriented enough to sound the alarm, fact and fiction

had done as wild a dance as Satan and his minions in the drawing, and the report became a fearful but forceful battle cry.

Zeal of the Convert

Frank woke to the wonder of a new world. According to his former life this world should be the road to Perdition, a horror show, the Devil's lair. But the day sparkled for him and, replaying the events of the night before, he saw nothing in them even remotely evil. Mt. Olive, complete with countless sermons, Bible studies, books, tracts, and lectures on evil, including admonitions against the demon marijuana, seemed almost remote now, something fenced off from his new reality. The feeling was bracing.

"You are possessed only of the Lord's love. Bless you," read a note from Lacey on the kitchen table. Frank was disappointed there was no telephone number or address after the signature. He wondered what she was going to do when the pot he'd given her ran out.

Paul on the road to Damascus might be a blasphemous comparison to Frank's overnight conversion, especially since, to the Mt. Olive crowd, at that very moment, Frank was the epitome of blasphemy. But the scales had truly fallen from Frank's eyes, and in the space of a few hours he had not only seen the light but he felt an urgent, dutiful need to do something about it.

Like many people paddling their canoe toward an unseen waterfall, Frank was almost giddy at the way the current in his river was picking up. Not knowing his house was under heavy surveillance, he burned off some of the bubbling energy he had accumulated in his revelations by doing pushups and jumping jacks, clothed, on the back patio. This would be reported as the Devil muscling up for some sort of coming assault on the godly.

Eating his breakfast with a newfound gusto, Frank remembered Pastor Otto's words, a sort of stump speech Frank had heard many times.

"You will not know when you have fallen," Pastor Otto had intoned. "You will only feel the heat of the fire when you have been burned beyond recognition. Only in the arms of the church, with the saved nearby, can you hope to discover the Devil in your heart before it's too late." But that seemed woefully uninformed. Lacey was no Devil. She was a woman with cancer. He himself hadn't been lured into sin by any agent of the dark god. He'd just tried some brownies and enjoyed himself.

In fact, he thought, the feelings he had with the drug weren't so much new as a return. For the first time in a long time his experience of the world wasn't mediated by the clang of biblical quotes, a host of "shoulds," robotic praises and editorial cluckings. What was in front of him the night before had just existed, been there, and had been in no need of an overlay of morality or theology. Lacey's "praise Jesus" had even been different, a sincere prayer of thanksgiving. If this way of seeing the world, in all its innocence, were indeed the Devil's trap, God, Frank thought with stunning temerity, had some explaining to do.

Every thought Frank had in the next hour or two, as he waited impatiently for his meeting with Daria, was brimming with dangerous self-confidence. He had to rescue the kids. If Lester Swallow wasn't up to the task, Frank knew he could find someone who was. And, barring that, he'd just kidnap them for their own good. A job? He knew he could find one tomorrow, despite the fact that he knew that people who had been fired from Newtowne didn't have an easy time out in the real, non-Christian world of work.

As he drove to his rendezvous with Daria he bubbled with the confidence

of the clueless. No longer a She-devil in Frank's mind, Daria was now a touchstone and perhaps a guide into his new endeavor. Driving through a sparkling day, Frank was oblivious to all sorts of things, especially the sight of Tom Adams' Toyota in his rearview mirror.

The Road to Hell, Part Two

After Daria had asked Frank if he was a changed man now that he drank coffee, she realized it was she who was changing, had changed. And it was Frank who in some way had helped her.

She didn't have to be in Belgrade. Dan didn't really need her there. His cancer wasn't debilitating yet. He certainly could handle his pot business by himself. She had left San Francisco to escape an increasingly fraught relationship she had with the art world. She had been "discovered" almost a decade ago and had been trendy after some well-received gallery shows. But with that success came doubts, pressure to line up her work with other artists, the need for networking, and what seemed to her like endless bullshit about the meaning of art and the primacy of the artist. So, she took Dan up on his offer of a respite in a podunk in the Midwest, even though she knew he was probably on thin ice and called himself Quincy or Sig or something.

But leaving San Francisco didn't put distance between her and her troubles. She tried not to work, pattered around the flowerbeds, sunbathed, and read. Then a commission for a wall sculpture came in, and she started working on it in Dan's cluttered living room. The day Frank, aka Earl, showed

up she was in the same sort of funk she had been in in San Francisco. Her nephew, her sister Ann's lovely son Ryan, was spending a week with them and that helped. But she couldn't decide if the sculpture was any good, if it was what the commission wanted, and how it would be received by the public. When Frank noticed the piece on the wall and she asked him what he thought of it, she really did want his opinion.

Why? She couldn't have said then but she realized it had something to do with his face. He was stumbling around, hemming and hawing, nervous, and a bit jumpy, but every time he looked her in the eye she was struck by just how genuine he seemed. She knew her next-door neighbors were holy rollers but she got no sense from him of the usual proselytizing you got from such folks. He is real, she kept saying to herself, and he became even more real to her when he declined to comment on her work. He was so unlike the art crowd she'd become used to, the phonies and bloviators, the strivers and self-aggrandizers. She even liked his very unfashionable shorts. Sitting next to him on the couch, their bare knees almost touching, she felt that full, happy sexual tug that doesn't come around often. She found herself touching him tenderly, something she'd never done with any gallery owner. If Frank had turned to her then and leaned in for a kiss, she would have leaned in to meet him.

A few minutes after Frank left that day, she stood in the living room looking at her wild sculpture. She saw Frank underneath it, a flesh and blood sculpture, a handsome man who seemed to have all sorts of hidden wells of sincerity and good nature. In a flash she realized she wasn't producing her art for people like Frank. She was in an art world echo chamber. She was throwing things on the wall in anticipation of critics and other artists ooohing and aahing over her cleverness. But that work seemed empty to her now. She wanted to produce something Frank might appreciate, enjoy.

She went to the wall and started dismantling her art. When she had it all down, she stuffed it in trash bags and took it to the garage. Frank, unknowingly, she realized, had been just the impetus she needed to put her tangled art world in perspective. She had turned a corner.

The day she went to retrieve some of the pot from Frank's new house she was pissed off at him, at Dan and at the whole law-and-order world. Dan had begged her to take care of one of his patients, and she very reluctantly said she would. She snapped at Frank and felt this time that if he leaned in for a kiss, she'd punch his lights out. But once she left the house the after image that remained of Frank was much like her first impression. He was genuine and welcoming. She could see that face in bed with her, their knees together on the sheets.

So, Daria didn't know what to expect as she sat in the Willow Tree waiting for Frank to show. When he opened the café door and came in, she almost didn't recognize him. Instead of the nearly mute, tentative, dust-pan-holding man she'd encountered before, Frank now sort of bounced into the small café, the gawkiness she remembered nowhere in sight. The difference in him was pronounced. He looked around the place, saw Daria, started toward her until she pointed to the counter and the Order Here sign.

He went there and looked up at the dizzying array of coffees until a chipper young woman asked him for his order.

"Just a regular coffee."

"Cream? Sugar?" she asked.

"Uh..." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Daria coming to him.

"Just...sugar."

Daria reached him as he said this. "Yes?" she said playfully as if Frank were addressing her. It took Frank a few seconds to pick up on the playfulness. He returned her smile until the chipper young woman told him he could pay at the cash register.

"I thought you might need some help navigating this world of coffee," Daria said as she followed Frank.

"Thanks. I went with regular."

"Safe bet."

Frank paid, got his coffee and the two of them went to Daria's table and sat.

"Is your name really Daria?" he asked, his voice strong and confident.

"Yes, why?"

“Well, the man I thought was Quincy or Sig turned out to be Dan, and his wife, you, turned out to be his sister.”

“What?”

“You’re his sister, aren’t you?”

“Is that what he told you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t believe everything you hear, Earl.”

Daria punctuated this with a warm smile. Frank got the implication and loved the fact that she might be teasing a second time. He was glad she was the Daria of his first visit and not the garbage bag-wielding Daria of their second encounter.

“Touché. Not sure why I didn’t tell you my real name.”

“Maybe because you were entering the Devil’s den?”

“How did you know that?”

“Just guessed. You church folk have a dim view of those of us headed for hell.”

“But you’re saved, aren’t you?”

“You mean, like, born again or something?”

“Yes. Dan said you two were saved when you were kids.”

“Again, don’t believe everything you hear. My brother is a piece of work. You probably told him you were saved, and he just wanted to make you feel comfortable. No, our parents were dyed-in-the-wool atheists.”

The word “atheists” pinged around Frank’s head. Was that what he was now? He might be on the outs with the Mt. Olive crowd but what about God? His belief in the Big Guy had been automatic in the past. Where was it now? Daria’s voice brought him back.

“Frank?”

“Sorry. I don’t think I’m church folk anymore. And I told you I was married but that might not be true anymore either.”

“Really?”

“Well, things are in flux.”

“So I gathered. Have your wife and kids come back?”

“Not yet. She’s filing for divorce.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Me too but I’m coming to understand her point. It probably seems to her and the whole Mt. Olive congregation that I’ve lost my way. They think I’m the Devil or possessed.”

“Why?”

“Well, I guess their Exhibit A would be the fact that I treated some of Quincy’s, uh, Dan’s patients with kindness rather than trying to exorcise them. I have you to blame for that.”

“So, I’m the Devil, huh?”

Frank gave her a long, appreciative look and wanted to say, “No, you’re an angel,” but he refrained.

“I guess so. Me too now.”

“How does it feel to be a lost soul?”

“Sunny. Last night a woman, Lacey, who was in deep pain came by, and I was able to help her.”

“How?”

“I gave her some of the pot you left behind.”

“You found that, huh?”

“Yeah, and I tried one of the brownies. I guess I got high. Felt great. And when Lacey came by, I gave her some. She was really hurting, and the pot smoothed her out nicely. I felt so good doing that.”

As Frank finished this his gaze drifted to the plate glass window at the front of the store. A man Frank thought he recognized moved past the window but Frank couldn’t see much of his face under a slouch hat.

“I think that’s Dan’s high too. Why else would he risk prison?” Daria asked, following his gaze, looking back at Frank.

“He has cancer, right?”

“Yes. And he was on parole from an earlier conviction for the same sort of activity. He said he had worked out a deal with the local police but I guess it wasn’t airtight.”

“A deal?”

"That's what he said."

"With a guy named Manley, the one who arrested him?"

"Yes."

"Boy. I guess I got played. When I first thought you guys were drug dealers, I went to him. He told me to snoop around and get back to him. I did. And..."

"Snooping? And here I thought you were, um, interested in me."

"Interested?"

"Sorry. Forget it. That one just slipped out."

"I am. I was. I mean. It was like you and Quinc... Dan were in a different world. I thought I was investigating you but I guess I was just attracted..."

Frank realized he was getting in dangerous territory. Any second now Daria's blouse was going to whisk away, and those gorgeous breasts were going to reappear. Plus, Daria's smile was enchanting him, almost forcing a confession.

"Attracted? So, you *were* interested."

"I guess so. But then I turned you guys in and got Dan arrested."

"That wasn't your fault. Dan screwed that pooch all by himself. He's always been like that. Mr. Contrary. Common sense isn't his game."

"But all the people he helps. Doesn't make much common sense for those people to be denied a medicine because some other people think marijuana's the Devil's handiwork."

"I guess you don't think that anymore, huh?"

"No. I'm sort of embarrassed I ever did. I know it's sudden but I find myself on the other side of a fence or a wall or something. I'm over here and everything looks different."

Frank held up his coffee cup for emphasis. As he did this, he caught sight of the man passing the café again, going the other way, furtively looking inside. He turned just enough so that Frank got a glimpse of his face. He laughed to himself, then apologized to Daria.

"Sorry. It looks like I'm being followed."

This time Daria didn't look back at the window. "Somebody's snooping on the snoop?"

"I think so. It's my wife's savior."

"The Lord is right outside the café?"

"Earthly savior. If I've read things right, he's part of the reason Grace wants a divorce."

"Sounds like you've got a soap opera running over at that church."

"I guess it does." Frank glanced over at the window again but Tom Adams had left. "So, you?"

"No soap operas here."

"Good to hear. You're an artist. You live in San Francisco. You..."

"I'm in flux too. And you're to blame."

"How's that?"

"When you came to the house and looked at my sculpture, I realized what a bubble I lived in. The art world, you know."

"I don't really. Art is depictions of Bible stories to me. Or was."

"Well, the art world can be like that, closed off from reality, almost a cult sometimes. People call themselves artists, slap something on a canvas, and convince everybody that there's some meaning in it all. I saw my sculpture through your eyes and that changed me. It took me back to what I really like about art: doing it. I've started sketching again. You know what was the first thing I sketched? That little wooded area between our houses."

Frank tried to resist it but the mention of that wooded area had a whole host of images come flying at him. He wondered if Daria could see what he was seeing. Did she put bare breasts in her sketch? He shook himself out of this and changed the subject.

"So where does Dan get his pot?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Well, I do."

"You're interested, huh? Don't let one night of aiding a cancer patient turn your head."

"No, just curious."

“Well, he was getting it from his own patch but that wasn’t enough for him so he imported some. That’s what they got him on. I guess the cops didn’t care about his patch.”

“Patch?”

“He grows it in a little plot over behind that industrial park. Grew it. He tells me it should be ready by now and says I should go harvest it. I guess he wants company in the slammer.”

“Is there a lot of it?”

“Yeah. I haven’t been out there in a while.”

“Industrial park? That must be behind Newtowne, where I used to work.”

“He liked the fact that it was right out practically in plain sight. See what I mean about common sense?”

“Wow. My office used to look out on...” Tom Adams appeared again in front of the café. Frank pushed back his chair and stood up. “Excuse me.”

He moved quickly toward the front door. Tom was a little slow picking this up but when he did he panicked, frozen for a few seconds, which was enough time for Frank to get to the door and open it.

“Hey, Tom.”

Tom finally got unfrozen and bolted to his left. Unfortunately, a pole supporting the roof overhang outside the café stood in his way, and Tom smacked into it so hard his body recoiled and his slouch hat went flying. Frank moved to help him but Tom recovered, scooped up his hat and reeled off toward the parking lot.

Frank went back inside and sat down to a huge grin from Daria.

“Well, that was fun to watch. That’s the savior, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Doesn’t look like much competition.”

Frank nodded to this. “So, this patch. It’s just sitting there and it’s going to go unharvested?”

“I guess so. Dan had a partner but he moved to Chicago.”

“What do you do with it once you harvest it?”

“You dry it, clip the leaves and... You’re not getting any ideas, are you?”

“No, but it sounds like all that medicine could help a lot of people.”

“I know what you mean, but it’s too risky. Are you going to have another cup? There are free refills.”

“No. This one has me wired. I’d like to see the patch.”

“Not much to see. It’s surrounded by tall grass, pretty well camouflaged.”

“I think I’ll take a look.”

“Frank, that’s not such a good idea. You had a nice time getting high, you helped a woman a lot, leave it at that. There’s a big world out here you don’t know much about yet. You can help in other ways. Volunteer with a food bank or something. Your kids. You don’t want to be seeing them through bars, right?”

“Yeah, but just looking? We could take a drive out tonight.”

Daria found herself drawn to Frank’s sincerity.

“Just looking? Promise?” she asked.

“Scout’s honor.”

“You probably were a Boy Scout, weren’t you?”

“Not only that, an Eagle Scout.”

“That figures. Okay. I guess I should take a look at it myself and make sure you don’t get yourself in hot water.”

Frank, without thinking, reached his hand out to shake. Daria took the hand and then used her left hand to stroke his forearm, much as she had done the first time they met. The effect on Frank’s limbic system was the same, a warm tingling ran from his brain to the rest of his body. But another function of the limbic system, the warning signals that helped our ancient ancestors survive, seemed to be on vacation.

“Deal?” Frank said. Daria searched his face and found it that same genuine one she had first admired. She couldn’t let him traipse off on his own.

“Deal,” she said.

Tails

Frank floated home on waves of warm thoughts and almost giddy anticipation for the rest of his life, for the new people and things he imagined he would encounter. He was no longer bound, hemmed in by strictures and guilt, by admonitions and rigid rules to follow, by prayers and supplications. He realized that so much of what he'd been taught since he joined Mt. Olive had to do with his fallen nature. He had absorbed that existential guilt and drew from it daily, keeping his head down and trying to angle his way to heaven.

But events of the past few weeks had managed to let Frank see the falsity of this worldview. He could tell from the way Daria looked at him that she saw a different Frank, a good man, and she seemed already to care for him in a way Grace never had. Daria, Frank thought, had been a gateway. That initial encounter in the backyard, sinful to him at the time, was, Frank could now see, a wakeup call, an invitation to a life richer and happier than the one he had lived while in the grip of Pastor Otto.

And he felt badly for those still stuck in that grip. He saw them now as if they were behind some enclosure, cordoned off from a world that was

bursting for him. And as he had that thought, driving into his driveway, looking back at his old house, he was stopped cold by the realization that Rachael and Franklin Jr. were still captives.

When he got in the house he went straight to the phone and called Lester Swallow. Frank was adamant. He wanted the divorce to include visitation rights and not just some weekend stuff.

“Like I said, that might take some time,” Lester burped, mixing his message with a tuna sandwich. “Maybe a year or so from now she’ll be softened up.”

“I can’t wait that long. In fact, I want to see them very soon, take them for an afternoon. Set that up, will you?”

Lester, who had assumed since his first conversation with Frank that he was dealing with a real milquetoast, was taken aback by Frank’s new forcefulness and said he’d see what he could do.

Frank spent the rest of the day in high anticipation, finding a good solid flashlight, imagining what the patch might look like, and trying to do some research on the computer. Grace had been in charge of the computer, however, and everything was password protected, so Frank didn’t get very far. He had heard Daria’s warnings about trying to fill Quincy’s shoes, but Lacey’s relief kept popping up, clouding his thinking. He wasn’t exactly planning anything but he wasn’t exactly listening too well. He hadn’t given his encounter with Tom Adams much thought. Tom and the whole Mt. Olive crew now seemed harmless in their opposition to him, their belief he was the Devil. He knew he needed to rescue the kids, to show them the world outside the Mt. Olive bubble, but he was out of the reach of the others, even Grace, and he didn’t bother himself thinking about them.

They, however, were doing almost nothing else but thinking about him.

Tom, an egg-sized lump glistening on his forehead, breathlessly relayed information about his sleuthing.

"I was pretty incognito. I could see Frank with the She-devil but I didn't think he spotted me. He was at the table one second and the next he was right in front of me. Then he hit me with something, and I had to hightail it out of there. I couldn't believe it. He was drinking coffee right out there in the open."

This last drew a gasp from many a Mt. Olive member who heard the story on the overactive phone tree. Action, all agreed, needed to be taken.

When Nick Cavendish, in Frank's old house, got home from work, he established a scouting post from the same window Frank had used to keep tabs on Quincy. He took his dinner by the window and opened it some to let in the warm night air. A bone white moon rose through leafless branches of the trees across the street. He took this as some sort of sign and redoubled his concentration on the house.

His vigilance was rewarded a little later when first he saw an odd light swirling around Frank's garage, then saw the garage door open and watched Frank, with a flashlight in hand, walk to his car. Nick had not prepared for this eventuality, assuming Frank was in for the night, stirring up potions or whatever, and when he realized Frank wasn't just retrieving something from the car but was going to get in and drive away, Nick scrambled to follow, dashing through his living room, hurdling bushes in the front yard, reaching his car and remembering he didn't have keys, racing back into the house, crushing his daughter Lillian's Apostle doll house on the living room floor, not stopping to apologize, then sprinting to his car, only to find Frank's car had disappeared.

The call went out immediately and within minutes Belglade was awash in hungry Mt. Olive eyes scanning the roadways for signs of Frank. Don Marriott, closing his gas station on Valentine Drive, was the first to spot Frank's car and gave chase even though he hadn't securely locked the front door. Don's cell phone battery was fading, but he managed to get out the

startling information that Frank had taken the industrial park exit off Westfall and was pulling into the Newtowne parking lot.

Tom heard this news in his kitchen, with Grace nearby. His shock was great because, he assumed, as Don and intermediate callers had, that Frank was doing a postal employee number and was about to seek revenge on the skeleton crew doing the nightshift at Newtowne. When he hung up, he couldn't conceal his horror, and Grace got wildly fluttery. When Tom wouldn't give her details, she raced around the house looking for "the darlings" assuming they were somehow in grave danger. Evangeline, doing the dishes, couldn't get anything out of Tom before he lit out to join the posse.

Frank had stayed in his car after turning off his lights. He was looking at the building he'd worked in for over almost fifteen years. It now seemed like he was looking at prison walls. The sight made him feel even more unharnessed than he had felt after coffee with Daria. He had been paroled, not pardoned yet, but free.

When a car pulled up next to his he assumed it was Daria but it turned out to be Newtowne security in the form of Adelaide Edkins. Frank rolled down his window.

"Frank," Adelaide said, a little surprised. She was one of the few non-Mt. Olive members employed at Newtowne, one of the few African Americans too. "What are you doing out here?"

"Hey, Adelaide. Nothing much. I was just driving by and I thought I'd have a last look. Did you hear..."

"You got canned."

"Yes."

"Sorry to hear that. There are rumors you and Grace, uh..."

"Separated? True. Not my doing."

"Sorry to hear that also."

Her walkie talkie squawked. A voice said, "He's at it again," and Adelaide said she'd be right there.

"We've got a racoon infestation," she said. "What are you going to do now, Frank?"

There were so many ways Frank could have answered that question, beginning with how he and his lovely friend Daria were going to check out a pot patch, but he tapered his response so Adelaide could get back to the racoon wars.

“Don’t know yet. It was all sort of sudden.”

“Keep in touch, Frank. You were always one of the good ones.”

As Adelaide left her words bathed Frank in a nice little warm glow. He looked around the almost empty parking lot and wondered if any of the other people he had worked with felt as Adelaide did. Would he maybe be missed?

Don Marriott, sitting out of Frank’s sight line in the Newtowne lot, now with a dead cell phone, adopted Army speak in his head and cursed the zero comms he had with his backups. Before he had lost touch though he had heard the theory that Frank might be on the road to revenge. He imagined that security officer would have a lot explaining to do when Frank acted and she hadn’t searched his car. Then another car came into the parking lot, parked next to Frank’s, doused the lights, and a woman got out. Don then wondered if Frank was going to have help spraying the Newtowne lobby with automatic fire, or whatever he was going to do.

Frank got out of his car, said something to the woman, and then the two of them walked off the parking lot, but not in the direction of Newtowne’s front door. They were going to circle the building Don realized as he sucked up his courage and got out of his car. Tom Adams pulled up then and said two or three others were on their way. Don and Tom then headed in the direction Frank and the woman had taken, and only when they were away from the sodium lights of the parking lot did they realize they had forgotten a flashlight. They whispered questions about whether they should go back, but, given the gravity of the situation, they knew they couldn’t lose track of the lethal Frank and his cohort and ploughed on through the moonlit darkness.

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Moonshiners

By the time Frank and Daria had circled the industrial park and were behind the Newtowne building, the moon was up fully. Though the going was a little rough, they were able to operate without their flashlight.

“Dan saw this spot driving into town and knew right away he wanted to plant a crop here.”

“You were with him?”

“No. I was in California. I thought he was just bluffing.”

“But he wasn’t.”

“Nope. The prick.”

Daria wasn’t exactly sure where the patch was and zigged and zagged a little, using the flashlight occasionally. Then she found what she was looking for and moved steadily ahead.

“I gotta give it to Dan. This is hidden in plain sight.”

Frank couldn’t see much until they were right on the crop. Then it became obvious. Instead of the spikey weeds they’d been walking through, three neat rows of leafy plants caught the moonlight and glittered in front of them.

“That’s it?”

“Doesn’t look like much, does it?”

The plants were tall, several taller than Daria, one eye-level with Frank. They moved down the right row, and Daria brushed the leaves. Frank reached out for a leaf but felt something sticky instead.

“I think these have molded or something. It feels sticky.”

“That’s the bud. These have flowered. That sticky bud is a real prize.”

A dewy fragrance filled the night. To Frank, he and Daria weren’t walking as much as floating, and their silence deepened the dreamlike atmosphere. The world dropped away for a few brief moments, and the patch was awash in Edenic innocence.

“Dan would weep if he saw this,” Daria said.

“It is beautiful.”

“Yes, but he’d realize the first frost was going to kill these plants and all the good they can do.”

Frank’s eyes had adjusted even more now, and he could see the buds at the end of the leaf branches, glistening in the bluish cast. He remembered frost kill from his farm days, the mornings you woke up and plants that had been standing tall and green the day before were yellowing and weathered after a freezing night. Lacey rose up from the patch for Frank, as wasted as she had been when she first arrived at the house, and the plants around her were suddenly wilted and sagging, their potential for succor gone.

“That doesn’t have to be, does it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we could just harvest these and give them to somebody who does what Dan used to do.”

“Who’s that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe ask Dan.”

Daria shook her head but she was thinking.

“Well, there is one guy I’ve heard Dan talking about. But I wouldn’t know how to get in touch with him.”

“But Dan would know?”

"I guess so. Maybe we could get in touch with him and tell him about the patch. Or maybe Dan's already done that. Next time he calls I'll ask him."

Frank started pawing some of the plants, feeling their lush branches, imagining how those branches and leaves and buds ended up in that pillowy baggie or those brownies. Frank reached in farther and was gripping the stalk. He gave a little tug to see how strong the roots were, but the plant didn't budge.

"How do you harvest these?"

"I don't. And *you* don't. *You* leave them here."

"But it could be a while before that other guy gets the message."

"Yes, but we'll just have to hope an early frost doesn't hit."

Frank looked over the patch to the moon, now higher in the clear night. For Pastor Otto and his congregation signs played a big part in their theology. The signs were mostly omens, warnings of the presence of the Devil. God spoke to his people through these signs, and the Mt. Olive crew was always on the lookout for these mute directives. Frank had thought some of this sign reading was a little suspect. But who was he to say that somebody's cough wasn't the Deity alerting the flock to a future danger?

On this gemlike night, though, Frank thought he could detect the hand of some benevolent god showing him the perfection of the moon and urging him to act. This push was similar to the one that got Frank out of his house and into an investigation of Quincy in the first place. The urge seemed heroic then. Now Frank felt he was being asked to continue that heroism.

"Why don't we harvest at least some of these and keep them until Dan's friend can pick them up?"

"They're not tomatoes, Frank. They're a controlled substance. Possession of even one of these plants could put you behind bars for many, many moons."

Frank looked back at the crop, at the moon. He had come so far in the last month or two. What was once dastardly to him and the Mt. Olive congregants now seemed benign and beneficial. And the laws that were touted as a bulwark against the evils of drug use now made little sense.

"Maybe I could go to Manley, the cop, and work a deal with him the way Dan did."

"Frank, you're not Dan. And may I remind you, you and Manley were working to put Dan in the slammer."

"You don't have to. But just holding the plants for a few days could be my atonement."

"You mean undoing."

"I can't imagine anyone would suspect me of having them."

"How about that spy friend of yours at the café? Wouldn't that be ironic if your church buddies followed in your investigative footsteps?"

"It would be, but that would never happen. Three. We'll just take three and hope the rest don't get frostbitten."

Daria gave Frank a long look, one that was full of admiration for his sincere desire to help.

"I'm staying in a motel, Frank. I can't have those plants with me."

"No. But I can put them in the cellar and hide them the way Dan hid his."

Daria looked up at Frank, her cheeks luminescent, her eyes dancing, the visual a counterpoint to her stern warnings. Suddenly Frank was back where it all began, in the bushes spying on his neighbor, watching the bikini top float to the ground. And though he now seemed to be eons away from that Frank, he knew that introduction to Daria had something to do with this moment. That backyard tableau was also a sign, and it was pointing to this patch of pot. In one way or another Daria had led him here. She could walk away now, and it wouldn't matter. She had done her job.

Frank fished out his pocketknife. He bent over and felt for the base of the stalk of the nearest plant. The stalk was thick and woody but the pocketknife made a nice cut with the first few swipes.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to take these in. You can go."

"Frank, I'm going. I don't want to be around this. I was lucky they didn't charge me last time."

"Yes. You should go."

“You can’t just throw the plants in your back seat, you know.”

“I’ll put them in the trunk.”

“This is crazy. Take some time. Think about it. There won’t be a frost for at least the next couple of days.”

The stalk splintered and with two more cuts Frank held the whole plant in his hand. He stood up. Daria was still there. The leafy branches bobbed a ghostly dance in the moonlight. Frank was surprised by the size of the plant, its girth. He handed her the plant and started cutting a second. Daria turned completely around, looking for any signs that they were being watched. When she returned to Frank, and the plant he was cutting, she spoke as much to herself as to anyone.

“What is it that puts me among people like you and Dan?”

“He’s your brother,” Frank grunted while sawing.

“That doesn’t mean I have to follow him off the cliff or explain why I’m standing here when I should have been in my car and out of here ten minutes ago.”

“I’m not keeping you.”

“I know. That’s the crazy part about it. Are you done sawing there?”

“Maybe I should get one more.”

Daria said nothing, and Frank cut a third in no time. As he was doing this, Daria held her plant up to the moon and emitted a little soft, keening sound, half hymn, half primal yodel. Once he knew it wasn’t some animal making the sound, Frank found he liked it. When he stood, Daria stopped, and they looked at each other.

“This is so wrong,” she said. Her teeth glowed between her lips.

“What was that you were singing?”

“Something Dan and I used to do, a blessing. Frank, one more time. This is really, seriously misguided.”

“Praise Jesus,” Frank grinned back after a moment of contemplation.

Daria shook her head, turned and started walking out of the patch. Frank gathered his two plants and snugged them under his arm as best he could. As he followed Daria he looked back at the moon. A flat cloud laced itself

around the white light, and, losing his assurance for a moment, Frank couldn't tell if this was an embrace or a chokehold.

Clueless

Just as Frank's ignorance of the drug trade had put a rather hyperbolic and misguided spin on the evidence he gathered from his investigation of Quincy, so the Mt. Olive posse clomping around in the weeds near the Newtone offices, working from a similar ignorance, formed opinions about what they saw that departed from reality by at least a country mile.

In their lurching Tom and Don first bumped into two others from Mt. Olive, Nick Cavendish and Wilmot Nevins, who had streaked to the scene. Then the four sleuths stumbled on Frank and Daria and dove into thick brush. Barely able to see what was going on as Frank cut the plants, the Mt. Olive boys were sure they had stumbled on some Satanic rite. The four never considered something as straightforward as drugs.

Frank and Daria left for their cars before the posse realized they were gone, and so they spent a long time, crouched over, listening for sounds that weren't there. Two engines starting in the parking lot clued them into this fact, and the four went as fast as they dared toward the sodium lights. Reaching the edge of the parking lot, they were only able to see Frank's car and the She-devil's car file out of the lot as if they had just left work.

Had they made it to the parking lot earlier they would have seen a very tender moment between Frank and the She-devil. After stuffing the plants in Frank's trunk, Daria turned to him with real concern, told him to be very careful, and gave him a little schooling on what he needed to do with the plants. Frank was aware that standing in the parking lot wasn't a great idea, given what they'd just done, but he didn't want to leave Daria.

"You're going to call me when you reach Dan's friend, right?"

"If I reach Dan's friend. You're going to be really, really careful with that pot, aren't you?"

"Yes. Scout's honor." Frank smiled down at Daria. In the soft sodium light she looked beatific, dreamy. "Could we meet for dinner or something?"

"I'm planning to leave soon, maybe in a couple of weeks. But, yes. I'd like that."

She smiled. The soundtrack dropped away for Frank, the world was concentrated in this lovely woman's face. He leaned toward her. She didn't punch his lights out. His lips met her soft cheek, and a warmth he'd never felt before filled his body. She returned the kiss. They leaned back, the soundtrack returned. Daria reached up and gently stroked Frank's cheek. Then she turned and with a wave she disappeared in her car. Frank, a little buzzed, still feeling the skin on skin, went to his car and followed her out of the parking lot.

Even though the pot was back in the trunk, Frank's car was thick with the sweetish smell of the sativa. Frank reveled in that smell the way a baker would the smell of a newly turned-out loaf of bread. He had acted. He was acting. And the leafy, sticky, bud-laden branches in the trunk, the results of his action, would be his gift to a small, suffering group of people.

His mind raced ahead to more actions in the future. After he had re-educated Rachael and Franklin Jr., he mused, and secured a job, and got himself settled, he might become an advocate for those in need of medical marijuana. He imagined himself speaking in front of a group, something he had, in the past, been not too keen on ever doing. He imagined...

A blinding light coming through the passenger side window, and a

blatting car horn coming from the same direction, yanked Frank out of these reveries and told him he had just run a stop sign. He swerved, the other car screeched, and the two cars missed each other by inches. Frank saw the driver of the other car yelling at him, but he kept driving.

Then Frank realized how disastrous an accident could have been, even a fender-bender. He saw his car sitting there tangled with the other car, a cruiser called, the strong smell wafting up from the trunk, and Frank, a sitting duck, busted. He drove the rest of the way home five miles under the speed limit, his senses alive to any potential danger.

When he eased into his driveway Frank doused the lights. The house was dark and backlit now by the fully risen moon. He sat thinking long enough to watch a moon shadow on the dashboard shift some to the left. Then an ethereal Daria came out of the front door and drifted to the driver's window. She smiled, leaned in and gave Frank a welcoming kiss before she wisped away.

Life was blossoming, even there in the cold moonlight. He had the plants that would soon help many people in pain. He was going to rescue the kids. He was going to see Daria again. He hadn't felt such hope and optimism in years. He left the pot in the trunk, went inside, searched through the kitchen cabinets, and then tucked into a comforting dinner of Cap'n Crunch.

Daria had been on a similar high after leaving Frank. She kept thinking that she had found what she was looking for when she left San Francisco: real life. Frank was solid, even though his life was in great flux. She could imagine the looks she might get among her art crowd friends if she told them she had been smitten by her born-again next-door neighbor. But that's how she felt. She had always liked men, even when they were boys who hadn't grown up. While she agreed with most of her feminist friends politically and socially, she could not work up the enmity toward men many of them felt was necessary. Frank tickled her. He had heart, and watching him move into a world beyond his conservative bubble was exciting for Daria.

She got into her motel room bed and replayed the moonlight dance she and Frank had done. Soon she was in that lovely warm space where

her body took the wheel. She put one hand between her legs and brushed her right nipple with the other hand. She gave in to the glow and started to follow it to its logical conclusion when the room's radiator clanked. She stopped, listened, and suddenly came back to a wider reality. Frank in all his exuberant innocence had a time bomb in his possession. And she was responsible for it being there.

She rolled over wondering if she should go back to Frank's house, wake him up, get that pot out of his house. No, she decided. Frank wasn't the child his church often made him feel like. He was a man who could make his own decisions. His mission might be dangerous and naive but at its heart it was not misguided. It was heroic. The radiator clanked again, and Daria reached between her legs to celebrate.

Citizen Otto

In the twenty-four hours after the pot harvest, Frank swelled with the growing conviction that he was in charge of his fate. In those same twenty-four hours Pastor Otto massaged a lucky confluence of information and evidence to tighten the noose on his former parishioner.

After his Cap'n Crunch dinner Frank took a nap, woke at three a.m., and moved the plants from his trunk into the garage. Once he had the plants in the garage, he was too excited about what lay ahead to go back to sleep.

The plants had wilted some in the hours since they'd been cut. Daria had said that he should break off the branches and dry them separately in a closed, lightless room. No time like the present, he said to himself, and began snapping off the thin branches, using his pocketknife on the thicker ones. After a while he had a large pile of branches, some laden with the sticky buds. He gathered these up and took them to the cellar.

In their time in the house Frank and Grace had hardly visited the cellar. It was unfinished and not all that hospitable. Grace had had it on her list of things to do to the house in a year or so. But it was perfect for Frank's purposes. There were even old clotheslines down there. A lot of the branches

lent themselves to hanging from these lines and the ones that didn't could be propped up against the cinder blocks. By the time Frank finished, dawn light cracked the high narrow cellar windows, and the room was awash in thick, earthy smells.

Frank went upstairs, lay down on his bed without taking his clothes off, and slept for the next eight hours, dreaming in the middle of that sleep that Rachael and Franklin Jr. and he were on a canoe trip paddling effortlessly against a raging river current.

Just as Frank was lying down, Pastor Otto was tromping around the weeded lot near Newtowne. The night before he'd had a full report from Tom about the rituals they'd observed. Don Marriott added a juicy tidbit when he said he thought the She-devil with Frank looked a lot like the woman who used to live in Frank's house. Then late in the night Pastor Otto had gotten a call that Frank had transferred some plants from his car into the house. Putting this all together, Pastor Otto, who knew Frank had helped bust Quincy, scoured the weeds looking for evidence, got lost, didn't find the remaining pot, and managed only to muddy up his new loafers.

That didn't deter him from his plan, however. Time was of the essence, and he had to do all he could to get Frank removed from that house. He left the Newtowne parking lot and made a beeline for the police station.

After a short wait, Pastor Otto finally got to see Manley. He knew the importance of this meeting and tried to keep his account secular. He said Frank had been acting strange, his wife had left him because she felt he was, uh, mentally unbalanced, and that he, Pastor Otto, suspected Frank was "into drugs."

Manley wondered if this was some kind of joke, hearing language Frank had used in their first meeting. But, as he'd done with Frank, he listened, pretended to make notes, and prepared to politely dismiss the good pastor.

"Last night some men from my church saw Frank go into a lot near Newtowne and pull out some plants and take them home. We think he was accompanied by the wife of the guy who used to live in Frank's house."

Manley sat up at this. He knew the woman Pastor Otto was talking about,

not as Quincy's wife but as his sister, and, more memorably, as the eye candy in a bikini who was quite upset when Manley had busted her brother. He couldn't imagine Frank having anything to do with either drugs or the woman, but it wasn't the sort of detail this pastor would throw in without it being the truth.

"You say Mr. Tripping's still in the house?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have you been inside, looked around?"

"No. I, uh, no...I haven't." He didn't want to reveal that parishioners under his command had done so.

"Well thank you Pastor for your alert observations. I can't quite imagine Mr. Tripping engaging in illegal activity, but you never know. I'll go over and do a sort of casual exploration, see what I can come up with."

"When?" Pastor Otto realized this sounded too eager.

"Well, soon."

"I'm just worried about the safety of the community." Which, of course, was one of the last things on his mind, the first thing being a new manse in time for the president's advance man's visit.

"I understand," Manley said, standing.

What he really understood was that he might have a can of worms on his hands. The dumb deal he made with Quincy, when Quincy had come to town, was in danger of biting him in the butt. He wasn't in any great hurry to go over and find out if straight-arrow Frank had been seduced by either pot or Miss Bikini.

When Frank woke from his canoe paddling dream, he was concerned about the fact that Rachael and Franklin Jr. had been with him in sleep but hadn't been near him, while he was awake, in a long time. Action man that he now was, he decided to go over to Tom Adams' house and demand to see his kids. He would take his fate in his hands. He showered and reached the Adams house just as they all were sitting down to dinner. Frank could see through the living room to the dining room, but when Tom came to the door he wouldn't let Frank in.

“What do you want, Frank?” Tom hung back from the screen door as if a gun battle was about to ensue, and he wanted to have enough room to pull out his pistol.

“I’d just like to see Rachael and Franklin Jr.,” Frank answered, not looking at Tom, seeing the kids craning their necks to see him, then being reprimanded by Grace.

“You’ll have to talk to Nick Battaglia about that, Frank.”

“Just for a couple of minutes, Tom. This is getting ridiculous.”

It got more ridiculous when Tom heard Grace warbling something from the dining room, and he slammed the door in Frank’s face.

“They say you can see the kids when you sign the divorce agreement and sign the house over to Grace,” Lester Swallow told Frank an hour or so later after a few phone calls.

“What do you mean ‘sign over the house?’”

“They said you’ll be compensated.”

“And Grace and the kids are going to come back here to live?” Frank asked, knowing that Grace would most likely by now have thought the house possessed as well.

“Well, you know they didn’t say anything about that,” Swallow said. “I assume they will.”

Frank smelled a rat, but he didn’t know who might be wearing the tail. Was Evangeline right? Did Tom have designs on both Grace and the house? Or maybe Nick Battaglia had some scheme. He thought briefly about Pastor Otto, but Frank was too newly out of Pastor Otto’s orbit to suspect him of true conniving.

In truth, just about the time Frank was juggling these questions, Pastor Otto was pushing his personal coniv-o-meter into the red zone. He hadn’t been back from Manley’s office for more than a few minutes when a friend in the regional ministers’ association called to say that he had it on good authority the White House advance man was coming to Belglade the Saturday after next and was going to be flying in on Southwest Flight 271 from Chicago. Pastor Otto had, by this time, heard about Frank’s trying to see

the kids and realized he had a pressure point vis a vis the house, one he desperately needed now, one that he could apply more quickly, perhaps, than Manley's bust. He called Nick Battaglia.

Lester Swallow called Frank late at night with the latest news from Grace's camp.

"You sign beginning of next week, and the paperwork will be done by the weekend. You can see the kids then."

"And if I don't sign?"

"Yeah. Get this. He says if you don't sign by Monday, the deal's off the table, you don't get to see the kids."

"What's the rush?" Frank asked.

"Beats me," Swallow replied. "This Battaglia guy's jumpy. Maybe he just wants to get his fee. Which reminds me..."

Frank tuned out as Swallow laid out some fee numbers. He looked around the kitchen and imagined it with the kids at the table doing homework, puzzles, games. He wanted to bring the kids into his new world, one of endless possibilities. He wanted to free them from the guilt and shame he knew was the stock in trade at Mt. Olive. But he couldn't do that if he couldn't see them.

He cut Swallow off in midsentence and told him to take the deal.

Signed, Sealed, But Not Quite Delivered

“Praise! The! Lord!” Pastor Otto shouted when Nick Battaglia gave him the news. He had, just moments before, gotten further confirmation of the White House envoy’s visit, complete with a name, Tucker Billings, when Nick came into his office. Within minutes Pastor Otto was a whirlwind of plans.

If Frank signed the papers Monday, all would become official on Friday. They may not have all the paperwork done but Battaglia assured Pastor Otto the residence would be legally his. If Pastor Otto’s house could be packed and loaded Friday night, he and Inez, with the help of an army of Mt. Olive movers, could be resting in the arms of the Lord in the new manse on Saturday night, and Tucker Billings could be warmly welcomed there Sunday morning. The War Council met later that day and began to shift from surveillance and skullduggery to command central for the move.

Pastor Otto’s sermon on Sunday was a warmup for the one he would give when Tucker Billings was in the pews, plus a call to action for the

congregation. The service was hardly over before Tom Adams led a crew of twelve in repainting the entire church building. The Mary and Martha Society spent almost two hours in the afternoon planning ways to lure Tucker, as all now called him, from the church to a reception at the new manse.

Later that night, however, the plans hit a speed bump. Pastor Otto got an emergency call from Tom Adams saying Grace was balking at the deal Nick Battaglia had arranged. Pastor Otto flew to the Adams household, worried sick that Grace's rather mercurial personality could torpedo his plans to rope in the President of the United States.

"If he's the Devil, or one of his minions, how can I let my precious angels be alone with him for even a second?" Grace sniffled reasonably a few moments after Pastor Otto arrived.

"We will arm them," Pastor Otto began as he searched for some Bible passage that would speak to the situation and give authority to the illogic he was about to bestow on his parishioner. "'Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?' Do you remember that from First Peter chapter 3 verse 15?" (It always helped to volley a verse with numbers attached and inflict a little guilt before applying the passage to what was to follow.)

"No, Pastor. I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, that's an important thing to keep in mind. Those little angels, unfortunately, are also under the laws of the state, and if you don't agree to let Frank see them, he might use those laws to pry them from you. But 'who is there to harm you?' We can easily make Rebecca and Franklin Jr. understand that when they are with their father they need not listen to a thing he says, and answer his questions only in the most rudimentary way."

"Rachael."

"Huh?"

"Her name's Rachael. You said Rebecca."

"Oh. I...uh...I was of course thinking of the biblical Rebecca and...Anyway, give me a half an hour with Re...achael and the boy, and they will be girded against any of the Devil's tricks."

Tom, the ever-vigilant, still paint-daubed from his whirlwind afternoon with brush and roller, literally sweetened the deal by unwrapping a butter-scotch candy for Grace. She took it and nodded agreement.

"I'm sorry, Pastor. It's just so hard to think about them with...him. But...I suppose you're right."

"Amen," Pastor Otto murmured, catching Tom's eye, the two of them relieved. Grace, having received the attention she needed, reached her hand out and Tom, now practiced, plunked another butterscotch in her palm.

That candy was the last straw for Evangeline. She was done hosting the Grace and Tom show. It had been patently obvious to all who could see that her husband and Frank's soon-to-be ex were an item. Evangeline had spent a lot of time taking care of Rachael and Franklin Jr. while the lovebirds cooed and cried together. The kids were nice kids but Evangeline wasn't into kids. She was childless by choice. That butterscotch was a sign that Tom had completely left the marriage. Evangeline didn't have any problem with that. She turned away from the scene and felt like she was heading straight for her sister's house and the first tee.

Frank was a little surprised that Grace wasn't at Nick's office when he and Lester Swallow arrived on Monday morning. And when Nick said she wouldn't be there at all, Frank asked Swallow if that was legal. Swallow assured him it was.

For some reason Frank had had the fantasy that Grace and even Rachael and Franklin Jr. would be at the signing. He had imagined giving the kids a lesson in reason and care, assuring them that no one was going to be going to hell for the divorce, that both their parents still loved them. He had a speech prepared, but all that happened in the meeting was a paper shuffle and one feeble attempt at a joke by Lester Swallow. Nick Battaglia ignored him.

"This will be negotiable Friday," Nick said as he handed Frank a check. "I'm filing the papers today, and I'll call you when I get the word all is set. Remember Grace has sole ownership now."

"Okay." Nick stood and Frank and Lester followed.

“We have managed to expedite the transference of the deed. You realize that when we take control of the house we will assume all the contents, so anything left will belong to us.”

“We?”

“I mean Grace, of course. We in the legal sense.”

“Right.” Frank held out his hand. Nick gave it a short look before taking it, as if deciding whether to shake the Devil’s hand was a good idea. “And I can see the kids on Saturday morning?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Where do I pick them up?”

“At, uh, let’s say Tom’s at 8:30 a.m.”

“Tom’s at eight-thirty Saturday morning.”

Frank looked Nick in the eye then, emphasizing the only part of the deal he just signed that meant anything to him. Nick, rattled some by Beelzebub’s stare, nodded yes and made a mental note to be sure the kids were ready when he said they would be.

After Frank turned and left the office Nick took his mental note to a “to do” pad, to be absolutely certain he followed through. When he finished the note to himself, he breathed a sigh of relief, glad that scary business was done with.

But, as in many legal transactions, small details and implicit understandings were skated over, ones each party assumed but, unfortunately for some, were assumed differently. In the case of *Tripping v. Tripping* just completed there was the somewhat minor matter of exactly when the Tripping currently in possession of the premises would vacate and when the Tripping about to occupy would do so. Saturday morning? Saturday after he’d had time with the kids? Sunday maybe? A minor point to be sure. Just a wee detail.

Table for Two

When Frank opened his eyes on Tuesday morning the first thought that came to him was that he was free. Not a thought, really. A feeling beyond thought, a sense of himself as someone out from under a harness. He didn't have to check with Grace, didn't have to get counsel from Pastor Otto, didn't have to punch a clock, and wasn't yoked to the fear of damnation.

He spent the day doing some packing while watching forbidden TV programs, ones Pastor Otto had inveighed against, including news programs like CNN. There was a lot to catch up on. An African-American senator from Illinois had been nominated for president by the Democrats. Only a month or so ago the Democrats were off limits to him, to any God-fearing Christian. But he wondered now why that should be. The guy seemed affable and was saying things that sounded sane. This was the Devil's work? Hmm.

He spent some time figuring out the computer. He found Grace's list of passwords and poked around the internet, amazed at the vastness of the information there. No wonder Pastor Otto had inveighed against the internet as well as TV programs. Without thinking too much about it Frank found himself on a page that gave instructions for processing marijuana plants. It

didn't seem too complicated. His father had been a good truck farmer and had passed a lot of plant lore on to his son. Frank went to the cellar and looked at the pot plants hanging from the clotheslines like sleeping bats. They had dried considerably since he had harvested them. He took a few of the branches upstairs.

"I don't think he'll do anything stupid," Daria told Dan as the two of them sat in the prison visiting room that same afternoon. She had told him about the trip to the patch and the harvest.

"You never know when all the governors come off," Dan said.

"Yeah, but, unlike some of us, he has a modicum of common sense."

Dan laughed. They were having a good visit knowing it may be their last for a while. Dan had the good news that his application for a compassionate release might be successful. He and Daria made plans for him to relocate to California, to live with her for the time he had left.

"Why did you tell him we were born-again?"

"Oh, you know me. I like to make people feel at home. He had balls coming here after he'd blown the whistle on me and all. He looked way out of place sitting right there where you're sitting. So, I figured the Lord wouldn't mind a little bending of the truth."

Dan was happy to hear Daria had turned a corner. He'd always thought her art, while good by some standards, was forced. He knew Daria was deeper than the art she was lauded for in San Francisco. Daria told him about her moment of revelation when Frank first came to visit. "You and Frank are both shaking off the shackles," Dan said.

"I guess that's true."

Dan gave Daria information about a contact he knew of who would probably be interested in the pot in Frank's possession and the rest of it behind Newtowne. He said the guy was off the grid someplace upstate and that it might take a while to get in touch with him.

“Okay,” Daria said, hoping what she had said earlier about Frank’s common sense was in fact true and that he could wait a while.

At about the same time Frank was having his common sense worked over by the smell of the pot plants on his kitchen table. Following the instructions, he’d found he was snipping leaves off the branches and pulverizing them until they looked like the stuff he’d seen in the bag of Quincy’s pot he’d found.

He was thinking about Lacey toking up with her DIY pipe when Daria called to report on her conversation with Dan.

“So, hold on for a few days, okay?”

“Will do. The divorce went through.”

“Oh. That was really quick. How do you feel?”

“Good but I’ll feel a lot better when I get to see the kids on Saturday.”

“Are we still on for dinner sometime?”

“Sure.”

“Tonight? Or is it too soon after your divorce?”

There was a small moment of delicious silence between them, both realizing that talk of the appropriateness of the dinner date implied a real date, not just a couple of buddies getting together for a meal.

“No, it isn’t. Where would you like to go?” Frank asked, finally, with only one restaurant in his ken, Applebee’s.

“Anywhere but Applebee’s.”

“Oh.” Frank waited, stuck.

“Do you like Vietnamese? Believe it or not I found this little hole-in-the-wall place, and the food’s pretty good.”

“Don’t they eat dog?” Frank had retained this information from something Grace’s brother had once told him.

“Uh, not at this place. You willing to give it a try? There’s a whole big world out here, Earl.”

Frank said he would pick Daria up at her motel, and they hung up.

He looked at the landscape of snipped leaves on the table in front of him and couldn’t help thinking that the tableau represented that “big world” out

there. He was looking forward to seeing it all. Dinner, at an exotic restaurant, with a beautiful woman, was a great start.

He snipped happily for a while as the sun set. He wondered what smoking the pot would be like. The brownie high hadn't been unpleasant, but he thought smoking the stuff, as opposed to eating it, would be like the difference between a riding a bicycle and driving a motorcycle. Frank had always had a fear of motorcycles. But he was getting over that, and he thought maybe a toke or two of Lacey's toilet paper roll pipe wouldn't kill him.

But not before his date. He looked at the clock, realized he had to get ready for dinner, and left the pot on the table. It was still there 20 minutes later when he hurried through the living room and went out to his car, forgetting, as usual, to either turn off lights or lock the door.

Manley had waited three days to visit Frank's house, hoping something in the interim would intervene—a tornado perhaps. Just as when Frank had come to his office and Manley had taken his own sweet time doing anything about the information Frank brought, hoping Frank would just get lost and the whole thing would blow over, he now wished this Pastor Otto would, say, slip in the bathtub and develop third stage amnesia.

The reason for all this grumpy ill will was, of course, that stupid decision Manley had made almost two years earlier. A scraggly ex-con had strolled into his office with a very unusual proposal. Maybe proposal isn't the word for it. Announcement. The man called himself Quincy, but quickly revealed that was an alias and went on to detail both legal and illegal marijuana sales he'd made in California, the latter of which landed him in Federal prison for two years. The feds had allowed him to move to Belglade in part because the state had no medical marijuana laws but any repeat of his California life would put him back in the big house.

But this Quincy, whom Manley now saw as some sort of hypnotist or conjurer, announced that he would be selling medical marijuana out of his house and somehow (Manley was still uncertain of the complex psychological mechanism Quincy triggered in him), got Manley to agree to look the other way. Manley slowly informed other members of the small police

department of this decision, and there was general agreement that he had done the right thing. Several members of the force knew the truth about the medicinal qualities of the drug, several others were acquainted with the recreational aspects of it, and so things went smoothly. But one stickler in the department balked, worried about his pension, and Manley was forced to approach Quincy again.

At which point Quincy pulled out his trump card. Quincy had wired himself and the deal was on tape. For the next six or seven months, Quincy was in a hands-off zone, even when Frank ambled in with his suspicions. Then the DEA sent info about Quincy importing. Manley was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place and opted for the hard place. To his surprise Quincy didn't object.

It was the oddest arrest he, Manley, had ever been involved in. Quincy not only went along willingly, he introduced Manley to one of his "clients," a white-haired grandmother who seemed to have no fear of arrest. Quincy's sister, the woman Pastor Otto said was keeping company with Frank, came in from the back yard dressed in a skimpy bikini and gave Quincy a complete scolding as if he were five years old. Quincy, wearing only a Speedo that revealed quite a package, went to the bedroom and returned with the preppiest outfit Manley had ever seen on a perp. And, for the topper, Quincy handed Manley the original tape of their deal in a lighthearted and ceremonial transference of ownership.

It was only after an administrative judge restored Quincy's full sentence of seven years in a federal lockup that Manley learned he had terminal cancer.

So, after Pastor Otto left his office Manley prayed the man of the cloth didn't know what he was talking about. He heard enough of the story to think the allegation was the result of some intra-congregation dispute spun out of control. The Frank Tripping who had come to his office twice was a clueless country rube, nice enough, but no matter under what influence, ever capable of plying the drug trade.

Then on the Monday Frank was signing his divorce papers, Manley got a phone call.

“Detective, this is Pastor Otto. I...”

“I’m working on it.”

“I wasn’t calling to push you. I...”

“You don’t have to. It’s been busy around here. I’ve got some other things on my plate. I probably won’t get to that for a while.”

“Before the weekend?”

“I can’t...no, nothing like that. Probably next week. I’ll keep you informed. I promise.”

“Thank you. Sorry to bother.”

Manley couldn’t have known that Pastor Otto was calling because it had occurred to him that Manley might swoop down on Frank before Saturday’s move and screw up what were becoming intricate moving day plans.

Manley was happy to have put the minister off for a week or so, but, later in the day, when he was heading back to the office from lunch, he remembered the call and took a short detour to the weeded lot next to Newtowne. Unlike Pastor Otto, Manley homed in on the patch quickly and noticed right away that there had been a recent harvest.

“Shit,” he thought. Under normal circumstances he would have set up a stake-out to catch someone red-handed, or green-handed as the case might be. But his expletive was directed more at Pastor Otto for what was looking like accurate information about Frank. He said nothing to anyone at the precinct and decided to pay Frank a visit after work.

He arrived at Frank’s door twenty minutes after Frank had left for dinner with Daria, rang the bell a couple of times, got no response and was about to leave, when he caught a glimpse of what looked like quite a stash of pot, visible through the living room window, on the kitchen table. He literally rubbed his eyes a couple of times because he couldn’t believe anyone in their right mind would leave that much dope that much out in the open.

As he always did in investigations, he tried the front door, and, unlike ninety-nine percent of such tries, the thing opened. Again, Manley couldn’t believe what was going on, but then he realized someone must be in the house, hiding from him.

“Police! Anybody here?”

He got no answer, drew his service revolver, and toured the house. When he saw the rest of the stash downstairs, he was stupefied. He’d seen that much marijuana in one place before, but never in the unguarded home of a bumbling born-again Christian. He snapped off a couple of very healthy buds, for evidence, he told himself, or in case he was diagnosed with cancer in the near future, and left the house.

He didn’t want to bust Frank, who had obviously gotten tangled up with Quincy’s sister somehow, and might be continuing Quincy’s medical marijuana business, but he didn’t think he had much choice. He decided to keep an eye on Frank for a while, see if maybe a tornado showed up.

33

What You See

Blissfully unaware that a Class A felony-sized stash of pot was being discovered in his house, Frank wondered if he should hold Daria's chair for her as they sat down at a tiny table in the Vietnamese restaurant. He made a small move to do so, but Daria sat quickly, smiling.

"You like?" she asked, meaning the restaurant's closet-sized space and red lacquered walls.

"I think this used to be a pizza parlor called Fat Phil's," Frank responded, surprised he remembered a place he had only once gone into, famished, pre-salvation.

"Bingo," smiled Daria. "The owner told me that. And, uh, be prepared for him."

Before Frank could probe this, the overly polite owner, in a white shirt, slicked down black hair (way too black for his age) and Nikes poking out from under his pressed slacks, came to their table (they were the only customers in the place), mumbled a few pleasantries to Daria, and asked them about drinks before dinner.

Daria ordered a Vietnamese beer and said she wasn't much of a beer

drinker but she thought this one was good. Frank hadn't tasted a beer in perhaps fifteen years. He followed Daria's lead, and allowed her to order for him as well, the menu, even with its complete English translations, looking impenetrable.

When the beer arrived, Daria held up her bottle to toast. Frank held up his and couldn't help thinking how different from a rote grace this ritual was.

"To a new life for both of us," Daria said.

"To your brother's health," Frank replied as they touched bottles. Daria was surprised by this and didn't take a drink right away. She gave Frank a long, searching look, as if perhaps seeing something new in him. Frank interpreted the look differently, worried he'd said something wrong. "Sorry, I..."

"No, nothing to be sorry about. You're absolutely right. Here I am thinking about getting back to my house and to work and friends, and Dan may never make it out of that place. Thank you."

A strange little appetizer arrived, puffy spring rolls in a delicate paper-thin wrapping. Daria, sighed, smiled her thanks to Frank and then perked up when she smelled the food.

Another couple came into the restaurant, people who looked vaguely familiar to Frank, but they didn't seem to notice him. The appetizer had a lemony taste inside, and Frank wished there were about ten more on the plate. The beer bubbled in his mouth and the restaurant all went a little fizzy. He was having a great time.

Daria told him about the neighborhood she lived in in Berkeley, near the Oakland city limits. She got wound up talking about the things she did in the City, as she called San Francisco, the museums, the music, loft parties, and even the silly Bay to Breakers annual goof run in which runners dressed in crazy costumes or nothing at all.

The beer and the conversation had sent Frank's governors packing, and so when Daria mentioned this last he blushed and said he had a confession.

"Before we ever met, I was spying on you guys," he blurted out, smiling.

"That figures. I told Dan we were so obvious."

"Yeah, but I was...I was in those trees."

"You spied from there?"

"Yes. I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be. I mean, I told you I sketched those trees. I liked that about the house, the trees and shrubs. But I knew they weren't real privacy. My house in Berkeley has real privacy."

"Yeah, well, confession."

"Confession?"

"I was spying there one day when you...when you took...you were sunbathing."

"Yes."

"And I saw you."

"Yes. Was that unusual?"

"For Belglade, yeah."

"People don't sunbathe in Belglade?"

"They do, but they keep their tops on."

Daria absorbed this but didn't respond. Frank had the distinct feeling he'd gone too far. But the confession was out and there was nothing he could do about it.

"You saw me without my top on?" Frank nodded yes and hung his head a little. Daria seemed amused then. She leaned forward. "Frank, I never sunbathed topless in Belglade."

"But..." Frank began as his mind raced back to that spring day, to the reality of Daria's half nudity, to its profound effect on him. Had he imagined all that? Impossible. But Daria held her ground with a growing smile as she watched Frank try to resolve the mystery.

"Don't worry. I'm flattered."

"I was sure..."

"No. That would have been really courting disaster. Dan's appearance and cars going in and out of the driveway was one thing, one thing I couldn't really do anything about, but I could, and did, keep my top on out in the backyard. I didn't imagine you spying on me, but I did realize those bushes and the ones behind the house weren't any real cover."

They were eating little pieces of pork in a sauce by then, and Frank looked down at the exotic meal. For a brief second, he questioned the foundations of all he held as “real.” Was he divorced? Did he actually distribute pot? Was he really sitting across the table from Daria? She saw the confusion and helped bring him back with a smiling question.

“So, what did I look like?”

Ah, if all confessions could be met with such cheerfulness there might be a lot more truth in the world. Frank felt almost instantly absolved. And he felt free to actually try to answer the question. And, in doing so, the remembered, imagined nudity once again prompted an involuntary tug in his midsection.

“Great. You looked great.”

“As in big,” and she cupped her breasts playfully, careful not to draw attention.

“Um, uh, yeah. I guess so.”

“Now I’m sure you just imagined it.”

Even though little was said, much was implied. Frank had never been so open with any woman in his entire life. The openness caused the particulars of their two lives to drop away. It wasn’t the artist from the Bay Area looking across the table at the born-again former cubicle dweller, but a couple of souls sharing a warm moment.

From there the improbabilities seemed to decamp fully and the moment stretched. And stretched. For Frank the revelation that he had only imagined Daria’s toplessness destroyed none of the beauty of what he had imagined, and for Daria the same revelation added another layer to her appreciation of Frank. Women, of course, don’t enjoy being mentally disrobed by men for the most part, but considering the source and the sweet naiveté of it all, Daria was touched.

“I hope you’re not disappointed,” Daria said much later. They had finished the dinner, and the second beer had given Frank a glow to his ears. There was an awkward moment over the check, goofy conversation in the car, another awkward moment outside the motel room, a proffered and

accepted invitation to go inside, a lovely, coats-still-on first kiss, some deflecting talk about how odd it was their paths crossed, a deeper, fuller, longer-lasting comingling of mouths and tongues when the coats came off, a proffered and accepted invitation to spend the night, and then the moment when, with the lights full on, Daria began to undress.

Daria's breasts were smaller than he had imagined. Her body was lovely in its graceful proportions, and her lack of embarrassment added to its beauty. She helped him undress, and the attending excitement caused a very premature ejaculation. Daria found this, and practically everything else throughout the night, delightful. Frank, the inexperienced, had lucked into the perfect guide for his trip to the new world of sexual enjoyment.

They slept off and on and should have been exhausted when they woke for good at about eight o'clock. But Frank had more energy than he'd had in months. Daria's eyes, the ones that had drawn him in so beautifully in her living room, were now inches away on the pillow and were as comforting and life-affirming as anything he'd ever experienced. He knew he wasn't imagining them, and he knew they could carry him over the myriad difficulties to come.

They said goodbye as if they weren't going to be parting for a long time. Frank promised to visit Dan. There was a nice, final kiss, that hand on the arm once more, and he was back in his car heading home.

34

Tuesday

Frank walked into his house without having to unlock the front door. He didn't notice that the lights had been left on, and he didn't sense that someone had been in the house since he left. He sat back down at the pot-strewn table and was flooded with joy. Despite the evidence, he still didn't believe he'd only imagined Daria's disrobing. It had been too real then, and it remained so. He got up and pulled down the Cap'n Crunch box. But then he decided a brownie might be a better breakfast for such a wonderful first day of the rest of his life. Tuesday, for Frank, was a lot of fun.

Pastor Otto was in a great mood Tuesday as well. The day before he had deftly angled his way into ownership of the Tripping house by inking a side deal with Grace that, in essence, swapped his current house for her former house and transferred the deed to him. Grace had seen this swap as a godsend because, as she said, she couldn't imagine ever setting foot in that Devil's den again.

When Grace heard Frank had signed the divorce papers, she had gotten a little blubbery. But Pastor Otto's offer to take the house off her hands had helped, as did Tom's ministrations. Pastor Otto, who had given Grace the

news, thought a little distraction would help the newly divorced parishioner and turned to Tom.

“So, if he’s picking up the kids here Saturday at 8:30 a.m., we’ll have the first truckload of stuff at the manse at 8:45 a.m.”

Sitting at his desk on Tuesday, working away at his sermon, fielding phone calls about the move, and realizing this was going to be the last sermon he’d have to write in his cramped little home office, he felt truly blessed. Inez brought him a sandwich at noon and reported later that he was “so full of the Spirit his feet hardly touched the ground.”

Manley’s feet, however, were firmly planted on the ground all Tuesday. He had watched Frank’s return home that morning. Feeling Frank would stay at home after his night-long ramble, Manley went to the precinct.

The dispirited detective was prepared to confide in his superior, Police Chief Barry Soloway, but when he entered Soloway’s office, he interrupted a meeting between the Chief and an agent from the Secret Service. It was then that he found out there was going to be a presidential visit in the near future, that a scout of sorts for President Bush was arriving Saturday, and that the president’s political advisor wondered if there were any high-level busts of any sort that the president could piggyback on when he visited.

Manley stretched his lips and shook his head no.

“Ya really haven’t got anything?” Soloway asked later.

Manley again denied he had anything. He didn’t want to be part of some splashy arrest. He knew if there was a federal angle, he could get his friend Larry Dykstra at the DEA to swoop down on Frank and grab some headlines, but Manley worried about where those headlines would lead. Would it just be a nice big fat pre-president’s-arrival bust, or would it lift the lid on a dumb little deal Manley had made two years back? He spent the rest of Tuesday quite conflicted.

35

Wednesday

Frank's time since his night with Daria had been something of a continuous high. It started with that breakfast brownie but then he just sort of took off unaided by the plant. Part of the high was reliving the night with Daria. Part was anticipating seeing the kids again. Part of it was packing for a new life. He fell into bed and slept soundly until a very insistent doorbell woke him early Wednesday morning. He threw on some clothes, hand-combed his matted hair, and opened the door to a round-faced teenage boy.

"Are you Sig?"

Frank was thrown. This was no cancer patient. He was well dressed, probably about fifteen, a little overweight, gap-toothed, wore his hair in fashionably uncombed spikes and toted a bookbag. He didn't seem nervous.

"No. He's not here. What do you want?"

"I was told, like, I could get some weed from him?" Though he question-marked the end of the sentence, he still didn't seem nervous.

"Who told you that?"

"My grandmother."

"Your grandmother?"

"It's not for me."

He fished in his pants pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of lined paper. He held it out for Frank. Frank then remembered where he was, what lay in the cellar, and opened the door wider to let the boy in. Frank took the piece of paper and unfolded it as he closed the door.

An unsteady hand had scrawled a note:

Sig,

Had a relaps. Start kemo tumaro.

Audrey

"She can't spell. My grandmother," the boy explained, watching Frank try to decipher the note.

"I see that. Or maybe you can't spell."

"I told you it's not for me. She woulda come, like, herself but she's hur-tin'. You movin'?"

He was looking at the boxes Frank had packed the day before. Frank was impressed by his composure. But he was still skeptical.

"Yes. Why didn't she send an adult?"

"An adult?"

"To get the...weed."

"What adult?"

"I don't know. Your parents?"

"My parents aren't around. It's just me and her."

"Can I call her?"

"No."

"How come?"

"Cause I got the phone." He pulled a cell phone out of a sidepocket of his bookbag. "This is the only one we got."

That sounded fishy to Frank, a sick woman home without a phone. He thought a little insider jargon might dislodge the lie.

"How much you want?"

"She said the usual, and she said to apologize 'cause I only got, like, twenty-three dollars."

"I don't know what the usual is."

"Neither do I. Look, you don't have to give me the stuff. I didn't want to come here anyway. I know a guy at school who knows where to get some. Grandma didn't want me to go there 'cause, like, if I get caught. So, she sent me here."

Frank held his gaze for a few seconds and didn't detect any dishonesty. He looked out the front window.

"How'd you get here?"

"I walked from school. I got gym first period. I'm skipping."

"You're going to carry weed around with you all day?"

"No big deal at JFK. Trust me." Oddly enough Frank was beginning to do just that.

"Come back after school, and I'll see what I can do."

"No way. We live out in Delmar. I take the bus. I ain't walkin' all the way home."

Now Frank detected a fatal flaw in the boy's story. Delmar was across the state line. You don't go to another state to go to school.

"I'll give you a ride." Frank figured this would be the stopper. The kid looked down, as if he'd been trumped. Then he nodded yes.

"Okay but you're going to get me in trouble."

"How come?"

"There's this girl on the bus route. I'm supposed to stop at her house first and help her with biology. Her mother pays me ten bucks."

"We'll go to your grandmother's, then I'll drop you off at her house."

"You don't trust me, do you?"

Frank let that question go and told the kid to return after school. He figured he'd never see him again.

About ten minutes later, as Frank was buttering a piece of toast, the doorbell rang again. Figuring it was the ballsy kid, he went to the door prepared to give him a little talking to. But it was Daria, and Frank didn't have time to say anything before she whooshed past him into the living room. Once inside, she turned and smiled.

“Hi. Surprised?” she reached up and kissed his cheek.

“Uh, yeah. I thought you were a pothead kid who just came to the door.”

“A what?”

“Some kid, asking for Sig. Claimed he wanted some weed for his grandmother. I guess the word’s out at JFK, the high school.”

“Hmm. I think I know who that might be, but you’ve got to be careful.”

As she was saying this they were drifting back to the kitchen, and when she saw the mounds of bags and branches, she gasped.

“Frank, you can’t have this stuff out like this. Somebody comes to deliver the mail or check the gas meter and you’re busted.” Daria turned to Frank and realized he was only half listening to what she was saying. He was smiling. “Are you listening? I came to tell you the contact Dan has is going to be hard to reach. We’ve got to do something with all this pot.”

“I didn’t just imagine us meeting here, once before, when it was your house, and I was, uh, casing the joint, did I?”

“No, you didn’t. But I think you ought to put the past away and think about the future. Let me help you. We’ll get this bagged up and put it away somewhere.”

They spent a half hour bagging the leaves Frank had clipped then putting the whole harvest in a garbage can and taking that to the cellar. They stopped their work several times to hug, to kiss, and to enjoy just being together.

“There are people at Mt. Olive who think just talking about something like sex means the Devil has his hooks in you,” Frank said at one point.

“Then we’re doomed, I guess, huh?” Daria said giving his arm one of her signature light strokes.

“Completely.”

They talked about getting together the next day, both realizing how much they enjoyed just being in each other’s company. After Daria left, the doorbell rang again at 3:10 p.m. Frank peeked out and saw that it was the round-faced boy. Figuring that if he was coming back and taking a ride

to his grandmother's he must be telling the truth, Frank went downstairs, grabbed a baggie of pot, put it in a knapsack, and got in the car with the kid.

On the way out to Delmar he learned the kid's name was Mark, that he planned to go into the Army when he graduated in two years, that his father and mother had divorced when he was ten, that his father was in Washington state, and that his mother had not been able to deal with her mother's cancer and was living in Kansas City with her sister, ostensibly because there was no work in Belgrade. Frank also learned that kids cross state lines all the time to go to school.

The house Mark and his grandmother lived in was a double-wide on a street of small wood-framed houses. Mark said they had had one of the houses themselves until an electric fire burned it down about three years ago. He went in the house first, then opened the door and motioned for Frank to come in.

Mark's grandmother Audrey was propped up on a half-couch in the living room. The place was neater than Frank had expected. Audrey looked every bit the cancer patient about to undergo a second chemo treatment. Her once-red hair was wispy, and her complexion was sallow and splotchy. She apologized for her appearance as soon as Frank came in the door.

"That's all right. Sorry to intrude. I didn't know..."

"Where's Sig?" Audrey breathed with difficulty, and Frank suspected she had lung cancer. He wondered what good smoking pot did if you had lung cancer. Maybe she should switch to brownies.

"He's in jail."

"Shit."

Frank's guilt about Quincey's incarceration rose. He didn't want to stay long. He pulled the baggie from his knapsack.

"I don't really know much about this stuff. I bought Sig's house after he'd been arrested. I got some of his stuff here, but I'm not sure it's dry enough yet. I'm sorry."

"I can't afford that." She turned to Mark. "You tell him we only had twenty-three dollars?"

“Yes.”

“I’m not charging. It’s yours.”

Audrey gave him a deeply questioning look then. At first it seemed she suspected a sting, a trap. Then that passed, and she wasn’t sure what she was dealing with.

“You’ve got five hundred worth of pot there.”

“Well. Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Glad to know how much it’s worth.”

“Why are you giving it away?”

“You need it don’t you?”

Audrey stared again and didn’t answer. Mark filled in the silence.

“He’s movin’ Gram. It doesn’t make a difference to him. I gotta get to Angie’s.”

Audrey was still disbelieving when they left three minutes later. Frank was struck by the glistening tears that formed in her eyes. They weren’t, as far as Frank could tell, tears of gratitude for his largesse. He suspected they had more to do with the fact that, now that she didn’t have to worry about her pot supply, the reality of the chemo, and the pain to come, loomed. Frank made an awkward exit, mumbled a little to Mark as they drove back toward Belglade, and felt deeply saddened after he dropped Mark off at Angie’s.

He had helped Audrey, he knew. But there was so much more she would need. Not for the first time he thought he might like to work in a hospital.

Manley had just pulled up to Frank’s house when he saw Daria leave. He thought about following her, seeing what that might produce, but his instincts told him to sit tight. He thought about going to the house and having a talk with Frank, but he nixed that plan when he imagined Frank might still have the dope on the table, and he, Manley, would be forced to do something about it.

Then the kid showed up and went inside. Manley remembered Frank's kids were much younger, so this was some kid outside the family. Then Frank and the kid came out, Frank carrying a knapsack, got in Frank's car and took off. Manley was not happy. Selling to a kid? This put Frank's activities in another category, and it made Manley wonder if he had been duped by Frank, somehow. Had he been in cahoots with Quincy all along? Manley tailed Frank's car, his sympathy for Frank draining by the minute.

When Frank passed the state line sign, heading toward Delmar, Manley thought, "Bingo!" and wondered if he had his digital camera in the glove compartment. He did, and when Frank stopped and went into the seedy-looking double-wide, Manley recorded his going in, his coming out, his license plate, all of it, to send to his friend Dykstra at the DEA. He was too exposed to photograph Frank dropping the kid off at another house on the way back to Belglade, but he had all he needed.

He couldn't quite believe what he'd seen. Either Frank had been one hell of an actor when he came into Manley's office, sounding like one of those clueless Christers, or he'd made an unbelievably fast dive down into the depths of criminality. Either way, he was dealing to kids, and even though a bust might open up to scrutiny his little deal with Quincy, it had to be done. Soon.

36

Ready, Set...

Belglade, on Thursday, was a beehive of packing activity. Many desks at Newton were empty due to the numbers of Mt. Olive members pitching in to help Pastor Otto and Grace get ready for their Saturday moves. Floor plans of the new manse were laid out on Pastor Otto's kitchen table, and every piece of furniture, every appliance, every book, dish, and knickknack were given its place. The idea was to make the new manse look completely lived-in by the time Tucker Billings visited on Sunday.

A further part of the plan was that later in the day on Saturday Tom, Grace, and several other handpicked members, were going to be at the airport when Tucker's Southwest Airlines flight arrived. They were going to try to meet him "accidentally" and steer him toward Mt. Olive.

Pastor Otto, directing the packing, made a mental note to remember to call Manley Monday and tell him where he could find Frank. He had been stuck on a title for his very red, white and blue sermon, but then, seeing the road clear to enticing the president, imagining what a career-changing moment that would be, it hit him.

"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," he intoned, in the middle of scrambling

packers. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus," he shouted, and he waltzed Tricia Nugent for a couple of turns in celebration.

Frank was packing a couple of boxes of his things, discarding a lot he felt he could do without, when Daria came in the afternoon. She said she hadn't had any luck getting in touch with Dan's contact. She worried about the pot being down in the basement.

"There's no problem with it being down there," Frank said confidently. "I'll see the kids Saturday morning, have them back by two, then come back and pick up the stuff."

"Don't you have to vacate the house Saturday?"

"Yeah, but they didn't say any specific time. And, trust me, Grace is not going to move over the weekend, if indeed she's moving in."

Frank explained what he meant by that. There had been something fishy about some of the goings-on in the divorce, and he imagined Grace was going to make a lot of money by selling the house instead of moving back in.

"That's not right," Daria scowled.

Frank said he really didn't mind. He then told her about his trip to Delmar the day before. Daria shook her head.

"You were riding in a car, going across state lines, with five hundred dollars worth of pot and a minor?"

"I gave it away. I didn't sell it."

"The judge will be happy to hear that," she said, giving him a resigned, appreciative kiss on the cheek.

They went to the Pizza Hut for dinner, and though they sat in the back, were spied on by Don Marriott when he picked up a stack of pizzas for the movers. He reported the sighting to Tom, and Tom decided to keep the information from Grace. She was, Tom said, "overloaded" already.

She might have been overloaded, but the impending move, into the former manse, gave her back some of her multi-tasking self. She plastered her new house with Post-Its, indicating where furniture and boxes should go,

as she had done with the last move. She had Rachael and Franklin Jr. follow her wherever she went, quizzing them on things they could and could not say to Frank, arming them, as Pastor Otto had suggested, with biblical passages they might use against Frank the Devil.

Grace actually used such language in front of the kids, reasoning that they needed to know the truth in order to protect themselves. She was still deeply uncomfortable with her angels being within a country mile of the man who had allowed himself to become possessed, but she figured that if they were well armed, four hours or so wouldn't give Frank time to turn them. And there was the Lord's work to do Saturday, the move and the foray to the airport to reel in Tucker.

The Pizza Hut was sort of a hub on Thursday night. Over on the bar side, out of sight of Frank and Daria and Don, Manley huddled with his friend Dykstra, the DEA officer. Manley had expanded his theory about Frank to include Pastor Otto and the Mt. Olive congregation. After he decided Frank had indeed duped him, Manley figured that Pastor Otto's blowing the whistle on Frank was sort of like a Belglade turf war. Manley would keep his eye on Pastor Otto after he'd had the DEA clean out Frank.

"I'd like to get them all, but for now it's Tripping's turn," he said after a long gulp of Bud.

Dykstra thought all this was a little far-fetched, but when he heard about the size of the stash and the fact that Frank crossed state lines to sell to minors, he told Manley he was in.

"I'll work on a warrant tonight," he said. "Nab him tomorrow." He gave Manley a thumbs up.

Manley bought the next round.

As he was doing that, Frank and Daria left the Pizza Hut, glowing with something akin to puppy love. Frank again went to Daria's motel room. She had a message and called Dan's friends in California who were trying to get him a compassionate release. In the course of the conversation Daria learned that Dan was even sicker than he was letting on.

Daria cried softly when she got off the phone. Frank held her, thinking

as he did that only a few weeks earlier he would have been in prayer with something like this. They got undressed and into bed and spent the night curled together, talking. Daria said Dan, as far as she knew, was truly not afraid to die.

“He believes we really are pure consciousness, not bodies or minds or personality. He says that shedding the body will not change him because he is beyond the body and mind.”

Frank didn’t understand this at all. To him then, in the motel room, feeling Daria’s soft skin next to his, he wanted to stay in his body forever.

37

On the Fifth Day

Friday brought a little nip in the air and a lot of fervent activity in Belglade. The Mt. Olive movers were at Pastor Otto's house, meticulously loading three U-Haul's with furniture and boxes for the new manse. Over at Tom and Evangeline's house Grace was driving everybody nuts with her oscillating moods, shifting minute by minute from order-barking control freak to handwringing divorcee about to deliver up her innocents to Beelzebub. Only steady Tom was able to ride that wild roller coaster.

Pastor Otto, in his office at Mt. Olive, was in constant phone contact with the movers, but he had decided to turn his undivided attention to his sermon for Sunday, reasoning that he would first have to dazzle Tucker in order to lure him to the special coffee hour at the manse after the service.

Melinda Evans, the aforementioned full-figured former runway model and heroin addict, showed up for an appointment Pastor Otto had forgotten about, and while he worried Satan had put Melinda there to divert him from his supremely important work, her décolletage was such that Pastor Otto figured it could only be the work of the Divine and cleared time for the appointment.

Harold Critch, assigned the duty of keeping watch on the soon-to-be new manse and Frank's comings and goings, had to often obey the more urgent duty of placating his prostate. If Frank was the Devil, Harold's prostate was one of his minions, because throughout the day Harold missed all the significant movement at the house while he stood expectantly over the toilet.

Manley, on his way out of town, put a call into Dykstra, but got only his voice mail. He thought that was a good sign that things were in the works, and a good reason for him to be out of town for the next 24 hours.

Frank, who had driven home from Daria's motel without having his tires touch the ground, turned his attention to packing, discarding, and looking forward to seeing Rachael and Franklin Jr. The check Nick Battaglia had given him cleared, and he withdrew a little cash, feeling like he had a stake for the adventures ahead. He took everything he was moving, except the garbage can full of ganja (Frank's new, favorite word for the stuff) to his new digs at the Days Inn.

And he fielded a very emotional call from Dan, who called Frank "a righteous dude." Dan had just said goodbye to Daria. He said he didn't believe people could ever be separated from each other, that the notion of discreet bodies was "nonsense." But he conceded that most people didn't think like he did, and he asked Frank to look after his sister in her "unnecessary sorrow." Frank, understanding maybe a tenth of what Quincy was talking about, said he would, and thanked him.

"I owe you for my new life," Frank said with a confidence and sincerity he couldn't have imagined a few months earlier.

"Damn right," Quincy coughed. "I just hope it's not a new twenty-five to life." And he hung up.

Heaven or Bust

The front door splintered with the fourth blow of the battering ram, and then collapsed inward with the fifth. Fifteen cops, guns drawn, were through the doorway before Frank could react.

One growling cop put the barrel of his revolver in Frank's face and told him not to move. The others split up and dashed wildly around the house screaming obscenities and knocking down doors instead of opening them.

The cop holding Frank pulled out a wad of plastic handcuffs, but something suddenly gripped him, and he turned quickly, went back out through the ruined doorway, and threw up in the bushes.

That was when Frank realized he was in a dream. He told the cop he had something that could help his nausea, started for the cellar, then decided he'd will himself awake instead.

The relief Frank felt waking was quickly replaced by worry about that garbage can in the cellar. The dream had made capture and incarceration real to Frank, and he was glad he and Daria were going to move the stuff that afternoon.

He checked the clock and saw that his visit with the kids was only an

hour and fifteen minutes away. He got out of bed, looked at himself in the mirror, pulled out an imaginary gun and pointed it at himself the way the dream cop had. Then he laughed himself silly.

Frank pulled into Tom and Evangeline's driveway exactly at 8:30 a.m., after idling down the street for six minutes, and got out of his car quickly, excited to see the kids. He had anticipated some frosty, acrimonious exchange with Grace, but Evangeline came to the door instead. She was the opposite of frosty.

"Hi, Frank. The kids will be down in a second. I just wanted to say thank you."

"Really? For what?"

"Liberating me. If you hadn't allowed yourself to be taken over by the Devil, I might never have gotten out from under that Pastor Otto nonsense," she said with a winking smile.

"Uh, you're welcome. But, Tom?"

"I think he and Grace will be very happy together."

"Oh."

Evangeline disappeared in the house. Franklin Jr. came out first and stopped in the doorway to give his father a long look.

"Hi Franklin."

"Hi." He stood there not moving, just looking. Rachael came up behind him.

"Hi, Rachael."

She looked at her father, looked from him to the car, then pushed Franklin Jr. in front of her, and the two came out on the porch. Frank leaned down to give them hugs, but because they a) had been brainwashed silly about the figure in front of them being a full-fledged representative of Satan, and b) because Frank had never been much of a hugger, they hung back. Frank didn't mind. He just nodded toward the car.

"Where do you want to go, kids?"

He started moving across the front lawn, and they followed warily. Their anti-Satan training had prepared them for negative responses, but this

required a positive one. They didn't know what to say. When they reached the car, and the kids still hadn't come up with a place they'd like to go Frank, took up the slack.

"I haven't had breakfast yet. Wanna go to McDonalds?" Rachael wondered if the Devil ate at a special McDonalds.

Franklin Jr. balked when Frank opened the car door for him, flashing on all the "gates of hell" stuff he'd been hearing about. Frank, seeing all this, feeling the vibe, realized he was going to have to take the reins. They headed for the Golden Arches.

McDonalds, buzzing with a breakfast crowd of mall-crawlers carbo-loading for the day's exhausting shopping, had a black hole of near silence at the Tripping table. Frank poked out a few questions, but the kids kept their lips tightly zipped. Their wide-eyed wariness pained Frank deeply. All sorts of images from their lives bounced in front of him: first steps, playground hijinks, birthdays, even midnight vomiting. They had been lively kids. What was happening?

"So, you're going to get your rooms back at the house soon, huh?" he ventured.

There was a long silence from the two of them, as if this was an unexpected, non-theological question upon which they would have to improvise an answer. Rachael got bold.

"We're not moving back there. Pastor Otto is moving there, and we're moving into his house."

"Really. You mean sometime? When?"

"Right away."

"So, you're not even going to move there for a little while?"

"Nope."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Frank finally said, though he wanted to add, "And what kind of price did your mother get for that, and what's Pastor Otto doing with this sort of real estate deal?" But he only smiled. Franklin Jr. relaxed into that smile.

"I liked that house," he piped up. Frank ached for his son, braving an unscripted comment.

"I'm sure your new house will be just as good," he said. But Frank believed this as much as he believed he was going to hell because he had chewed on a brownie.

At the same time he was saying this, things were in full swing in the manse move. Harold Critch had watched Frank leave to pick up the kids and sent out the alert that "subject has loaded car and is gone for good." The phone trees crackled and the loaded trucks at Pastor Otto's house rolled out toward the new manse.

Pastor Otto, riding in his car in front of the first truck, had a Moses moment: He was leading his people from the wilderness to the promised land. Tiny Mt. Olive was set for much greater things. A photograph of President Bush, cowboy boots and all, enjoying the hospitality of the new manse, floated up over the hood of Pastor Otto's car. Then a succession of TV appearances, burgeoning membership, a glorious new building next to a theme park that became the vacation destination of millions of the devout. Then, suddenly, a stop sign. The truck behind Pastor Otto, perhaps under the sway of the same visions, nearly rammed into Pastor Otto's car and the caravan came back to reality.

Tom Adams was already at Frank's now-supposedly-former digs when the trucks arrived. He was even more of a whirlwind than usual. Grace had had a meltdown when it came time to leave the kids with Evangeline, and Tom had had to deal with that. The linchpin of the moving effort, he was also in charge of the attempt to get Tucker's attention out at the airport early in the afternoon. He had the back latch of the first truck opened before the truck even stopped fully.

The spirits of those who convened to unload the trucks was celebratory to say the least. These people had the distinct sense of a wonderful victory accomplished. The Devil had been routed. Belglade could breathe

easier. Hymns to this victory literally wafted over the movers. When the first pieces of furniture were placed (precisely where they were supposed to be) Pastor Otto halted the proceedings theatrically and called for a moment of prayer. The call went down the line, and for a moment the scene at the house looked like a freeze frame from a documentary about ants' work habits. Men holding heavy easy chairs stood stock still. No one moved a muscle. Pastor Otto's voice rang out from the almost empty living room.

"A new day dawns, and the Lord's abundant blessing has showered down on his good people. The river was wide and deep, but we have forded it, and we stand at the beginning of a glorious future. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Let us continue His work here on earth. Amen!"

The "Amen!" in response would have given a locker room full of football players charging out to the Super Bowl pause. The freeze frame became a sped-up frenzy. The move was on. All was right with the world.

"Are you saved?"

This came from Franklin Jr. as he and Frank sat on a bench in the dinosaur playground behind the elementary school, while Rachael, a distance away, yoked a T Rex trying to climb it. Franklin Jr. had waited until Rachael was out of earshot to ask the question that had driven him nearly crazy for days.

"I'd like to think so," Frank responded softly with a smile.

"I don't."

"Don't what, Franklin?"

"Aren't you going to hell?"

If Daria's imagined disrobing kicked off the chain of events that led Frank to be having this conversation on a bench in a dinosaur park in the first week of his divorce, Franklin Jr.'s wide-eyed question now linked Frank to a new, rapid chain of events.

Staring deeply into his son's interrogating eyes, Frank knew he could not let his children out of his sight until they were old enough to know that hell

was one helluva lie. Without answering Franklin Jr.'s question, he got up, went to a payphone, called Lester Swallow, woke him from a sound sleep, and inquired about the legalities of kidnapping his children.

"Hold on. Hold on," sputtered a groggy Swallow. "Don't do anything rash."

"This is a matter of life and death," Frank parried.

"It's a matter of around five or six years in a state lockup. When you supposed to have them back?"

"Two o'clock."

"Call me at one-thirty. I'll see if I can get something worked out with holy roller esquire."

Frank agreed, but he was as determined as he'd ever been in his life. If one-thirty brought a negative answer, he was gone.

The next stop after the dinosaur park was a fill-up at the Getty station. Franklin Jr. didn't ask to help pump the gas, something he had routinely done before, and Frank found this sad, one more reason to rescue the kids.

Pastor Otto, right about then, was in, well, heaven. He truly couldn't hope for more in the afterlife than he was seeing around him as he stood in the kitchen of the new manse. His flock was so spectacularly doing his bidding, flawlessly unloading the contents of the new manse, and delivering them exactly where they were supposed to go, praising Jesus as they worked, and giving their pastor such confidence in their abilities, that he was able to shift his thoughts to the half-written sermon he would deliver to the congregation, plus one very special guest, twenty-four hours hence.

Tom Adams delivered his two-hours-in report with crisp efficiency and whirled to keep working before Pastor Otto could even congratulate him on the interim success. Wilmot Nevins followed on Tom's heels and brought the news that the pastor's study was ready for his use and "should be quiet enough for you to work."

"Praise the Lord," Pastor Otto responded, and started for his study.

As Frank was pumping his gas at the Getty station, he thought about Pastor Otto's land grab and found himself getting pissed. He'd been duped and the kids had been denied rooms Frank knew they liked. One more reason to keep them with him. He'd find a house with rooms similar to the ones they were losing.

When he got back in the car he couldn't help probing.

"So, you guys are really going to be moving into Pastor Otto's house, huh?"

"Yes," Rachael answered after weighing the question for a few seconds.

"And Pastor Otto's going to be moving into our house, huh?"

"Not really," Rachael replied.

"Huh?" Frank had his key in the ignition but stopped. "I thought you said he was going to be moving into..."

"He's not *going* to move into our house. He's moving now. They got this big plan, and trucks and everything, just like when we moved into the house."

"What do you mean 'now'?"

"Like right now."

Frank looked in the rearview mirror at his seat-belted daughter. In an instant she morphed into a ganja-filled garbage can in the cellar of his house. A moment after that members of Mt. Olive were circling the garbage can, poking at the baggies, wondering what all this smelly oregano was doing in Frank's cellar.

"How'd you like to see your old rooms one more time?" Frank asked, turning the key in the ignition and not waiting for their responses.

Pastor Otto was almost at his study when a small commotion at the front door stopped him. The efficiency of the movers had been such that, unlike many moves undertaken by nonprofessionals, in which people going out of the house always seemed to collide with or have to move aside for those going in, the Mt. Olive movers glided in and out without breaking stride

one way or the other. But now there was a true roadblock at the front door, and Pastor Otto went to investigate.

The problem seemed to be some strangers blocking the door. A young man and woman wearing identical blue windbreakers and sunglasses were standing there defiantly not letting anyone out. Pastor Otto didn't have a clue who these two were, but he was quite certain they were screwing up his grand plan, and he was going to make short order of their disruption.

"What's going on here?"

"Are you the owner?" the young man asked.

"Of course, yes. What do you want?"

Pastor Otto was sure now these were city building inspectors or some such, and perhaps Frank had overlooked some regulation. This thought became more certain when the young woman pulled out an envelope and handed it to him.

"This is a warrant to search the premises, issued this morning by Judge Thomas Engleton of the federal district court in Kansas City," she began in a scripted singsong. "We ask you to please stay where you are, have a seat and allow us to do our work."

Pastor Otto thought that was pretty tough talk for a city building inspector. He unfolded the search warrant that was in the envelope with growing confusion about what was going on. Then Nick Battaglia was at his side. Nick's right hand had gotten wedged between a china cabinet and the backend of one of the trucks, and it was swollen and red when he took the warrant.

Pastor Otto hadn't read the words on the page. He was trying to figure out how to finesse these petty bureaucrats. He smiled up at them thinking he might be able to take them outside and have a little talk about the urgent business of saving souls. All the young man and young woman saw, however, was a forced, very nervous smile from a suspect.

"They're looking for drugs," Nick said in a whisper that was heard all over the living room. Those in the moving crew who had been blocked from leaving gasped. Pastor Otto glanced briefly outside and saw not only that

work had stopped there but that the caravan of trucks had been surrounded by about ten undercover cop cars. The word “drugs” whipped between his temples until, finally, he was able to put two and two together.

“Manley! You’re with Manley!”

The blank expressions from the two cops didn’t deter Pastor Otto. He figured they couldn’t give away any information about the case. But he was sure now things would be okay.

“Look, it’s not me you want. It’s the former owner. He just moved out. Just now, right?” He said this last to the little Greek chorus standing around him. They took their cue beautifully and parroted words like “former owner” and “just now.” The Sunglasses still blocking the front door were unmoved. Nick Battaglia interjected with a different tone.

“Uh, Pastor, uh, I wouldn’t say anything more right now.” In the sitcom version of this he would have poked Pastor Otto in the ribs. Instead, Pastor Otto practically poked him in the eye.

“But it’s just a mistake. It’s Frank they’re looking for.”

He turned back to the front door and found, to his surprise, that the two original cops now had a phalanx of other windbreakered searchers-to-be behind them. And a slightly older man, Dykstra, shouldered his way through.

“We’re with the DEA,” Dykstra barked in Pastor Otto’s face. “We ask that you sit and let us do our work.”

“But you’re not going to find anything. I mean, that was the former owner. He was the one I...” Nick latched onto Pastor Otto’s sleeve but the enraged reverend was beyond such a leash.

It had dawned on him that this silly mistake, his mistake that is of not telling Manley about the move, might torpedo all the plans with Tucker, just by the very fact of having the street in front of the new manse choked with the city’s entire fleet of cop cars. He had to get them out of there right away.

“Look, let me make a couple of phone calls and clear this up so *we* can get back to work.”

Dykstra, a little surprised that Manley’s conspiracy theory, about a church group dealing drugs, appeared to be no fantasy, brushed Pastor

Otto aside and used a pre-ordained hand signal. A swarm then poured in through the front door, agents bringing Mt. Olive movers with them, everybody being hustled into the living room and guarded carefully, other agents fanning out through the house, and the movers looking to their spiritual leader for guidance. But Pastor Otto was seriously in need of some guidance himself.

“This is an outrage! I’m a man of God! Can’t you see that? You’re going to find nothing. I’ll sue! That’s what I’ll do, I’ll sue!”

Nick Battaglia and others finally got Pastor Otto to calm some and sit, Nick whispering that of course they would find nothing, and that it would be a lot better to just let them figure that out and leave. Pastor Otto came out of his rage and saw the array of worried faces around him. He huffed for a long minute, took another look at the agents now beginning to probe every nook and cranny, and then, reflexively and angrily regained his ministerial composure.

“Let us pray,” he began, with a sidelong glance at the invaders. The whole group of movers bowed their heads in unison.

The only one missing from this convocation was that keystone Tom Adams. Grace had called his cell shortly before the DEA swooped down, and she was blubbing so badly about the kids in the grasp of the Devil that Tom had moved away from the new manse’s front yard. He had just gotten Grace quieted, and she had thanked him in purring, captivating tones when he turned and noticed the cop cars and the movers being hustled into the house. His first instinct was to rush inside, but then the alarm on his watch went off, and he realized he and Grace had to hightail it to the airport to try to hook Tucker. Duty, as always with Tom, came first. He hopped in his car and drove away.

Frank speeding toward his house, remembered the bevy of Mt. Olive workers who had helped him and Grace move and developed his strategy from that memory. When he got to the house he would leave the kids in the car, even though they might complain, make a beeline for the cellar, talking to no one, grab the garbage can and hightail it back to the car.

Then, as he was stopped at a light, the image of the Mt. Olive movers surrounding the garbage can resurfaced, and this time they were more drug savvy. And this time they were getting ready to call in the fuzz. What to do? He looked back at the kids. Abduction to save them from the grasp of Mt. Olive was one thing. But being on the run from a drug charge and having the kids in tow was a bit much even for the newly minted outlaw, Frank. He'd have to roll the dice, see what was up at the house, what they knew there, and take his chances.

For the first time in all that had gone on recently, he wished he'd never squeezed through those bushes that Saturday morning.

The walkie talkies had been sporadic for the fifteen minutes or so; the DEA agents poked around the house. The congregation members sitting and standing in the living room said little to each other after Pastor Otto had "explained" things in his rather oblique prayer ("Lord bring the agent of this intrusion to the door so I can speak to him and tell him that things have changed, and the culprit is now not here, please, soon"). The indecipherable squawks from the walkie-talkies had a very perfunctory feel to them, and Pastor Otto used each one to harumph about being invaded in the land of the free.

Then suddenly the squawks became frequent enough to send the agents scurrying around and to deepen the scowl on Pastor Otto's face. In a flash many agents hurled themselves down the cellar stairs, loud voices coming from the cellar nearly drowned out the squawks and then, as if it were on fire, agents rushed Frank's garbage can of pot upstairs, through the living room, past the assembled Mt. Olive crew, and out the front door.

Dykstra, grinning ear to ear, followed, whipped off his sunglasses and stared at Pastor Otto, saying nothing.

"That's not mine. That's...I don't know who...I mean that's Frank's...I mean, right? Right, everybody? We didn't move that in. Right?"

Pastor Otto's sputtering had the flock's head spinning, but Dykstra, perhaps used to such denials, was level-headed and succinct as he pulled out a wad of plastic cuffs and spoke to Pastor Otto.

“You have the right to remain silent...”

Frank felt himself grip the steering wheel harder as they neared their old house. The kids felt the tension and were quiet. A very insistent van of some sort behind them blew its horn loudly. Frank slowed to protest the insistence, but then suddenly the van blew past them dangerously. It was a news van with an antenna on top.

Frank didn’t make the connection between this zooming van and his problem until he had pulled onto his own street, following the van, and it was too late. The block was packed with odd cars, news vans, and a stream of pedestrian onlookers heading down the street.

“Wow,” was Rachael’s assessment. Frank gulped his concurrence.

Not yet knowing exactly what was happening, he thought about making a U-turn. But then it occurred to him that the Mt. Olive movers had found the garbage can, had called the cops, and all this activity was due to the cops waiting to arrest him. The scene looked a lot like the one Frank imagined when he had assumed Quincy’s bust would be a *Cops*-chaotic fuzz fest. A U-turn, Frank reasoned, would be a tad suspicious.

Then too, there was a Belglade cop in the middle of the street, waving his arms to move Frank and the several cars behind him through the block.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Franklin Jr. finally was able to ask.

They could see their former front door now, and familiar faces, those of Dot Richards, Mike Le Grand, and Wilmot Nevins were coming through the door accompanied by guys in blue windbreakers.

Frank was doing some rapid calculations. He saw the moving trucks, the trail of boxes and furniture going into the house, some of the furniture being ripped open by the guys in the windbreakers. The Belglade cop was waving Frank through even more frantically now as cop cars whipped around taking newly minted prisoners off to a booking session.

Frank moved ahead, but then involuntarily slammed on the brakes when he saw the actual garbage can full of ganja on the front lawn, guarded by two

armed DEA agents. He blinked a couple of times thinking he was imagining this. But he wasn't. He stared for a long minute. Then he jumped when the Belglade cop thumped the back of his car for him to move.

As he was clearing his old property line, having to look ahead to avoid the zooming cars, Franklin Jr. yelled out.

"Pastor Otto!"

Frank slowed and looked in time to see his former pastor, his guide through troubled waters, gesticulating as wildly as he could with his hands pinned behind his back, being escorted out of the house and into a waiting cop car.

Frank drove ahead a little, got past most of the hullabaloo, and pulled to the curb. A flurry of questions from the kids hit him from the back seat, but Frank only stared straight ahead, thinking. It was clear that some signals had been crossed at the divorce signing. Frank was sure there hadn't been any mention of an early move-in.

The confusion about what had happened then became confusion about what was to happen in the near future. There was one whopper of a false arrest going on behind him, but did that mean Frank was responsible. Grace and Tom were probably being trussed up back there. Somebody had to take care of the kids.

In his rearview mirror Frank could see the activity still swirling. Should he give himself up right then and there, get it over with? Or should he do the opposite, scam, take the kids and run?

Then he reeled back to the beginning and the image of Daria sunbathing and how that had all been in his imagination. Was all that was happening behind him just imaginary? It didn't seem so. The kids were seeing what he was seeing. He could test the reality of it all by getting out of the car and...

"What are we going to do, Daddy?" Rachael asked, sounding much younger than her years. Frank turned to his kids and could see their anxiety.

"I, uh, don't know, honey."

"What would Jesus do?"

Franklin Jr. didn't just burp up some rote phrase. He was looking his

father in the eye and asking a sincere question. Frank spiraled deep into those eyes until he saw no distance between him and his son. He was their Dad, their lives were in his hands right now, and for who knew how long.

He faced forward. What would Jesus do, indeed? Frank had enough gas in the tank to get pretty far away without a stop. He had a new life out there somewhere. Jesus would probably face the music, Frank figured. But just as quickly he realized he wasn't Jesus, he was Frank Tripping, and he could do what Frank Tripping was supposed to do.

He put the car in gear and stepped on the gas.

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Hosed

“Praise the Lord.”

Dan looked at the joint in his bony fingers, brought it to his lips and inhaled as deeply as he could, which wasn't much.

He was lying in a hospital bed Daria had rented for him when she knew they were going to let him out. Out the window nearby Daria herself came into view in her sunny backyard. She was wearing cutoffs and a halter top and laughing when someone used a hose to give her a shower.

Dan leaned back on the pillow and closed his eyes, dropping the joint into a proffered ashtray. He let out the smoke and took a shallow but satisfied breath. When his cancer had gone into the palliative stage, he had been given the long-sought humanitarian release and now the end was close. But he had his good spirits still, and the rather new family around him helped.

There was more laughing from outside as Rachael and Franklin Jr. came into view, Franklin Jr. wielding the hose, happily menacing his sister and Daria.

Frank, sitting next to Sig's bed, wished he had enough artistic chops to get a scene like that down on paper or canvas, but he'd settle for just

experiencing it. He wondered briefly if he was only imagining a half-dressed Daria and the rest of the things he was seeing, but he knew she had become, in the past five months, a certainty, a reality.

Daria had seen news of the bust in her motel room. Ten minutes later Frank called and said he was taking flight, taking the kids with him, and asked if he could see her in San Francisco. Daria counseled Frank to take the kids back and give himself up. She wasn't surprised when Frank signed off saying he couldn't do that.

Grace, Tom, and the three other women who were waiting at the airport for Tucker, happened to catch the same news report Daria saw on an overhead monitor. The other women rushed home to help, but Tom angled Grace to the side and, strings up on the soundtrack, pledged his undying love to her.

As often happens with such a clandestine romance, the lovers took advantage of the chaos developing back in Belglade and hightailed it out of town. They took the first flight they could find and ended up in Flagstaff, as clueless about their future as Frank was about his at the time, but blissfully happy, especially after they found the perfect church two blocks from their new house. Grace and Frank worked out a fair custody arrangement and she thought maybe she'd soon be in contention for another Christian Wife of the Year award.

Dan, eyes still closed, laughed to himself about something or other. His laugh was echoed by Daria and the kids outside. Dan had had a good laugh when he saw news of the bust at his old digs. Manley had come to him on Friday to tell him the feds were gonna bust the place and said that Dan shouldn't even think of exposing their deal. Dan had tried to warn Frank, but Manley had seen to it no communication was possible. He who laughs last, Dan had thought when he got the delicious news of the mangled arrest.

When Manley realized what the feds had done it was too late to unravel the whole confusion. He figured Pastor Otto's lawyers would have an easy time springing their client. The spectacle of a pastor, and a good chunk of his congregation, being hauled away on pot charges was difficult to overcome,

however, and Pastor Otto, as the titular owner of the house, was forced to bite the bullet and do eighteen months in a cushy federal lockup.

Maybe that's what Dan was laughing about, Frank thought, sitting beside his bed. Frank himself didn't laugh about Pastor Otto's misfortune, even though Frank realized it was the pastor's greed that had gotten him in trouble. After a long trip through the desert and a soft landing at Daria's in San Francisco, Frank was more focused on giving the kids the best transition he could, rather than enjoying some sort of revenge. And as his gaze went from Dan to the window, it appeared things were working out.

Daria rushed Franklin Jr., grabbed the hose and turned it on him. He and Rachael scattered, laughing, and all Frank could see through the window was Daria. He didn't have to imagine her dropping her halter top now. But just for old time's sake he replayed that seminal, apocryphal event in their backyards in Belglade.

Daria must have somehow realized what Frank was thinking. She'd become good at that. She saw him looking at her through the window, walked toward the house, gave him a sexy shake of the hips, blew him a kiss, then sprayed the window with water until her image was just a cascade of dancing color and light.

About the Author

Doug Magee is a writer, photographer and filmmaker living in New York's East Harlem. Much of his work has come from his opposition to the death penalty. He is the author of two books of non-fiction, four novels and two books for children. He wrote the screenplays for two films derived from his work as a journalist—HBO's *Somebody Has To Shoot The Picture*, starring Roy Scheider and Bonnie Bedelia, and Showtime's *Beyond The Call* with Sissy Spacek and David Strathairn.

Acknowledgments

SAVED is the hilarious, high-spirited story of Frank Tripping, a Midwestern family man and a conservative Christian, who comes to suspect his new next-door neighbors are drug dealers. Frank, living in an evangelical bubble in the mid-2000's, doesn't know much about this category, "drugs," but he sees it as his duty to investigate. In doing so he steps out of his church-based world, leaps over the cultural divide and finds the outside world not what he was told it was. A satire that doesn't stray too far afield from reality, **SAVED** takes place in the years just before evangelicals went gaga over MAGA. Frank Tripping's journey, a heart-warming hoot, is the perfect antidote for our divided times.

Excerpt from SAVED

"Frank had been saved for years, so, as Daria clicked back the top half of the chaise and pulled up her short, smooth legs, there was no question continuing to partake of this forbidden image would ruin his chance to go to heaven. The tumescence that grew all by itself under his tighty-whities was the work of the Devil, to be sure, but since he had the assurance of salvation, continuing to stare at the prone, welcoming body could do Frank no harm, as in long-term, as in eternity.

Or so he thought. Salvation doesn't necessarily come bundled with wisdom or clairvoyance. As parts of him below the navel swelled like fruit ripening in fast forward, Frank's bland and regimented universe was taking a major hit."



Doug Magee is a writer, photographer and filmmaker living in New York's East Harlem. He is the author of four novels. His produced screenplays include HBO's *Somebody Has To Shoot the Picture*. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary, but don't let that fool you.

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