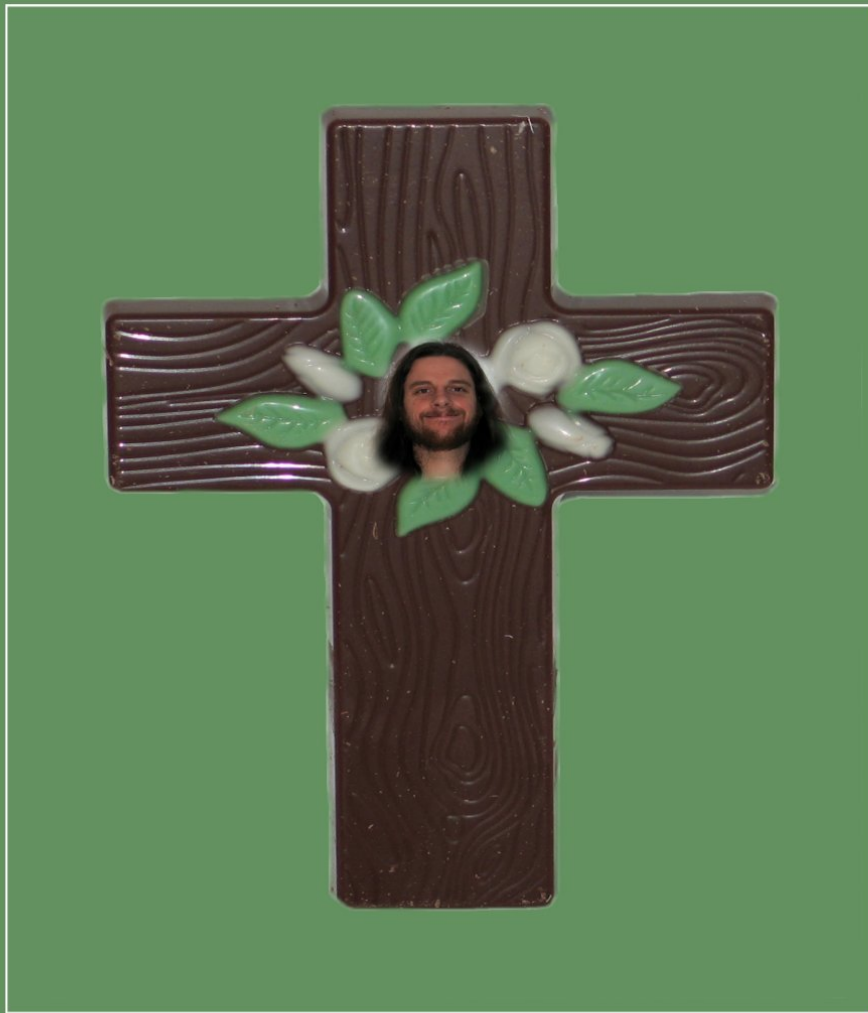


Fluent Heresy



Ryan Cragun

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ISBN Pending

Date: August, 2005

Publisher: Lulu, Inc. <http://www.lulu.com/>

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Introduction

It took some time to realize it, but when I initially left the Mormon Church, after having spent the first 25-26 years of my life as an adherent, I felt angry because I felt I had been intentionally deceived. There are a number of ways to understand deception in this case. The Mormon Church doesn't consider what it does deceptive. They feel that Mormon history should be uplifting and faith-building and if some facts are lost in the telling of that history, than so be it. This is an interesting stance coming from a religion that claims to seek the truth.

As Altemeyer and Hunsberger point out in their book *Amazing Conversions*,¹ it sometimes happens that religions impress the idea of truth-seeking so deeply into the psyches of their members that those same members then turn that pursuit of truth on the religion itself. In many cases, the religion fails to live up to its own standards. When this happens, those truth seekers leave.

While it certainly sounds better to say I was pursuing truth than to give another reason for leaving the religion (like having committed some grievous sin, which is a favorite accusation of many Mormons so they can maintain their worldview that only sinners leave), it is also the case that I can only claim that motivation. There is no way to confirm whether I left Mormonism because I was seeking truth or because I 'sinned' (though asking my wife, who left with me, should provide some evidence). Anyway, the point is, I was raised to believe that the only thing that mattered was the pursuit of truth. What's more, Mormonism claims to have more truth or to be 'truer' than any other religion (e.g. D&C 123:12). As it turns out... That isn't really accurate.

Thus, when I speak of deception and the multiple ways in which it can be understood, I am particularly interested in how a religion that claims to seek the truth can also justify 'lying for the Lord' to its own membership. When you begin to pry under Mormonism's hard carapace and dig through the soft tissue underneath, you find some nasty little secrets, including numerous instances of deceit by the leadership of the religion. For instance, polygamy was introduced among the leadership of the Church as early as the Nauvoo years, around 1838-1840 (and was possibly practiced by Joseph Smith as early as the Kirtland years). These activities were kept secret and even denied for almost 13 years before being revealed to the regular members in 1853, yes, the members, not just the general public.

Incidents like the one above left an acrid taste in mouth. I did not want to belong to a religion that condoned and even practiced deceit. But the real

¹ Altemeyer, Bob and Hunsberger, Bruce. 1997. *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion*. Prometheus Books.

kicker is that the religion also sweeps under the rug its instances of deceit. I was told of Joseph Smith's miraculous 1820 vision hundreds of times in Church but was never told about his money digging activities. If the Church's message was the truth, historical strikes against it would not matter: truth is truth!

I was angry when I realized that Mormonism's self-applied label of 'truth-seeker' turned out to be an instance of false advertising. That anger needed a way to play itself out. Since I try not to misdirect my anger (though my wife can attest that I don't always succeed in this endeavor), I turned to venting my feelings and frustrations through writing. Long story short – which is, after all, the format of the book – I wrote a variety of essays and short stories touching on some of the different elements of Mormonism I found particularly disturbing. These elements range from the dishonest approach to history to its stance on homosexuality to its outdated conception of sexuality. All of the stories are, in one way or another, critical of religion generally or Mormonism specifically.

I should note that writing these stories was cathartic, which, in retrospect, was at least part of the goal in writing them. I no longer feel raging anger at the deceptive practices of Mormonism. Anger, like most emotions, subsides over time. But more importantly, I have come to terms with my new life and my old one. This doesn't mean I am longer critical of Mormonism or religion in general; I still am. But I try not to be hypocritical by condemning intolerant practices and beliefs. If Mormons find their religion appealing and see no reason to question its practices or self-presentation, that is their prerogative.

With the rationale for writing these stories laid bare, I have but one more goal in this introduction – encourage the reader to keep an open mind. I have made no effort to soften the stories contained herein; they present the issues as I saw them while I wrestled with them. Some of the stories hold the potential of making you as uncomfortable as walking into church and exposing yourself spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. Such an expose would be mild in comparison to what one might find if religion also exposed itself. But until that day, I'll continue write my *Fluent Heresy*.

Chapter 1: Fire Insurance Ensured

Part I.

"Eric, can I talk to you?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Um, well, not here, actually. You mind if we go for a drive?"

I nodded but began to wonder why normally vibrant Bishop Johanson seemed a bit nervous. He was a large man and sweat came to his brow rather easily, but he was sweating more than usual for some reason. Brother Erickson, the ward clerk, looked at us strangely as we left the clerk's office and headed toward Bishop Johanson's car.

Sacrament meeting had been over for about an hour and I was just finishing up updating the Elder's Quorum home teaching assignments on the computer when the bishop approached me. Walking through the nearly deserted building with a nervous bishop began to make me nervous. *Had I done something wrong recently that I hadn't repented for? Did I pay my tithing in full last month? Was there something wrong with my family or my younger sister on a mission?*

Bishop Johanson was walking quickly, which was unusual. He always lumbered like a bear. The ward teddy bear is what he was; always there to help and always happy. Something must really be wrong, I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him this somber. I thought I might be able to break the silence by approaching it head on, "What's going on? Is it something serious?"

Bishop Johanson slowed for just a second to fleetingly catch my eye, "I'd rather tell you once we're in the car." He quickly looked away and continued at his hurried pace. I suddenly realized that an anxious bishop can make anyone a penitent saint. Was he this upset about something I had done? Suddenly, I was racking my soul for whatever grave misdeed could have caused my bishop to become so serious.

Then a thought occurred to me: It couldn't really be something that serious if he wasn't taking me to his office, could it? I mean, doesn't all confidential discussion have to take place in the bishop's actual office? He must have something important to tell me, but it's just private and he doesn't want anyone to potentially overhear him. My conditioned guilt pangs began to subside as we exited the building and walked toward his Lexus. He triggered the keyless entry and motioned for me to get in.

He started the car, backed out of the stall, and headed for the parking lot exit. It wasn't until we were almost a mile away before he began, "Eric, what exactly did you hear while you were sitting in the clerk's office this afternoon?"

I couldn't help but wrinkle my brow. What in the world was he talking about? What had I heard while in the clerk's office? I was surprised so I did what any well-trained future Mormon leader would do, I stalled for time, "Um, well, Brother Erickson was telling me about Sister Stevens in the hospital. He said that she wasn't doing so well after her surgery and her family thought she might not pull through. Uh, I also overheard Brother Bagley and Brother Esperanza talking about, um, what was it... I think it had to do with someone's temple recommend and potentially someone being excommunicated, but I didn't hear a name."

"So, you didn't hear anything that you shouldn't have?" queried the bishop.

"Well, I'm sure I wasn't supposed to hear the thing about the temple recommend, it really isn't any of my business. Is that what you mean?" I replied.

"That's all you heard; nothing else?" His anxiety looked like it was climaxing, but believing that I had done nothing wrong, I didn't really know what to say.

"I'm sorry, bishop, you're just kind of putting me on the spot. I wasn't really paying attention to most of it, other than when Brother Erickson and I were talking so it's taking me a minute to think through what happened this afternoon." I paused for a second and then remembered the one thing that should have occurred to me right away, "I do... I do remember hearing some raised voices coming from your office. Is that what you are referring to?"

The look on his face was hard to read. He was looking at me intently and his eyes had narrowed just slightly. I think his anxiety had subsided, but I wasn't sure what had replaced it. He was also spending more time looking at me than at the road. As a result, he was making gradual swerves over the center line. Thank goodness the neighboring ward was still in Church.

Then, strangely, everything went back to normal; it was jovial Bishop Johanson again. He smiled, nodded boyishly and bounced his eyebrows. "Well, Eric, I want to apologize for that. You see, there was a little misunderstanding and it really is never fitting for a servant of the Lord to get upset like that. I lost my cool and, well, I think I said some things that I probably shouldn't have, but it was all because I was upset. So, I just wanted to make sure things were okay."

His apology was even more bizarre than his initial anxiety. Not sure how to respond, I tried empathy, "Well, we all lose our cool. I mean, even God loses his temper occasionally. Don't worry about it."

He kept up his jovial demeanor but something was different. Subtle hints were beginning to give away that this wasn't real; he was acting. He was still breathing heavily, but he wasn't trying to cover it up by smiling. The crow's feet in the corners of his eyes were still taut from whatever had upset him;

normally they were wrinkled in laughter. The sweat was still beaded heavily on his forehead, despite the air conditioning in the car. He wasn't really jovial; he was pretending.

"Well, I just wanted to make sure everything was all right. And your attitude about it is, well, it's great. You're right, I'm sure every church leader has gotten upset at some point and done some things they shouldn't have. So, we're okay?"

I nodded and he turned the car around and headed back for the Church. "You know, bishop, you really had me going there for a minute."

His eyes flashed narrowly for a minute as he looked at me then the 'happy face' returned, "Oh yeah? How so?"

"Well, I thought I must have done something recently that you were aware of that I hadn't confessed or that was more serious than I thought. I mean, I was really doing some serious soul searching while we walked to your car. I was really nervous." I thought telling him that might bring things back to how they normally were between us.

He put on a slightly different face, it was the understanding bishop's face when they are about to listen to a confession, "Is there something that you *should* tell me? I've seen you with a new girl; is there something going on that shouldn't be?"

"Well, if kissing suddenly became a sin, then perhaps I should tell you about that, but I've never felt guilty about kissing a girl before and I don't now." I was actually surprised that I was talking so openly about kissing a girl in front of my bishop. I was an adult and a returned missionary, but he was still old enough to be my father.

I continued trying to further return things back to normal, "If I had a nickel for every time my parents had gotten upset over money or yelled about money, I'd be giving Huntsman a good race for tithing donations to the Church."

The car slowed down suddenly and the anxious Bishop Johanson that I had just recently met returned, "I thought you said you hadn't heard what was said in my office?"

We were just outside the Church parking lot now. "I, I didn't say I hadn't heard what you said. I wasn't really paying attention, but I caught the word money enough times to realize that whatever was going on was over money."

He was serious again, but not quite as serious as before. "Right, well, Eric, I'm sure you can understand that the stuff that takes place inside the bishop's office is supposed to be confidential. I would appreciate it if you just kind of forgot about the whole thing."

"Sure." It was certainly a strange request to make explicit. Even when I heard the outbreak I had no intention of telling anybody about it.

He pulled back into his parking stall and turned off the car. "Eric."

I looked up at him.

"I'm really sorry about getting upset."

"It's really not a problem." This was getting very uncomfortable. I didn't know what else to say so I suddenly remembered that my mom was preparing dinner. "I need to get going. Some family is coming over for dinner tonight and I need to help get stuff ready." I didn't actually have to help. It was a small lie, but I doubted I'd burn in hell over it. Of course there was the added weight of the lie being to a judge in Israel, but giving the tension, I'm fairly confident this lie would fall into the 'little white' category. Either way, I knew it would get me out of the situation; family dinner on a Sunday night holds a lot of sway in Mormondom.

We got out of the car and walked back into the building together. I had to pick up my PDA and teaching manuals that I had left by the computer. I was parked on the other side of the building so I'd have to go through it anyway. When I walked into the clerk's office, Brother Erickson and Bishop Johanson exchanged a strange look, as though they were saying something to each other and Brother Erickson gave a slight nod. Something strange was going on and I was pretty sure that I had somehow just become part of it. I grabbed my stuff and left.

Part II.

I mulled things over all the way home from the church. Why was Bishop Johanson so nervous about me overhearing what went on in his office? I tried to recreate as much of the conversation as I could from my vague recollection of it. Brother Kiserp was with whom the bishop was arguing. Was that important? I recalled hearing the words 'tithing' and 'money' a lot, so at least some of the argument had to have been about those two things. Of course everyone in the ward knew that Brother Kiserp was loaded; he was the ward multi-millionaire. So, unless he had recently had a nasty turn of luck, which didn't seem obvious by his behavior, I couldn't see why there would be a problem with his tithing. And why would the bishop be yelling about it?

Brother Kiserp had only been in the office for a couple of minutes before Bishop Johanson had called in Brother Erickson. Brother Erickson went in for a minute or two, came back out and searched through some files in his briefcase for a minute, then returned. That seemed to calm things down and eventually Brother Kiserp had apologized and left.

Parents fight about money. Businessmen fight about money. Well, pretty much everyone fights about money. But, why would the bishop be

fighting about money? This was God's Church; He only needed the money to teach us, his followers, humility. I mean, as far as I knew the Church wasn't hurting for money. Maybe Brother Erickson had made a mistake on Brother Kiserp's tithing statement and Brother Kiserp had caught it. You know what they say about the wealthy, they only get that way by being miserly. He probably counted every single penny that went in and out of his bank accounts. But if Brother Erickson had made a mistake why didn't he need to use the computer to fix it? Why did he have whatever he needed to solve the problem in his briefcase? There were plenty of filing cabinets in the clerk's office, why weren't the files in a cabinet?

I toyed with all sorts of scenarios but just couldn't believe any of them. I have a very fanciful imagination and picturing Bishop Johanson as a sleeper member of al Qaeda who was stealing money from the Mormon Church to finance terrorism just didn't work. But I couldn't get over Bishop Johanson's reaction to the argument; why had he been so concerned that I had overheard him? It really wasn't my place, but what if I just went down to the Church later that night and looked at my file and my file only. I had the right to look at my records, didn't I? If there wasn't a problem with my tithing record then I would just assume that there was a slight accounting error and that everything was alright now.

I continued to explore possible scenarios for another hour or so while waiting for dinner. I finally had to tell myself to stop. My fantasies and ruminations had a way of getting out of hand. By the time my aunt and uncle arrived I was imagining that Bishop Johanson and Brother Erickson were employed by a business that was in competition with Brother Kiserp's and they were using his tithing as a measure of his income because they were going to sue him for embezzlement. I decided I'd go to the church after my relatives had gone home and settle the matter. If I didn't find anything, then I would let it all go.

Three hours later I let myself into the Church. It was eerie how I was looking over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me. The bishop lived almost a mile away from the building. Besides, I had come up with a pretty good alibi. In my hurry to get out of the uncomfortable situation I had left the home teaching assignments printout in the clerk's office. I didn't really need it right away, but the Elder's Quorum President had called me just as dinner was ending wanting to know what changes we had made.

I walked quickly down the dark hallway to the clerk's office. I had thought about whether I should bring a flashlight or just turn on the light, but figured that if someone saw a flashlight waving around through the window they would definitely call the cops. Turning on the light would give my presence away, but if I wasn't doing anything wrong then what would it matter.

I opened the clerk's office door very slowly; I had a strange premonition that I was going to find the bishop sitting inside, in the dark, waiting for me. I flipped

on the light and found nothing. But there was one problem; I had hoped that the blinds would be closed so even though people could tell there was someone in here, they wouldn't be able to see who it was or what I was doing. No such luck. They were wide open.

I walked over to the printer and found my print out. Brother Erickson must have seen it because it had been torn off of the printer and stacked neatly beside it. I normally just made photo copies of the printout for the rest of the Elder's Quorum Presidency but tonight I would let the Church foot the bill to give me a reason to be in here for a few more minutes as I found my file. I turned on the computer, waited for it to boot up, searched through a few screens and found the report that I wanted to print. I told the computer to print three more copies and waited for the printer to start noisily screeching across the pages before I started snooping.

I sat back in the computer chair and looked at the filing cabinets. There were three of them, lined up neatly. I didn't want to poke through anyone else's records so I looked to see if the cabinets had information on the outside of the drawers that would lead me directly to my file. I eventually found the cabinet that had the 'C' records in it. I checked out the angle between the window and the cabinets and realized that someone would have to be standing right outside the window and looking in at a very odd angle to be able to see me going through the cabinet. This bolstered my courage and I made my move. Nonchalantly I stood up, pretended to stretch my back, my arms, and then my legs. I walked around for a minute or two as though I were waiting for something, which I was. Thankfully the printer was very slow. I still had another five or six minutes before it finished printing.

As I walked around, pretending to stretch, I casually made my small circles larger and larger until I ended up by the filing cabinets. Situating myself outside of the view of most of the window, I opened the drawer marked 'C-E' and quickly scanned through the files. Just in front of my father's file was mine, 'Eric Clayman'. I eased it out carefully, and a silly thought hit me - my fingerprints would be on the filing cabinet and my file. I wanted to dismiss it as ridiculous. I mean, can you imagine the police dusting down the filing cabinet of the local Mormon Church's clerk's office? But since the thought had occurred to me, I pulled out my handkerchief, wiped clean the handle of the drawer I had touched, then wiped the top of my file clean where I had touched it. I then used the handkerchief to situate the file on top of the cabinet where I carefully opened it.

Sitting on the very top was my tithing record from last year. I couldn't believe it. It was wrong.

I'm a poor college student, and, well, a begrudging tithing payer. I knew exactly how much I had paid in tithing last year and the amount in my file was almost four hundred dollars less than I had paid. The date on the report showed that it had been printed during the last week of December. I hadn't

paid anymore tithing after that date. It even had the bishop's signature where he had signed it during my tithing settlement interview. It must be a mistake. Surely I wasn't remembering things correctly or, or.... Or what? It really wasn't a big deal. I knew how much I had paid, why would it matter if there was a mistake in here? God kept his own records, didn't he?

But there was one other thing that I could do. I knew about how much my father's salary was. He also went to the temple quite regularly which meant he was a full tithe payer. I closed my file, slid it back into place, and gently removed my father's file. Opening it slowly I found a very similar tithing report sitting on the top of the file. My father made almost eighty-thousand dollars per year. That would translate into eight thousand dollars in tithing. There it was, staring me in the face - five thousand three hundred eighty two dollars and sixty-four cents.

My mind was racing again. I wanted to give the bishop the benefit of the doubt. It was possible that my father paid tithing only on the money he earned after taxes, but that would still be almost a thousand dollars less than what should have been in the file. I closed the file, slid it back into place and pushed the drawer closed. It clicked loudly as I heard, "Hi Eric."

Part III.

Standing in the doorway to the clerk's office was Bishop Johanson. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. I was guilty to the core. My hand was pinching my handkerchief and was still holding the handle to the filing cabinet. The printer that had been so busily screeching away as it printed my reports was silent. The reports lay in a tumble on the floor.

He knew exactly what I had been doing just as I knew what he had been doing. He was a principal at a local middle school. That didn't pay enough to afford a Lexus. He took extravagant vacations with his family several times a year. No one ever questioned where the money came from. He was, after all, the bishop.

"You find something interesting in those *confidential* files?" It was a rhetorical question. Or, if it wasn't, it quickly became one; I was too dumbfounded to respond. He continued, "I thought we had an understanding, Eric. You're young; you're supposed to be trusting and you're not supposed to be worrying yourself about the financial situation of the Church."

I finally got up the courage to respond. Trying to recover any composure I might have left, I pulled my hand off the cabinet and put my handkerchief away, "I don't think it is the financial situation of the Church that is the problem."

He cut me off quickly, "Oh but it is. You're informed enough to know that the Church makes more money per year than does Nike. The Church has

plenty of money, Eric. And if tithing just happens to be a little low this year in the prosperous Evergreen Ward, it isn't going to hurt the Church's bottom line. Our ward still pays more in tithing than any other ward in the stake. The Church is not hurting for money, Eric."

I realized that my caution in opening the cabinet was actually going to work against me at this point. If the outcome of this situation wasn't a good one, there would be virtually no evidence that I had been in here this evening. Brother Erickson could testify that I had been in there earlier that day working on the computer and that was why my fingerprints were on the computer and keyboard. But there wouldn't be fingerprints anywhere else, just like it was supposed to be. I quickly palmed the top of the filing cabinet where I had laid the files, hoping to leave some record of my visit.

I had no illusions that there would be a simple solution to this confrontation, but I had to at least try to talk him out of whatever he was planning, "So... you were hurting for money, and so was Brother Erickson. Skimming a little off the top of the tithing wouldn't be a big deal then, would it?"

"I always knew you were bright, Eric. The problem is what do we do now? You know something that I really can't afford for you to know. I could offer to pay you off, but then you would become just as guilty as I am, and that just won't work for a 'Peter Mormon' like yourself, would it?"

This was taking the wrong road. He had just ruled out me being quiet about the whole thing which meant he had something else in mind.

"Look, bishop, I can pretend that this never happened..."

"And live with the guilt? I would never want that for you, Eric. Besides, I don't think you could do it. Nope, there is a better solution."

I was pretty sure I didn't want to know the solution he was thinking of. I slipped around the side of the filing cabinets near the door into his office.

"Eric, that door only locks on the other side. Go ahead and try it. I always lock it before I leave at night."

I was actually thinking surprisingly rationally despite the dread I knew lingered just out of sight. I hadn't actually intended to use the door; I just wanted to get on the opposite side of the filing cabinets from him. I figured that at the bare minimum it would give me more time to diffuse this situation and handle him if he attacked. But once I got to the other side of the cabinets I realized that if I could get my foot on the door I might be able to use it as leverage to wedge myself against the cabinets and topple them.

"Go ahead, try the door." He smiled.

I turned my back on him and pretended like I was trying the door. But just as quickly I brought my foot up on the door and lunged backwards against

the cabinets. Surprisingly they did just as I hoped and tilted back then fell over. It hurt like hell, but I was hoping it had bought me at least a few seconds.

I jumped back up to find Bishop Johanson holding his right arm and cursing. The corner of the first cabinet had gouged his arm, tearing a gash in both his shirt and his skin. Blood was oozing slowly out of the wound. He was still blocking the doorway but I figured he would be. I grabbed the computer chair and swung it at the window with all the strength I could muster. The window cracked heavily, but didn't shatter.

I looked over my shoulder. Bishop Johanson was fully aware of what I was trying to do now and he was fumbling in his right pants pocket with his left hand for something. I swung the chair again and had better luck. There were still a lot of shards in the frame, but I didn't care. I didn't know exactly what he had in his pocket, but I could guess. I dove through the jagged window frame into the bushes outside just as the gun fired.

I landed hard and had another strange thought - this seemed an awful lot like Joseph Smith falling out of Carthage Jail when he was shot. What a time to compare myself to 'The Prophet.' At least in my case there wasn't an angry mob waiting to finish me off outside... or so I thought.

I scrambled to my feet and ran as fast as I could to the closest possible corner of the building so the bishop couldn't get a shot at me. I heard him knock out some of the glass just as I was nearing the corner of the building. He fired once and I made the corner, but ran right into Brother Erickson.

I'm not a very big man, but Brother Erickson is even smaller than I am and he's almost seventy years old. Lucky for me he lost our encounter before it even started. I slammed into him hard and ran right through him. My chin hit his forehead and I bit deeply into my tongue but I was still on my feet. The pistol he had in his hand landed several yards away on the concrete sidewalk.

I made for my car as fast as I could and dug into my pants pocket for my keys. I opened the door and started the car. While it revved alive I looked to where I had run into Brother Erickson. He was still laying flat on the ground, not moving. I slammed the car into reverse and pulled out as quickly as possible. Just as I got it into first gear, Bishop Johanson turned the corner. I slammed on the gas and popped the clutch. It was too much for my little Civic; it jerked forward and died.

Bishop Johanson was making his way toward me as I started the car again. He fired once, shattering the window just behind me. I always doubted a car door would stop a bullet but I ducked down inside the car anyway as I let out the clutch and pushed on the gas. He fired again, it slammed into the car but I couldn't tell where. I was moving and trying to remember where the exit to the parking lot was in relation to where I had parked. As I picked up speed I poked my head above the dash and corrected for the exit. Several more shots

tore into my car, one shattered the rear window and the others hit the rear of the car. I picked up more speed and shot out of the exit.

Part IV.

When I ran into Brother Erickson I broke several of his ribs and knocked him unconscious. One of the ribs pierced his lung and he suffocated before an ambulance could get to the Church. Bishop Johanson left him there. He took off in his Lexus but was caught by police only a few hours later for speeding. He was headed south, passing through Cedar City when a highway patrolman pulled out behind him. Bishop Johanson tried to outrun the highway patrol, but to no avail. They eventually blew out his tires.

Between the two they had taken nearly seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars in just under two years time. Former Bishop Johanson was sentenced to five years in prison, but only served 33 days before he hung himself. Sometimes the shame that accompanies a fall from grace in Mormondom disturbs me... Sometimes it doesn't.

Chapter 2: Going Under

By T.G. Woden

Day 270:

The rabbits continue to behave normally. No adverse effects have been noted. Jekyll and Hyde, the two Golden Retrievers, are also behaving normally, though they do not seem to be sexually interested in each other as they were prior to going under. I must look up sexual cycles for canines to determine if it was the treatment or if this is normal for them.

Phoenix, unlike the rest of the animals, seems disturbed. She has been acting up lately; calling out and refusing her normal food. She goes under tonight. Perhaps I am attributing to her unique behavior some sort of premonition of what is to come, but she does seem unsettled.

Day 271:

Minor problem arose while Phoenix was under; Sarah from school came by. Though there was a positive side to the interruption in that I was able to determine that the program functions perfectly well on its own and did not need any intervention on my part, I am troubled that Phoenix was left inside the chamber for so long after being brought back. She was confined within the insulation for thirty minutes longer than I have left the others. Physiologically she does not seem to be affected by the experience, but she continues to behave erratically. Instead of calling out, like she was doing yesterday, she sits very quietly in her cage. She is also refusing food. If she goes more than a couple of days I will have to administer the food intravenously.

All the other animals are fine.

On an interesting side note, Sarah wanted to know why I was not as involved at school as I used to be. She said she noticed the change a while back and thought I might be in a slump. Apparently she thinks that depression is quite common among graduate students but she became really worried when my lack of involvement and demure moods continued for longer than, in her estimation, is typical. I guess she had been interested in getting to know me better before I started acting differently. She is very beautiful and I think I would like to get to know her better, but I told her it would have to wait another ten days or so. I explained that I was deeply involved in a project and that was why I was not as involved at school; the project is very demanding. She wanted to know what the project is but I promised her I would tell her when we go out in ten days.

Day 272:

Phoenix continues to refuse food. She sits quietly in her cage. She barely moves. I wish I had another chimp to run through the treatment to determine if it was the actual treatment or the time in the insulation afterward that has so affected Phoenix. Unfortunately monetary constraints have allowed for only a single chimpanzee. If she does not eat by tomorrow, I will insert an IV.

All other animals are fine.

Day 273:

I found one of the new born rabbits dead today. It was fine yesterday. The autopsy revealed severe internal damage, as though the rabbit had been beaten. However, there was no visible sign of violence on the outside of the rabbit. And the extent of the damage would imply a much larger animal had grabbed hold of the animal and either smashed it into something or squeezed it until it was dead. Very strange. Since all of the animals are separated by such distances, it is hard to imagine that another animal could have gotten hold of the rabbit. When I found the rabbit it was in one corner of the rabbit cage and all of the rest were in the other corner. Because I have tried not to project human feelings on the animals, I am refusing to consider their behavioral response as a type of fear, but if I could project feelings on their behavior, they do seem to be 'afraid'.

Phoenix, though not as lively as she was before going under, has begun eating again and seems to be behaving more like she did before the treatment.

Other than the rabbits behaving as though they were scared, all other animals are fine.

There was one other hitch that occurred today. After school I went to refill the nitrogen and oxygen tanks. The person that helped me had serviced the tanks for me before. Apparently he had done some checking on things and wanted to know why I needed so much liquid oxygen and nitrogen. I told him that I was working on a project at home that required them; he did not seem satisfied. He seemed to think that projects that require chemicals and such should be regulated and with all of the chemicals that I had purchased from them over the past year I could be doing something very dangerous. I did my best to convince him that I was not engaged in anything dangerous. I think it worked when I told him that it involved computers because he does not really know all that much about them. In a sense the project does involve computers, but it is obviously not the focus. I also reassured him that it would not be much longer, that the project would be finished in another month or so and then I would not be purchasing any more gases or chemicals. He seemed reluctantly satisfied and gave me what I needed.

Day 274:

All the animals are fine.

I reset the chamber and tested all of the equipment. All of the backup systems were operating correctly. I even introduced one of the fifteen possible errors - some programming achievements that I am quite proud of - and the system responded perfectly.

Day 275:

Phoenix ate only half of her food today. She seemed to be reserved and withdrawn again. I am not sure what causes this. Another physical exam revealed nothing wrong with her.

All of the other animals are fine.

I went to church. It is hard attending a church when you don't really agree with a lot of the teachings. My calling, teaching the fourteen and fifteen year olds, keeps me going back though. I try to help the kids I teach understand that there might be other perspectives to religion and sometimes incorporate them into the lesson, but I feel guilty when I get too much into stuff that is not in the lesson manuals. I have learned that I have to dichotomize myself and teach only the 'believing half' of my thoughts. Perhaps believing is too strong. It would be more accurate to say the 'hoping half' of my thoughts. I 'hope' that I have not spent years of my life attending a church in vain. I 'hope' that two years spent serving the aims of the Mormon Church were not in vain. I 'hope' that their teachings on the afterlife are not mistaken. I guess we'll see.

Day 276:

Another dead rabbit - description identical to the last one. I guess it is possible that the treatment caused the parent's gametes to mutate resulting in deformed offspring, but these young rabbits have not undergone the treatment themselves, they are just the offspring of the rabbits that did undergo the treatment. I am hesitant to think that they are hemorrhaging internally. The damage to their bone structure seems to rule that out. They must be getting crushed by something but I am unsure by what. In case it had anything to do with the arrangement of the cages and them possibly falling into a crack or something like that, I resituated the cages and double checked the animal arrangement. Everything still seemed fine. However, since this is a repeat occurrence, I am a bit more disturbed than the last time. If it happens again before Friday, I will postpone my treatment.

All of the other animals seem fine.

On a side note, I had a final exam at school today. My school work has suffered, but not as much as I thought it would. I passed, but not with my

usual A; I got a B+. It was still one of the highest grades in the class. I also saw Sarah again. She reminded me that we have a date in five days and that I am supposed to tell her about my project then. I confirmed the date and told her it would be good to be done with the project.

Day 277:

All of the animals seem fine.

Day 278:

Rechecked the systems and introduced several more pre-programmed errors into the system. All back ups worked. Two days and counting.

No problems with the animals. I think I will put an advertisement online to give the animals away when I am finished with the project. Though I have grown fond of having the animals around, the only ones that I would want to keep are Jekyll and Hyde. Getting rid of the animals is obviously not standard operating procedure and I should consider keeping them to determine the long term effects of undergoing the treatment, but once I am done, I would prefer to be done with it. Besides, I can always evaluate myself and the two dogs.

Day 279:

It rained heavily today and I think that is why the animals are a bit restless. Can't be certain but they seemed a little louder than usual. Other than that, they seemed fine.

I must admit that I am a bit nervous about tomorrow. I am unsure as to whether anyone has ever done what I am about to do. I am still planning on going to school. I don't think sitting around the house all day will help me keep my mind off of what I am planning.

Day 280:

Well, the big day is here. I normally write my notes in here after the treatment, but because it is going to be on myself this time I thought I should comment on how I am feeling - not that how I am feeling is at all related to how the other animals would have felt when undergoing the treatment, assuming they felt anything. I am still a bit nervous but will meditate prior to beginning the treatment to calm my nerves.

If something goes wrong, I'm assuming people will find this. If that is the case, I want to apologize to my parents. They will undoubtedly be upset by all of this. I am sorry. I just wanted to know for myself what it is like. And, I thought that my experiments could help shed some light on what it is like. If I

don't come back tonight, Sarah, I am sorry about the date and the fact that I chose you to find me. Please forgive me.

Final words... You would think that me being completely coherent prior to risking my life in the name of science I would have something profound to say. All I can think of is: 'I hope I make it back. But if I don't, I hope I have pushed humanity forward.'

--

It is 10:33 pm on day 280 and I am alive. I don't know that I can explain adequately what I have just been through. I am still shivering and sweating at the same time. I don't know if that is because my core temperature is still low and just my extremities are hot or what, but it is a very strange feeling. I will try to take you all the way through what happened.

At the pre-determined time, around 7:20 pm, I situated myself in the insulation bag with the 'umbilical cord' passing through the top of the chamber and into the bag. All of the sensors were attached and the oxygen flow was fine. I began to meditate and had relaxed myself enough that when the lid closed and the coolant began to pour in, I was almost completely oblivious to it. I did, however, feel the chill and then became fully aware of what was happening. I was afraid at first, but that feeling disappeared quickly as I became so cold that I could not think straight. Then, darkness.

I'm not sure what happened. I thought I would experience something, but the next thing I remember was slowly coming to as the reverberations from the defibrillator ebbed throughout my body. I was groggy at first but remembered where I was and what was going on. I knew I would be a bit stiff from not having moved in almost two hours. I slowly unzipped the insulation bag and could see that the lid to the chamber was open. I carefully made my way to my feet and climbed out of the chamber and over to the monitoring station with the sensors still attached. I wanted to be sure that I recorded everything that was happening to my body before detaching the sensors. When my vitals had all returned to normal, I detached the sensors.

To be sure that the treatment had worked, I scanned through the sensory data and, sure enough, I had been dead for almost two hours. Of course, technically, I had been frozen and would not have been declared dead by a medical professional, but all neural and circulatory activity had stopped. My heart had stopped, my thoughts had stopped. I was for all intents and purposes dead. But I had no memory of experiencing anything while I was dead. No floating sensation; no leaving my body. No heavenly visitors, no anything, just darkness.

Perhaps I did something wrong. I would hate to consider this entire project a waste. Given the results, I am going to try it again to see if this were anomalous or if I can repeat my findings. I will try again Sunday evening.

Day 281:

I checked on all of the animals before going out with Sarah and also checked my vitals - everything seemed perfectly normal. I slept well after going under yesterday and then spent most of today resetting the equipment and cleaning the rest of the house.

I picked Sarah up at 7:00 and took her to the Blue Gibbon. She ordered vegetarian to go along with me, but I know that she isn't vegetarian. It was nice of her though. There was a stake dance for young single adults. Since I'm a graduate student and don't have limitless funds - most of my money goes to the feeding of the animals and buying the gases right now - I thought a free dance would be okay. She didn't seem to mind, though she did seem a little uncomfortable with the Mormon setting. She had never been to a Mormon church before and was definitely not expecting the atmosphere she found at the dance. It wasn't too bright, but well enough lit that you could actually see the person that you were dancing with. And the music, though a bit dated, was, for the most part mellow with occasional ballroom dance type music inserted. I taught her how to do the Swing and a very basic Cha-Cha before we got tired of the dance. I did see a few people that I knew, but most of the young single adults in Cincinnati are either undergraduates or very old and neither are groups that I particularly care to spend time with. Frankly, I don't particularly care to spend most of my time with Mormons, but I am still not completely comfortable in settings where people are drinking or smoking, so I have to work out a balance. After the dance we went back to my place to watch a movie.

Though my experience with women is limited, I would guess that what happened next is not all that uncommon. Half way through the movie she asked me if I was going to tell her about my 'project'. Of course, even though I didn't think the movie was great, I was still watching it and was annoyed that she would ask me that right in the middle of the movie. I tried to put it off and get her to watch the movie but I could tell that she would have been upset if I put her off any longer. So, I stopped the movie and explained that there had been a problem with the project. I had a setback and was going to have to re-run it. Until I had confirmed my findings, which were obviously not what I was expecting, I didn't really want to tell her about everything. She still seemed a little bothered by that and also mentioned that she could tell I was still distracted and not paying her my full attention during the night, but my explanation was enough to get us through the rest of the movie with her eventually cuddling up next to me.

I don't really understand how other people's standards work, but Sarah probably would have been willing to spend the night. We had known each other for almost two years now, entering graduate school together, but I just didn't feel right about it. I did have church the next day and it just would not have worked. I finally took her home at around 2:00 and kissed her goodnight. I

probably wouldn't have had she not pretty much demanded it. I told her that I had very much enjoyed the evening and would love to do it again. She was pretty blunt when she said that she would like me to finish my 'project' first before going out again so she could have my full attention. I understood. She still wanted to go out with me; she just didn't like it when I was so distracted.

Day 282:

Went to Church today. I had a kind of moral dilemma when the sacrament came around. It didn't have anything to do with Sarah, I was a perfect Mormon 'gentleman' with her. I was just wondering if I would be considered worthy if I had killed myself. I mean, suicide is looked down upon and considered a very grave sin in Mormonism. I had, in a sense, committed suicide. A day and a half earlier I had killed myself and then brought myself back to life; kind of Christ-like in a sense. I ended up taking the sacrament so people wouldn't think anything was wrong, but I never really resolved the dilemma. Sure, life was sacred, but that seemed so strange to me based on Mormon theology. Why would life be sacred if the eventual goal is to return to live with our Heavenly Father? Why shouldn't people be able to take their life if they are tired of living this one? I don't think I have ever understood that concept. I mean, sure, my case was a little different. I wasn't exactly trying to kill myself for good, just temporarily, but... Anyway, Church was very weird today.

I had resolved to replicate the experiment tonight so I came home and doubled check all of the equipment and systems. I had an idea though, just before I climbed into the chamber: Instead of meditating tonight, why not sing a hymn or recite scriptures? Would that make any difference in what I experienced?

I climbed into the chamber singing inside my mind the words to 'O My Father', one of my favorite Mormon hymns. The lid closed right on schedule and I felt the chill again, just like last time. However, this time, instead of everything closing to darkness and then just waking up on the other side, I woke up outside of my body. I was standing right next to the chamber and knew that my body was inside, dead. I was dead.

I studied everything around me and it all looked strangely different, as though it were lighter. I didn't realize it, but someone else was in the room with me. I walked over to the monitoring station and could see all of my vitals and the timer counting down to when the coolant would be gone and the heated water would begin to circulate in the chamber. I felt a hand on my back and turned around to see a very bright, almost shining young man looking at me. I didn't know who he was until he spoke. He was my grandfather. He gave me a hug, but when he pulled back he was very serious. He told me that what I was doing was not right. I was playing with one of God's most precious gifts and that, if I wasn't careful I might just not return.

I admitted to him that I knew he was right. I then looked at the timer and told him that I had almost forty-five minutes in earthly time before my body would be brought back to life. Would he be willing to show me what the after life was like? He seemed hesitant at first, as though he felt that he shouldn't, but he realized that all I was going to do if he didn't was try and explore it on my own, so he agreed.

Suddenly we were drifting upwards at a rate that was so blindingly fast that I couldn't follow it. In almost an instant we were in a different place, like a different dimension. There were lots of people, all dressed like him. They seemed to be waiting for something. I realized that what they were waiting for was my grandfather. He had been assigned to come down and talk to me and convince me to stop my experiments. These were all of my relatives and all of the people who were waiting for me. When they saw him return and realized that I was with him they were at first shocked but then rushed forward to meet us both. One person seemed to want to reprimand my grandfather but then changed his mind. I was introduced to many people that I had never heard of. Most of them said they were ancestors of mine that had lived a long, long time ago. They told me not to worry about doing the work for them prior to the millennium because it would be impossible to find a record of their birth or death, but that during the millennium their information would be given to mortals on earth and the proper priesthood ordinances would be performed for them. I also met people whose temple work I had done. There were a lot of them because I had gone to the temple so many times after my mission while still living in Ogden. They thanked me profusely and their relatives did as well.

All of this was amazing, but the most remarkable experience of all was when I met my future children. There were three of them: Steven, Chad, and Kelli. They told me that I was going to marry Sarah after she converted to Mormonism and that they would be coming along some time down the road. They were wonderful and it made me very excited to return to earth to fulfill God's purpose for me.

My grandfather eventually called to me and told me that it was almost time to go. I asked him if there was anyone else that I could see while I was there, any prophets or famous religious people. He laughed and said that I had already met a future apostle; my son Steven was going to be an apostle. I was amazed. But then he said it was time to go. I wanted to stay because the feeling was so incredibly amazing being there, but I knew that I had a lot to do back on earth. I waved a very longing goodbye and was suddenly transported back into my earthly body. The transition was so sudden that I don't even remember traveling between heaven and earth. I was just suddenly there.

This time when I awoke and could feel the reverberations of the defibrillator shocking me back to life, I was not as groggy as the first time, but just lay inside the chamber in amazement, trying to recapture the euphoria of my experience.

I finally realized that I should try to follow the same procedure that I did last time to get comparable data, so I forced myself to get up and kept the sensors on until my vitals had all returned to normal. It took a bit longer this time because I was so excited. It was an amazing experience.

I felt like I was floating. I had died and gone to heaven and come back. It was just like so many other people had recounted from their 'near-death' experiences. Perhaps my project had been a success after all. I could tell people the truth. I felt that all of my participation in religion and Mormonism was not in vain. Joseph Smith was a true prophet and he had restored the word of God.

I am so excited. Sorry, I know I just switched tenses to the present, but that brings you up to now, when I am writing this. I am a little wired. I just feel like telling the whole world about my experience. I want to call up Sarah right now and tell her the whole thing and, well, I want to propose to her. Oh, it is just so hard to get all of this out without exploding from all of the excitement. I am too hyped up to look through the sensory data tonight. I'll check it tomorrow night. I'm going to go commune with my Heavenly Father.

Day 283:

I am such a fool. I am such a fucking fool. I should have realized it. I was on cloud nine all day today. Sarah noticed the change in my demeanor and wanted to know what had happened. I told her that I thought my project was a success but I wouldn't know for sure until I checked the sensory data tonight. Well, I just checked the sensory data and found out that there was a flurry of brain activity just before I died and just after I came back. The first time I went under there was no comparable activity. The activity was intense and my body responded to it as well. I have seen that kind of neural activity before. I was dreaming. I was in an intense dream state just before I died and the dream state continued when I came back. It only lasted for a couple of seconds total, but in that couple of seconds I experienced everything that I recounted last night.

Perhaps this whole thing isn't a failure. Perhaps this is what I was supposed to find out. I am not going to say anymore until I try it again.

Day 284:

I listed all of the animals except Jekyll and Hyde online for sale; well, not really for sale, I'm just giving them away. Twenty-three rabbits, a chimpanzee, and four cats. I doubt there will be any lasting effects for any of them from the treatments, but I can't be sure. I did find another dead rabbit this morning though; I really don't understand what that is all about. Hopefully the people that take them will treat them better than I did; I mean, not killing them and everything. I also let Jekyll and Hyde out. If they are going to remain as my pets, they should not have to live in the cages anymore.

I have also been thinking about what the sensory data means. I have a problem in trying to resolve it though. I think that what it means is that whatever it is you want the afterlife to be plays itself out for you as you are dying. If I could get a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Hindu or whatever in here, perhaps they might experience something similar - they would wake up having experienced whatever their conception of the afterlife is. The problem is that I think you truly have to believe it for it to play itself out as vividly as it did for me. I'm not sure how to resolve this issue yet. I'll have to give it more thought. Until I come up with a solution, I am not going to go under again.

Day 285:

I gave Phoenix away today. He went really quickly.

A few of the rabbits went as well and I got calls for most of the others. I also asked Sarah if she would like either Jekyl or Hyde. She said she probably would, but only if she could change the name. She ended up taking Jekyl and left me with Hyde. She changed his name to Byron and wanted to know why he was almost a year old and not housebroken. I told her I would tell her when I told her about the project.

I still haven't figured out how to resolve the project.

Day 286:

Got rid of the rest of the rabbits and the cats. I think getting rid of most of the animals has helped ease my conscience. Even though I became a vegetarian for health reasons, I always felt that the mistreatment of animals was another reason for my change in diet. Keeping animals for experiments kind of went against that notion, but now that they are gone and in good keeping, I don't feel nearly as bad about it. In a sense, having them around allowed me to succeed in the experiment in so far as I was able to bring myself back, twice. But I still feel a little guilty for having used them in such a fashion. I wonder what that experience was like for them.

I've thought a lot about the contradictions in the data and I think I might have an answer. I am going to have to consider it a bit more before I try anything though.

I also set up a date with Sarah, not for this weekend but the next. I told her that if I hadn't resolved the issues with my project by then that I would tell her about the whole thing. Who knows, maybe she will have the solution.

Day 287:

Working on house training Hyde. He makes for a good companion. I talked to my parents today. When they asked what I had been up to I lied and told them I was just going to school and that was keeping me busy. If anything ever comes of the experiment then I'll have to tell them, but not until then.

Day 288:

No school today, it's Saturday. I spent most of the day cleaning up the cages and getting them ready to sell. I've listed them online as well. I probably should have given them to the people that I gave the animals to, but I haven't been thinking straight lately. I've rented two movies for tonight and am going to treat myself to a personal favorite, Taco Bell and Mountain Dew. No one ever seems to understand why I like Taco Bell, but it is something that I can eat as a vegetarian and I think it just reminds me of good times growing up. Oh well, another night alone.

Day 289:

Church was really bad today. It was all I could do to keep myself from standing up and yelling to everybody, "This is all a lie. I know because I know what happens when you die." I'm not sure I want to go back or am going to go back. I've lost my faith. I may just set up an appointment with the bishop and let him know that I want to be released from my calling because I don't think I'll be coming to church for a while.

Called Sarah and talked to her for a little while. She wanted some help on some homework that is due and I told her I would help her tomorrow morning at school. Sarah is becoming a good friend.

Day 290:

Helped Sarah with her homework, but am no closer to resolving the problem with the project. Most of the cages are gone. A pet store owner came by and picked most of them up. I kept one for Hyde and one that I think I could use as a bird cage should I ever get a bird.

Day 291:

I've got it. I think I know how to resolve it. It hit me today as I was analyzing the sensory data. If this works then I will know. Will continue entry after going under...

The End.

Publisher's Note:

The previous account is a posthumous publication of T.G. Woden. He was pronounced DOA at Cincinnati University Medical Center at 9:37 pm on April 6, 2004. He was found asphyxiated in a water-filled, insulated casket in his basement on the same day. I received a pre-recorded phone call from Tom around 7:30 that evening. The message informed me that something had gone wrong with the project and that Tom was in need of assistance. It explained that the front door was unlocked and that Tom was in the basement. It also requested that I call emergency medical personnel.

When the message ended I called 911 and gave them Tom's address and briefly explained what they should expect to find. I raced to his house after communicating with the police and found the front door open, as Tom said I would. I found the door to his basement and descended into what one can describe only as 'a remarkable laboratory'. With the assistance of several of the professors in the biology department at the University of Cincinnati as well as several individuals in the department of Computer Science, we were able to discern what Tom's mysterious 'project' was.

Tom had developed a method of freezing animals and bringing them back to life. On his computer we found data for all of the animals that had 'gone under', as he called it. He had applied his treatment to twelve rabbits, four cats, two dogs, and one chimpanzee, all with remarkable results. None of them had died as a result of or during the treatment according to Tom's records. He also recorded full sensory information for all of the treatments on all of the animals, including all necessary vitals and brain activity information.

We also found that Tom had 'gone under' two times successfully prior to the third time which proved fatal. In accordance with his last will and testament, Tom wanted his journal logs published.

As a final note, an explanation of the events leading up to Tom's death is given here. It appears that Tom's third time 'going under' was also a success. However, upon being revived, Tom removed the breathing apparatus while leaving the sensors attached. Before asphyxiating within the insulation that protected the subject from the coolants, Tom whispered the following words, "I was wrong." This was picked up by a microphone that made up part of the 'umbilical cord' connecting the subject to the monitoring system. There is no previous record of Tom using the microphone, though it was used in recording the sounds that the animals made that underwent the treatment. It is unclear why Tom removed the breathing apparatus, but the lack of oxygen lead to his death.

Though the data continues to be analyzed, there have been no definitive findings.

Chapter 3: Heavenly Tours

"Go to Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company." - Mark Twain

"The streets weren't always paved with gold," whispered Steven.

"Why would they pave them with gold in the first place?" replied Brian using the same hushed tone.

"To convince the people of Heaven that it is better here than everywhere else."

With that, the back door to Heaven sprung open.

"I can't believe they only have a two-tumbler lock on the back entrance to Heaven," said Brian.

"Well, that's kind of a funny story. You see, the big man up here..."

"You mean God?" queried Brian.

"Well, we call him Bob, but yeah, that's who you would call 'god'. Anyway, this is actually Bob's secret door, the one he uses to get to hell."

"God goes to Hell?" Brian asked incredulously.

"All the time." Steven said it as though everyone already knew what he was saying. "Heaven is as boring as, well, as going to church. It just goes on and on. Not much changes. Nothing ever happens. I mean, Bob even got bored with it. Sure, they all bow down and worship him when they see him and that's a great feeling the first few times you have hundreds of thousands of people praising you, but it gets old. Sometimes you just have to get away. I'd say he spends more time in Hell than in Heaven now."

"Doing what?" This was almost too much for Brian to believe.

"Well, Luke usually entertains him for part of the time he is there. You know, Luke's pretty fun, lots of things going on all of the time. And, sometimes Bob just walks around and interacts with the people of Hell as though he were one of them. You may have even run into him or will someday. He's pretty cool." Steven drifted to silence.

"So, you were saying about the lock?" Despite his fascination with where he was and what Steven was telling him, he hadn't forgotten mention of the original story.

"Oh yeah, well, Bob occasionally forgets the keys to Heaven when he leaves. So, he had the lock on the back door made so he could easily pick it if

he needed to. You know, it doesn't look very good when the 'King of Heaven' has to knock on the Pearly Gates and get Peter to let him in. Bob can be pretty forgetful at times; he's getting pretty old. I mean, he completely forgot to tell Noah to build a separate arc for the dinosaurs. He spent millions of years designing these really cool reptiles and then killed them all off with the flood. He was pretty pissed about that."

They talked as they walked down a dimly lit white hallway, stopping short of a corner.

"Remember, if anyone asks, we're from the Southside. Take off the brown robes now."

Steven helped Brian out of the brown robes and helped him adjust the white clothing. The outfit was slightly too big for him, but was suitable.

"Do the people here know that most of their 'glow' actually comes from the fabric in their clothes?" Brian asked.

"No. And don't tell anyone either. That fabric is one of the major sources of income we have in Hell. That and the fluorescent/black combo lights that give them the rest of the glow. Especially the portable one's; damn those are expensive." Steven paused to take off his robe. "Now this is where the tour gets tricky. People here in Heaven don't actually do anything other than talk about how much better Heaven is than Hell; which is just them being deceived by Jesus, so don't get uptight about it. Anyway, we have to meander as though we have no place to go and pretend like everything we say is a put down to Hell. Got it?"

Brian nodded. Steven finished stuffing their brown robes into a bag and hid it in a perfectly carved niche in one of the walls that was marked 'Heavenly Tours'.

"Here we go."

They walked side by side another fifty feet, turned a corner and blinked into comfort in the blinding white light. As their eyes adjusted to the sham brilliance of Heaven, Brian saw hundreds of thousands of people, standing in small clusters, talking softly. The only noticeable movements were the gestures and movements people made as they discussed whatever it was they were discussing. Slowly, Steven led them into the midst of the inhabitants of Heaven.

Brian caught snippets of conversations as they passed the pockets of exalted individuals, "I heard that in hell people actually have to work," "When I was talking with Michael during the last eternity, he told me that people in hell get in arguments and don't know everything," "...and then God said, 'One day we'll just get rid of Hell altogether.'"

It was amazing. He couldn't help himself, "Steven, do these people ever leave?" he whispered it as softly as he possibly could.

Steven smiled as though he had just found out he was in Heaven, which, of course, he was. It was quite remarkable, actually, that Steven could give that impression through a simple smile thought Brian.

Steven responded, “Ask what you want, but you have to keep a smile on your face. No one is ever unhappy in Heaven. As for your question, other than Hell, none of these people even realize that there is an entire universe to explore outside of Heaven. They are so content that they were ‘right’ when they were mortals that they just stay here.”

Brian was catching on. With a smile he continued questioning his tour guide, “They don’t do anything but talk?”

“Well, occasionally someone famous will come out of Bob’s palace, you know, like Abraham or Moses or someone like that. The people all bow down to worship and the famous person will say something about how wonderful they are, blah, blah, blah. Then they go back into the palace. All of the really famous ones are in on it. Jesus is really the ringleader; all of this was his idea.”

“In on what?” Brian smiled, almost chuckled as he asked the question; he was fitting right in.

“Well, Jesus’s inner ring is made up of the ones that know that there is something outside of Heaven other than Hell. You see, billions of years ago when Bob was finished having kids, all of us were sitting around thinking of something to do. Luke came up with the idea of embodying ourselves mortally so we could experience what it is like to be born and die again. Bob really liked the idea, mostly because it would give him something to do; immortality can really get on your nerves. Bob and Luke worked out the whole evolution thing so complexity of life would get to a point where we could inhabit the bodies, be self-aware, and feel somewhat natural – it was a great idea. It would have been a lot of fun if Jesus hadn’t interfered and decided that he could make it into a test of the loyalty of Bob’s kids if they forgot everything when they took on mortality. He didn’t tell anybody about it, he just made that the side effect of being human when he was assigned to create humans. Well, once Bob found out, he had to agree to Jesus’s plan for religion because he couldn’t just abandon his kids forever. So, Jesus got to play god and create religion for whatever reason but this pretty much pissed off Luke who decided he was going to leave.”

“I thought there was a war?”

“War? Nah, Luke just left. He was sick of putting up with Jesus’s shit. So, now we have Heaven and Hell. I’m not sure anyone really knows what Jesus is up to, but he sure has a lot of people bamboozled into following him. If Bob didn’t care so much about his kids he’d have kicked Jesus out a long time ago. Anyhow, with Bob being able to leave whenever he wants and visit Hell he stays happy and isn’t bored anymore.”

Steven led Brian through the crowds for a while, pointing out Bob's palace and several famous mortals. Nothing changed. No excitement, no arguments, no conflict, just millions of people gossiping about Hell. Brian quickly realized that Heaven is a pretty boring place.

"Steven, is there anything else to see?"

"Not really. I can't get us into the palace, but other than that, this is about all there is to Heaven. Had enough?"

"Yeah, I think so. Strangely I feel kind of let down, as though there should be something more to Heaven."

"You'll get over it. Let's head back to the gate." They turned around and headed back through the milling people smiling all the way.

"So, did I mention we also do tours of Bob's brother's creations in Alpha Centauri? There's Vpoicyu, which I personally recommend. I can get you a good rate on that one..."

Chapter 4: Misattribution

"Can you imagine what it must have been like the first time? I mean, it couldn't be anything like it is now."

"The question is irrelevant and probably not answerable. Besides, how is asking that question relevant to what is about to happen?" Father Tomms asked. Father? No, not Father. Eric. He was going to be Eric again.

"It's not relevant. Why should it be relevant? That isn't really the point to conversation, is it, to always be relevant?" Father Woolsey could never concentrate on a subject for long. "But it will keep our mind off of 'what is about to happen!'"

The two priests were sitting outside a massive set of oaken doors mounted on ancient stone walls. It had been an interesting year since Bishop Cardon had introduced them to each other. Bishop Cardon thought they would be good for each other. He was right, but in the wrong way. Now he was responsible for their punishment. It was him they were waiting to see.

Unrelenting, Father Woolsey continued, "I mean, if you think about it, how would a primitive mind conceptualize such a remarkable concept? And did they have any notion of how much it would affect the history of the world, the history of their ancestors?"

"If you didn't ask such questions..."

"...you would." Cutting him off before he could finish what would undoubtedly have been a biting remark that was unintended but provoked by the stress of the situation, Father Woolsey finished the thought for him, "If I didn't ask the questions, you would. You know that and I know that."

"I'm sorry. I don't always consider the implications of my speech."

"Don't pretend piety. No one ever fully considers the implications of their speech." Matthew understood - strained moments can lead to painful dialogue; but good friends understand that kind of pain. "You still haven't answered the question, *Eric*."

"Hm... Eric... I am going to be Eric again." Eric paused before continuing, "It really isn't an answerable question, Matthew, but if you look at primitive - and I use the term hesitantly - religions that are still extant, very few have the same conception of God as does Western Christianity. My guess is that a misattribution was the origin of the idea and that it snowballed from there to the leviathan that religion is today."

"A misattribution... I wonder what it was." Both men paused in thought for a moment.

A robed cleric opened the massive doors beside them and silently beckoned for them to follow him.

"Perhaps we'll never know." Matthew smiled and took Eric's hand. They stood and followed the cleric through the doors.

Just inside the doors the brown-robed cleric stopped and waited for them to pass before closing the doors, draping the room in a thick light. Ahead of Matthew and Eric sat three more robed clerics, all in white. A fourth cleric, also in brown, sat off to their left and was busily scribing notes.

"Brethren, please come forward." The center cleric commanded; it was Bishop Cardon. He was not the oldest of the three, but he appeared the most sinister; as sinister as a man of the cloth can appear. And to Bishop Cardon there was reason to look sinister - he had been betrayed.

Matthew and Eric strode forward confidently, coming to a gentle stop several feet in front of the table that separated them from their fate.

Bishop Cardon spoke again, "It has come to our attention that you have been openly professing certain things; things that are not to be openly professed. Is there truth to this accusation?"

It was not really a question. Everyone present knew the truth of the accusation. Ritual demanded that they face their accusers; ritual demands silly things some times.

Matthew started, but Eric stopped him and took the lead, "We stand behind that which we have professed."

"Very well, read the accusations."

The lone cleric jotting notes finished what he was writing and stood. "In as much as Fathers Woolsey and Tomms have chosen to openly profess their belief solely in evolution and deny the role of God the Almighty in such; in as much as Fathers Woolsey and Tomms have chosen to openly profess their homosexuality; in as much as Fathers Woolsey and Tomms have chosen to decry the validity of the sacred word of God in his scriptures; in as much as Fathers Woolsey and Tomms have denied the infallibility of the Vicar of God, named Fathers, upon recognition of guilt will be de-robed." The cleric rolled the missive before handing it to Bishop Cardon and returned to his seat.

"You have already pled guilty to the accusations. Is there anything you would like to say?"

Eric was not fast enough to stop Matthew this time, "Bishop Cardon, do you know what led humans to believe in god?"

The room was not noisy before; it was still now.

"I don't know for sure, but I would guess it was a misattribution. Do you know what that means?" It was not really a question but rather a self-

invitation to continue his diatribe, so he continued, "Perhaps someone threw a rock in a lake and it started to rain. Or maybe someone called on the sun to stop the rain and it worked. Whatever it was, it was not a deity that descended from the sky through the vagina of a virgin. There is no God. And if there is no God there is no directive from heaven telling me with whom I can have sex or what I must believe. And since there is no God you have no entitlement to authority. We do not recognize your alleged authority as anything but a power-seeking and deceitful farce. We came today only to let you know that we do not fear your decision or your 'god'." The stillness had been rent with a voice that could have been mistaken for divine by those who believe in such things. It may as well have been divine for the result was the same.

Humbled by the outburst, Bishop Cardon quietly and quickly read the judgment, "You, Fathers Woolsey and Tomms, are no longer welcome among us. You must leave."

Nodding his head, Eric had but one more thing to say, "Divisiveness. Such is the result of the belief in a God. All humanity shall one day forgive our primitive ancestors for they knew not what they did."

Turning away from the council, the former fathers left the life they had always wanted and accepted the life they were always meant to have.

Chapter 5: Our Day of Glory

“Is this a joke? You’re joking with me, right?”

“No, I’m dead serious. This isn’t a joke. I wouldn’t kid about something like this. I swear I just saw on CNN that Christ was seen descending in Jerusalem. They don’t have footage because their reporters’ cameras aren’t working, but they *have* been able to get through on satellite phones. Christ was just seen in Jerusalem.”

“Alright, if you say so, I’ll be right over. Bye.” Still shaking his head in disbelief David realized that his heart was pounding. Could it be true? No, of course not. Stan was just playing a joke on him as he had so many times before. Of course, the only way to be sure would be to go over to his house and check it out on TV. David didn’t have a TV. When his broke last time he just got rid of it and decided not to buy a new one and now here he might have missed the Second Coming of Christ.

Grabbing his keys from the jar by the door David opened the door and out of force of habit turned around to lock it as he closed it. He paused for a second, realizing that if Stan was telling the truth there would be absolutely no need to lock his door ever again. Locking the door he put his keys in his pocket and hurried towards Stan’s house.

Stan was standing at the open door waiting for him. David passed him quickly and headed directly for the TV room. Directly in front of the TV he found Stan’s wife, Karen, holding their 8 month old baby boy, Matthew. Karen seemed transfixed; she didn’t even seem to see David come in the room. David was just about to say ‘hello’ when he saw the nearly frantic coverage of the breaking news on CNN. Behind the reporter, various renditions of Christ’s second coming were taking their turn on the screen. The news anchor was doing his best to maintain his composure, but the flurry of paper slips and the nearly constant buzz in his earpiece were just too much to maintain his normally calm demeanor.

David’s jaw opened, shut, then opened again. It finally shut again once he had collapsed into the voluptuous couch in front of the TV. A strange thought suddenly popped into his mind, ‘Maybe he shouldn’t have given Stan so much grief for having spent nearly three thousand dollars on this monstrous TV? After all, it was now bringing the Second Coming of Christ to him in high definition and almost as large as life.’

On the heels of the first irreverent thought came a second, nearly as irreverent, but much more on topic, ‘How could this be happening if the prophet hadn’t warned them?’ He couldn’t stop himself, he had to say it, “Stan,

even though I'm sitting her watching this in person I'm still not sure I can believe it's happening."

Stan wasn't taking advantage of the voluptuous couch; he was standing near his wife in silence, wonder, and awe. Of course, when he heard the question the magnitude of his awe increased tenfold. All he could manage was, "What?"

Gathering his courage David dropped his bomb, "Haven't we been told that as Mormons we would have foreknowledge of Christ's return? I mean, I swear I've heard that somewhere. And besides, not all of the prophecies have been fulfilled: no temple in Jackson County Missouri; no dead prophets in Jerusalem; the gospel isn't being taught in mainland China or Iran. It just doesn't fit." For emphasis he associated each of the prophecies he was quite positive had not been fulfilled on individual fingers; his list tallied three, but he was sure there were more, many more.

Stan could just shake his head, "Come on, man, it's on the freaking TV. Heck, it's on CNN of all stations; do you think they'd misreport something this big?"

David had guessed Stan would say this so he had been formulating his response while Stan spoke, "Look, I'm not saying that I'm not seeing this on TV. You remember the stories about the scare the broadcast of the War of the Worlds caused when they didn't admit that it was just a story?"

Stan just stared at him blankly.

"Okay, I wasn't alive then either, but I remember the stories. Anyway, how do we know that this isn't the same thing? I mean, I may not be a general authority, but I am a member of the Elder's Quorum Presidency. If the Second Coming were about to take place, we would have heard. You're in the bishopric for heaven's sake; you should have had at least two weeks notice if this were the real deal."

Stan didn't want to back down, but he had to admit that there was some logic to what David was saying. As he prepared his rebuttal, he remembered the talk he had given not two weeks ago about The Second Coming. The primary source for his talk had been an article written by M. Russell Ballard in the 1996 December Ensign. The quote popped right into his mind and he knew that David's argument was right, "Shit!"

"Stan!" Karen said it without batting an eye or moving from her position in front of the TV.

Out of habit Stan self-corrected, "Shoot. Sorry." Turning toward the kitchen, he hurriedly angled his way through and into his study on the opposite side. "I can't believe I'm admitting this, but I think you're right."

David got up and followed him into his study. He found him digging through a pile of Ensigns.

“I don’t actually need to find it because I memorized the quote I thought it was so cool. I mean, it pretty much laid it right out.”

“What quote?” David asked.

“What you just said, about the prophet having to know before anyone else. M. Russell Ballard said it in a talk in the Ensign.”

“So I did hear it somewhere?” David said, bordering on being smug about it.

“Well, yes, but it wasn’t because you read it in the Ensign; I know how much you read the Ensign. You heard it in my talk two weeks ago.”

“Well, Mr. Doctrine, if it was such an amazing quote, why don’t you repeat it back?”

“I may miss a word or two, but it was something like, ‘I am called as one of the Apostles to be a special witness of Christ in these exciting, trying times, and I do not know when He is going to come again. As far as I know, none of my brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve or even in the First Presidency knows. And I would humbly suggest that if we do not know, then nobody knows, no matter how compelling their arguments or how reasonable their calculations.’ Something like that.” David was nodding throughout, but when Stan finished he wrinkled his face as though he wasn’t satisfied.

“Well, that’s pretty good, but it’s not the one I was thinking of. I mean, your quote leaves the option open that maybe no one will know when it is going to happen, not even the prophet.”

Stan nodded, “True. But I’m pretty sure what Elder Ballard meant to say was that the Prophet would know ahead of time. But even if that isn’t what he said, I know I heard it somewhere else too, though I’d hate to think it’s from a non-authoritative source like Duane Crowther or John Lund or someone like that.”

“But even so, I don’t know that it matters either way. I mean, if the Church hasn’t announced it and Christ hasn’t met with President Hinckley; I don’t believe it. I mean, doesn’t there have to be the whole returning of the priesthood keys thing, too?” Stan’s quote had bolstered David’s confidence. He was now almost one hundred percent convinced that Christ hadn’t come.

“But, what if they knew and just didn’t tell anyone? I mean, wouldn’t that kind of ruin the whole ‘endure to the end’ thing? If you give it away just before it happens wouldn’t that just result in a bunch of people repenting really quickly? Maybe they just kept it on the hush-hush for that reason?”

David hadn’t seen this argument coming, but he had to admit it was a good one. “I guess that’s a good point. And they probably wouldn’t have wanted to be really specific about the date and time in case they were a little off,

you know? I'm sure the prophet and apostles didn't want the bad publicity if they were off by just a few minutes."

"Stan!"

David had never gotten used to Karen's nasally voice, but it seemed urgent and they both ran into the TV room. It still seemed like she had not moved but the channel had changed; she must have biceps of steel to hold that baby for that long without moving. The TV was now showing the beginning of a news conference in front of the Church Office Building downtown. The bottom of the screen read, 'official statement by the LDS Church forthcoming.'

For several seconds there was just the commotion of numerous reporters vying for position before Thomas S. Monson came into view. He approached the quickly arranged podium and stack of microphones slowly. When he finally reached the podium he gripped it as though he were about to speak in General Conference. He paused for a minute then began, "Ladies and gentleman, we have absolutely no reason to believe that the situation developing in the Middle East is at all associated with the return of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As the leadership of Christ's only true church we bear witness that false prophets and anti-Christ's will arise in the last days. They shall even deceive the very elect. Do not be fooled. Trust in the Lord's anointed and we will not lead you astray. That is all we have to say at this time. Pending the outcome of this situation we will arrange another press conference and present another statement."

He turned quickly and ignored the shower of questions that rained down on his disappearing back as he walked back into the Church Office Building.

"I knew it!" David was ecstatic. He thought he might have lost the debate with Stan for a minute, but President Monson had just sided with him. "I knew I was right."

Stan was still in shock and had resorted back to shaking his head in amazement. Karen, for her part, still hadn't moved. David wasn't even sure if she had blinked and even though he'd heard her talk, he hadn't seen her talk. If it wasn't for her vibrating pat-pat on Matthews back he would have believed her to be a statue.

"Well, I'm sure things will work themselves out. I was just about to make dinner. Tell you what, why don't I make enough for the three of us and bring it back over and we can talk about all of this and see what happens while we eat? How does that sound?" David's excitement was beginning to die down and he smiled to himself as he remembered that he had locked his door; no harm being an orthodox skeptic.

Stan shrugged his shoulders, absolving himself of his patriarchal decision-making authority. Karen quickly assumed responsibility for the decision with a curt, “Fine.”

David could have sworn he still hadn’t see her mouth move. Staring at the TV like that couldn’t be healthy.

Having sat back down during the press conference, David got back up, paused to collect his thoughts, and then headed for the door. Stan walked with him.

“I can’t believe someone would actually try to impersonate The Second Coming. What a publicity stunt! I wonder what they’re trying to sell...” Stan said as he opened the door.

“Well, it’s a crazy world out there. You never know with some people.” David paused for a second then continued, “I’ll be back over in about half an hour with pasta and a salad. You think you can provide the drinks and maybe some garlic bread?”

Stan nodded and closed the door behind David as he headed down the front steps. He headed down the walk and as he turned the corner so he could see the mountains he stopped as though he had hit an invisible wall. A brilliant light was filling the sky. David raised his arm to shield his eyes. Just before everything went black he heard a small, piercing voice, “Behold, I am come.”

Chapter 6: A Walk with a God

“You’re a journalist, correct?”

I was sitting alone, reading the paper and taking notes on my PDA when the question landed on my ears. I looked up from my coffee in my regular sitting place in JoAnne’s Café and my eyes quickly registered that I was looking at something abnormal. The voice was male, but the figure was shrouded in clothing; not an inch of skin was showing. I nodded, warily.

“Do you mind if I sit down for a minute?” the strange looking figure asked.

Indicating only as annoyed humans can, I acquiesced and angled my head toward the bench opposite mine in my booth. The journalist in me was intrigued. “What can I help you with?” I said it slowly, wariness present in my voice.

“Are you religious?”

I talk to strangers; I ask them forthright and difficult questions – that’s part of my job. Strangers trying to get cozy with me by asking personal questions isn’t part of my job. Annoyed, I repeated myself, only more forcefully, “What can I help you with?”

“Steve, I already know the answer but I need to hear it from you before I can tell you why I want to talk with you. Are you religious?”

Believing that answering the question would get him to leave, though knowing that I was probably wrong, I replied, “Was... I was raised Mormon but I don’t really believe in much of anything anymore.”

“Right.” He said it as though he were approving my answer. “Steve, I am supposed to give you five hundred thousand dollars to listen to a story. If you don’t believe it, fine, don’t do anything with it. But if you do believe it, you are to use the money to do whatever it takes to get the story published.”

If I hadn’t worked on a story just recently about a schizophrenic homeless man who had been caught trying to stab Salt Lake City’s mayor at a press conference I might have been interested. But what he was saying could only be the ramblings of a lunatic. Obviously this strange person sitting opposite me was delusional. But the fact that he knew my name was disturbing enough to keep my attention.

With a slight chuckle, I said, “Look, I don’t know you but you seem to at least know my name and a little bit about me. I’m definitely at a disadvantage and you must recognize that any good journalist is bound to be skeptical. Five hundred thousand dollars to listen to a story? Riiiiight, that happens all the

time.” I tried not to be sarcastic very often, but I was becoming very uncomfortable very quickly and I wasn’t completely in control of my response. “Unless you’re willing to give me some additional information or show me the money, I think I’m going to have to request that you leave. Or maybe I’ll take the initiative and do so myself.”

I swirled the last of my coffee and brought the mug to my lips. Before I could drink it the stranger opened his coat, reached his hand in his coat pocket, and began to extract something. I hesitated, wondering if I was going to have to throw my coffee in this figure’s face to defend myself and run. Instead of a gun, he pulled out a folded piece of paper, placed it on the table, unfolded it, and slid it across to me. I was looking at a five hundred thousand dollar cashier’s check from Zion’s Bank.

Unfinished, I set the coffee back down and eyed the check. It looked legitimate, but I was a journalist, not a banker. “How do you know my name?”

“You remember Ezra Fisher?”

My grandfather? What did this have to do with my grandfather? I nodded warily and squinted my eyes; this was getting very weird.

“Ezra has become a good friend of mine.”

I was thoroughly befuddled. This stranger reminded me of the invisible man from the movie by the same name; he was wearing a long trench coat, a drooping hat, sunglasses, gloves, and some sort of mask that covered the rest of the skin that would otherwise have been visible. I couldn’t see his lips moving underneath the face covering but could hear his voice very clearly, as though there was no impediment to the sound. Whatever reason he had for covering himself so thoroughly, I could live with. What had me so disturbed was the mention of my long dead grandfather as becoming ‘a good friend’ in the present tense.

“Um, you realize you said that in the present tense? You are aware that Ezra is dead?” I asked.

“Well, yes and no. He is dead in the sense that you understand it, but he isn’t actually dead in the sense that he no longer exists. Ezra has become a god.”

I pushed the check back across the table and laughed out loud this time, “And I suppose you met him in the Celestial Kingdom too, right?”

He didn’t take the check. He left it in the middle of the table and appeared to look me directly in the eye. I couldn’t see his eyes, but if he had eyes they were looking directly at mine. “Yes, I did.”

It was forceful, powerful, and surprisingly convincing. Somehow his voice had not only penetrated his mask but had also penetrated my skeptical

defenses. I should have realized it from the beginning of the encounter, but there was much more to this creature than was readily apparent.

He must have realized that he had made an impression because he continued without a response from me, “I am what is called an ‘attending angel’ in the Celestial Kingdom. I serve your grandfather. My name is Rebohoam.”

I must have looked rather silly sitting there nodding dumbly. It was as if I was saying, ‘of course you are; I knew it all along’ but couldn’t find the actual words.

“Your grandfather loves you very much. He cannot bear to see you wander in darkness, deceived by the seemingly sincere writings of apostate Mormon scholars. He sent me here to tell you his story. It is a short story; a very simple account of what has happened to him and what he has done since he transitioned from the mortal life to the post-mortal life.” He paused for a minute, apparently to let the shock dissipate. “Would you like to hear your grandfather’s story?”

I began to nod, dully, but stopped short. What about the money?
“Um, yes... I mean, about the story, yes. But, Rehobo...”

“Rebohoam”

“Yes, Rebohoam, why are you giving me money to listen to my grandfather’s story and, well, where did you get it? Sorry, you sound convincing, but I really don’t have any reason to believe anything you’ve said up to this point.”

“The money isn’t to listen to the story; it is to publish the story. Where it comes from is not your concern, ‘For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways.’”

“So let me get this straight. You’re claiming to be an attending angel in the Celestial Kingdom that has been sent by my dead grandfather to tell his story and he is giving you five hundred thousand dollars to have me publish the story, but only if I believe it and want to.”

“Yes.”

“Well, um... yeah, okay. Why not? If you’re lying, at least I’ll be entertained while I finish my breakfast. I’m willing to listen. But if this is legitimate I should get a tape recorder to record it. I have one in my car. And, well, this isn’t the best place to make a recording; we’ll have to go somewhere else...”

“There is no need to record the story. You will remember it once you hear it.”

“I’d really prefer to record it...”

“You will remember it.” It wasn’t a statement this time; it was a command.

“Alright, fine. If the story is memorable then I’ll remember it.”

I was still pretty sure I was being had. Of course, there was always the off-chance that he was telling the truth, but come on; an attending angel wearing a trenchcoat and mask? I couldn’t help but ask myself: Was I really about to listen to a story about an exalted being from a being only slightly less exalted? Either way, I wanted another cup of coffee.

“Um, Rebohoam, do you mind if I get another cup of coffee before we begin?” I was beckoning to the server while we talked and didn’t realize that Rebohoam was very gently shaking his head.

The server arrived and I requested two cups of coffee. When I looked over at Rebohoam to see if he wanted anything else, he whispered softly, almost under his breath, “ ‘And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly.’ ”

Shit! I had just ordered coffee in front of an exalted being. What’s more, I’d ordered him a cup. “Um sorry, make that, um..., one orange juice.”

The server gave me a strange look, probably something similar to how I had initially looked at Rebohoam when he had offered me half a million dollars to listen to a story. But when I nodded to her to ‘go ahead’, she picked up my empty coffee cup and left to get the orange juice.

I looked back at Rebohoam, “I’m sorry. I, well, did you want an orange juice? I can call her back and get you one but I figured that if you’re an exalted being you must also be immortal and not need food.”

“Just so you are aware, Steve, no one else can see me. Sarah Beth didn’t offer me anything or even look at me. She is not aware of my presence. Undoubtedly this will make you look a little strange, talking to yourself in a booth, but ‘there is no other way’.”

That was the third time he had quoted something Mormon. It was kind of silly at this point, but I suddenly found myself wondering if all exalted beings talked like that, quoting scripture or excerpts from the temple ceremony. I may have been apostate, but the years spent reading and re-reading the scriptures and the weekly temple attendance had so ingrained these things upon my mind that they would probably be the last things to go if I ever got Alzheimer’s. If those quotes were the last things to go, it would probably make it seem like I had returned to religion in my old age. Man my kids were going to be screwed up! Of course, if this guy was who he claimed he was I probably would be returning to religion in the next few minutes, but I still wasn’t convinced.

“So, you’re just going to tell the story and I take notes?”

“Yes, but we will wait for your orange juice.”

There was a rather awkward pause as we both waited for the orange juice. Then it occurred to me for the second time that I was sitting across from someone who claimed to be a ‘nearly exalted’ being. Why wasn’t I peppering him with questions?

“So, uh, Rebohoam, what’s it like? I mean, on the other side, what’s it like?”

“You do remember reading ‘Life Everlasting’ by Crowther, correct?”

I nodded. It had been a long time, but I remembered the gist of it.

“Well, he was somewhat right, at least, when he described the Celestial Kingdom as a collection of beautiful white palaces. ”

I nodded; he wasn’t convincing me so far.

“However, at the same time he was very wrong, though explaining this is difficult to mortals. He was right because he saw in the descriptions given by prophets and those that had experienced death and returned a coherent picture of a glorious kingdom. But at the same time he has failed to understand his own bias and assumptions. As a mortal he is limited by his mortal understanding, just as the prophets’ descriptions were limited and so too were the accounts of those that had died. The Celestial Kingdom is much more than what they were able to recount, but it would not be possible for me to explain it any better than other mortals have. I can just help you understand that your mortal mind is not capable of understanding what it is really like. In order to fully appreciate the expanses and nuances of exaltation you must be exalted. Despite my high position in the after-life hierarchy, even I, servant of the gods, am unable to fully comprehend Elohim’s Celestial Kingdom. Of course, for all those that have attained exaltation they must not only be able to enjoy the fullest extent of celestial expanses but must understand it so completely that when their time comes they are able to replicate it. ‘To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven,’ but also in the heavens.”

Strangely, I had been so transfixed by what I was hearing that I had apparently missed the delivery of my orange juice. Sarah Beth must be wondering whether or not she should be calling my wife, or the police, or the mental hospital with how strange my behavior must have seemed. I didn’t want to admit it, but this guy was kind of convincing. If he wasn’t who he claimed he was, he was a very good actor. I took a drink from the orange juice and realized that it had been a very long time since I had had orange juice. Initially the taste didn’t mix well with my coffee, but as the bitter coffee aftertaste left, it was replaced by the acidic sweetness of citrus and orange. I suddenly realized that all of that coffee had dulled me to the wonders of orange juice. I turned on my PDA, jotted a few notes, and looked up at Rebohoam.

“I’m ready when you are.”

He nodded very slightly then began...

To walk with the gods it is necessary for you to understand the transition from mortal to god. Therefore I begin this story with a recounting of my death. I recall, as I lay in my bed surrounded by my children and peering into the remarkably caring face of my eternal sweetheart that the very nature of the hospital room began to change. Walls were no longer impediments; I could see through them and within them. I was also not limited to the vision of my eyes; every part of my spirit came alive, as though I were experiencing the world for the very first time. I no longer saw just the corporeal forms of my loved ones; I was able to see their souls. The visible connection between spirit and body was sublime. Many of them radiated a powerful faith and understanding of what was taking place at that moment; especially radiant were the souls of those that understood where I was going.

It was at this moment I realized that the ultimate judgment is much easier than mortals believe. The glory of the individual is readily seen. Our intelligences, the elements of spiritual matter that make up our non-corporeal forms, respond to the beliefs and behaviors of their bodies. The corresponding spiritual glory is very clear to the immortal eye.

Also quickly noticeable was the passage of time. Because my comprehension had so suddenly expanded to the point that I was fully aware of all things within my initial radius, and many things beyond it, the movement of my loved ones was slowed to a crawl. I was able to understand everything about every movement, including the synaptic firings that drove my dying thoughts. I was even able to comprehend the workings of individual cells and beyond, to the protons and neutrons, to the quarks and photons, and then to the intelligent matter that is the substrate of all matter. I was able to discern the finest things, but by changing my perspective, simply willing it, the passage of time returned to what mortals might consider normal. It seemed as though it were relative to the size of the referent, but I would later learn that my first understanding was also a limited understanding.

As the scope of my view increased, time increased and, suddenly, I was rising through the floors of the hospital at an ever-increasing rate. By the time I passed through the roof and into the open air my comprehension was that of the entire city below me. But it was far too fast and before I could fully explore what I was experiencing, the transition again increased and without a sense of movement I was at the gates of the Celestial Kingdom. I was not alone. Many others, similar in some ways, different in others, were also approaching the Kingdom. It was as though there was some sort of connection, like an umbilical cord, pulling us toward our home and the lifesource of our awareness.

As I moved closer and closer to the gates I realized that many of the individuals in the area outside the wall were going the opposite direction with dismay. I soon realized why, they had failed to pass the knowledge tests of the sentinels. When I came near enough to see the actual entrances into the kingdom, I became aware of massively powerful souls, resurrected beings whose power seemed to emanate as though they, themselves, could have been astral bodies. As individual spirits approached the entrances they were confronted by these guards. If the individual failed the examination he or she turned away and seemed to drift away with the group of individuals that were heading in a different direction.

When my turn arrived, I was greeted with the first token of the Aaronic Priesthood. The sentinel looked me in the eye as he asked the questions. I answered the first question correctly, so the sentinel continued with the knowledge examination. Having watched several individuals before me attempt this exam and fail I knew that most were unable to look the sentinel back as they were examined. Not so in my case, for I knew that I would pass the examination. I was endowed while a mortal and the fullness of that blessing became a reality when I sensed the dismay of the individuals that had failed. I gripped the sentinel's hand as powerfully as he gripped mine and he smiled as he happily and knowingly administered the examination to a future exalted being.

Never had I heard so joyously heard the phrase, "Ezra Fisher, having been true and faithful in all things and desiring to enter the presence of the Father, shall enter." I, too, was surprised by the familiarity of the proceedings, and the differences. No longer was there a veil worker to help the individual through. No longer was there a sense of separation as I acted as proxy. No longer was the dialogue between two disconnected individuals. I was being examined by a guard to the Celestial Kingdom and he, having affirmed my endowment, had granted me entry into the glorious kingdom of Elohim.

Squeezing my hand, the sentinel pulled me past the gate, embraced me, and ushered me toward a shimmering portal. It was not until much later that I understood the great significance of the portal. Without the protective influence of this mystical gate, the sheer power of the emanations from Elohim's very being and kingdom would destroy lesser spirits, all those that were attempting to gain entry and had been found unworthy. But oh the bliss of the worthy soul as he enters the beauty and warmth of god's presence!

As I crossed through the portal, I was temporarily overwhelmed. Not only were my newly discovered senses tender, but it was at this point that all of my previous knowledge and experiences returned to me. I ceased to be Ezra Fisher at this point and once again became Ellesboah, child of

my Heavenly Father. As the euphoria passed but before my senses could become aware of my new surroundings, I suddenly felt like I was home. A deep longing that had been part of my drive toward religious devotion in my mortal life was suddenly gone. I was once again whole. I knew what it was that I had to do from here on for eternity and the eternities of eternity – I was a god and must fulfill that great responsibility.

When my immortal and exalted senses returned, I became aware of the multitudes that had gathered around me. There were so many people to meet and greet and so many acquaintances and relationships that had lain dormant for so many millennia. Despite the numbers, I was aware of them all and knew them all intimately, for thus is the capacity of the exalted mind and thus is the end of the exalted being – to become one of the network of limitless gods whose power and influence grows ever greater.

After greeting so many I was finally led by my Heavenly Mother, Navidia, to the very throne of God where I was greeted by Elohim, Jehovah, and Rababak, whom you would know as The Holy Ghost. Such joy I had never known. I had been tried and tested and been found worthy and now I was basking in the greatest glory in the universe. Each member of the Godhead greeted me by name and recounted a fond memory from my past. They do know each and everyone of us intimately. You are not alone in your mortal existence.

All of my dreams and musings about this day had not only come true but had been magnificently surpassed. I was content, yet I knew there was more. What I had experienced in such a short period of time would so dramatically exhaust a mortal that he or she would need millennia to rest. But immortals are not so limited. From the throne of God I was taken to the school of the Gods where I became a novice initiate. My first instructor was Michael, the archangel known mortally as Adam. I continued to meet and greet famed individuals, all the while my knowledge and divinity increased exponentially under the tutelage of the most benevolent of instructors. I was instructed in the ways of the divine by such legends as Abraham, Moses, Peter, and Joseph and Hyrum Smith. I use their mortal names so you know to whom I refer, but these exalted beings are so much more than their menial mortal accomplishments. They are truly the great and noble ones revealed to Abraham.

Being trained by perfect individuals and learning by perfect standards is likely not comprehensible to you, a mortal. But the rate of progress is fast enough that the training was completed before my lovely Martha had made the journey from mortality. It was my joy to greet her in greatness as she entered the kingdom and began her journey toward becoming a goddess and the first of many blessed women to become my eternal companions.

I tell this story to my wonderful servant Rebohoam as we await the great and terrible day of the Lord, when Jehovah shall return in his glory and usher in the millennium. Though we have been resurrected and are in all things prepared to begin our own kingdoms, Elohim's plan must first close and be complete before we can venture forth to become as he is.

I write this, Steve, because I love you more than you can imagine. You were always the brightest of my grandchildren but often it is the brightest that seems to cause the most worry. I have received and achieved so much, but to not have the exaltation of my progeny assured, to not have their divinity confirmed, is very distressing to me. I weep with our Heavenly Father for your salvation.

You, Steven Fisher, were in that room when I began this journey. Not all of the souls in that room radiated faith and understanding. Your soul was dark and disturbed. At first I attributed it to your youth and your grief over my loss; emotions which were present and poignant. But I have since recognized that what I was witnessing was the beginning of a journey toward darkness and the denying of your divinity. Do not follow that path, Steven, I beg of you. I have gone to great lengths to convey this message to you, please do not dismiss it. Yes, I have requested that it be distributed to help others, but the real intent is to re-ignite those lingering beliefs from a childhood religion you have tried so hard to extinguish. 'Believe and behave, for thus is the key to heaven.' I oft repeated that phrase but now know it to be true. Trust in me now, and you shall not be forsaken. Amen.

I had not moved nor batted an eye during the telling of the story. I was entranced. I was spellbound. I was dumbstruck and suddenly remembered a similar occurrence in The Book of Mormon when Korihor had suffered a similar fate, though I believed my inability to speak to be only the temporary shock still lingering from the story I had just heard. The weight of my disbelief began to burden my shoulders and I felt the intense agony of guilt long since dismissed as a social creation.

Rebohoam paused briefly to let the magnitude of the story and message soften my hardened heart. Again nodding slightly, he said, "Steve, I must go. I now need to know your answer; will you make of this story what your grandfather intended?"

Of its own accord, my head began to nod and I knew the answer from deep within my soul. I must share this gospel with others. I must do as Alma the Younger did and endeavor to repair the damage I, and so many other Mormon 'Intellectuals,' had done. I nodded fervently and Rebohoam pushed the check across the table and into my trembling hands.

“Then I take my leave and will report this great news to your grandfather. I believe he was right when he said he knew that you had it in you to see the light.” He stood, “Farewell, Steve. I hope to see you one day in your grandfather’s embrace.” With that he bowed slightly, turned and walked toward the door.

I was so lost in thought and caught up in my experience that I very nearly missed it. It was a sign. No, not a miracle-like divine sign. It was a computer-printed sign in large letters taped to the back of Rebohoam that read “April Fools”. When I saw the shoes I realized who it was, Erick Johanson, editor of Sunstone. He always wore red Converse high tops.

I couldn’t help it; I just blurted it out, “Bastard!!!” As everything clicked I looked around the café and realized it was nearly full of people I knew from Sunstone. Even Sarah Beth was in on the prank as she doubled over in laughter behind the service counter. The entire café erupted with applause as Erick turned around, removed the hat and mask, and took a bow. Since the first primate blushed, a human face had never seen such a dark shade of crimson. I had been taken, hook, line, sinker, and the whole goddamn rod. The applause quickly gave way to laughter and I realized that not only had a number of people from Sunstone witnessed the event but that several people were holding video cameras and had filmed it. Undoubtedly this wicked joke would become Sunstone legend.

Erick made his way back to my booth and apologized profusely, admitting that he had come up with the joke years ago but it wasn’t until he met me that he knew he had found the optimal target. He knew I wouldn’t hate him for the rest of my life, just for a day or two until I got over the embarrassment. He continued to apologize until I smiled, at which point he knew that things were going to be okay. I even recovered enough to jokingly tell him that I was going to go cash the check. He laughed again and said, “Go ahead. It was well worth it.” He was serious. He had made millions when he sold his software company and was now editor of Sunstone just to give him something to do in his during retirement.

Only Erick would be so bold to attempt something like this. Only I would be gullible enough to fall for it. And only those damned Mormon intellectuals would be able to read the story and laugh at it.

Chapter 7: Love Evolved

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“It’s too late now; they’ll be here any minute,” responded Diana.

“But until you actually do it, you haven’t done it.” Paul was right; despite what Bill Clinton claimed, there was a distinctive line one crossed that turned intimacy into sex.

“Look, you and Jeremy are most likely the biggest beneficiaries here. If you are having second thoughts at this point, then maybe we should...”

But Diana was unable to finish her thought as the doorbell rang.

Paul stood, and with a final glance at his wife, walked out of the kitchen and toward the front door. Passing through their front room the doubts mounted as he passed mounted pictures of him and Diane as well as pictures he and Diane had taken since they had met. Did he really want to do this? Arriving at their modest doorway it finally hit him that standing on the other side of that doorway was pleasure and pain, no matter how you looked at it.

Whispering to himself, Paul muttered, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” and turned the knob. But while the door swung open, his incessantly questioning mind retorted with, “But is the pleasure worth the pain?”

“Hey Jeremy, Heidi.”

It was the second most awkward greeting of his life. The first took place while contacting a potential investigator as a missionary and involved a gangster, a chupacabra, and a side-splitting roar. But this greeting involved sexual tension, which is only slightly more uncomfortable than knowing you’ve blown an opportunity at teaching someone the true religion, even if you no longer believe it to be true.

Together, Jeremy and Heidi smiled and replied, “Hey Paul.”

Paul swung open the door to let them in and simultaneously noticed that Jeremy was carrying a duffel bag. He set it down near where they hung their coats while they engaged in rote small talk.

“Chilly, for October, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I hadn’t planned on wearing a coat, but once I got outside I knew I needed one.”

“Just last week it was warm enough that I was wearing a t-shirt around without a jacket.”

“When it changes, it changes quickly...”

And so it continued until they made their way into the kitchen where Diana was just finishing setting the table.

“So, who cooked tonight?” asked Heidi.

“Who always cooks?” answered Paul.

Directing herself to Paul, she continued, “So, what’s on the menu?”

“It isn’t a stand out, but it should be good – salad, lasagna, corn, and garlic bread. I even went to the trouble of making the garlic bread myself.”

Heidi asked Diana if there was anything she could do to help put the finishing touches on while Jeremy took a seat and pushed forward the conversation with Paul.

“So, how’s work?”

“Fine. Nothing’s happening since we finished our last big project. The bigwigs are gearing up for the next one, but until then we’re just kind of coasting... And you?”

“We’re in the middle of a crunch trying to wrap up one project but also overlapping with another, bigger one that is being rushed through. I doubt it will happen, but we’ll see...”

A stranger first meeting these two couples might think the men were brothers and the women were sisters. Paul and Jeremy were both of average height, around five foot nine, and of average, build, though Jeremy wasn’t in quite as good of shape as Paul. Both had brown hair and were reasonably handsome, though they were certainly not from the Pitt or Cruise molds. What’s more, they were both software engineers, which resulted in a jargon-laden conversation that, when observed by outsiders, made them think of communication between identical twins.

Heidi and Diane looked very similar, but in a very distinct way. One looked to be the other’s older sister, even though they were almost the same age. They sported similar haircuts with nearly identical colors of hair, but Diane was almost six inches taller than the particularly diminutive Heidi. Despite their similarities in appearance, they had more divergent careers than their spouses; Diane was working on a PhD in Biology; Heidi taught mathematics at a local high school. But their Utah Mormonism upbringing gave them nearly identical cultural backgrounds with similarities in ideas, thoughts, and interests.

Heidi carried the salad bowl over to the table and was followed closely by Diane with a chilled bottle of wine.

“Nice,” said Jeremy, “a little something to lower inhibitions.”

It was the first indirect reference to what they were doing together tonight, and it was met with another awkward pause laced with sexual tension.

“Do you remember when we first met in the Montgomery Heights Ward?” asked Heidi.

“We met separately and didn’t even realize that we had met each other’s spouses until the next week in Church. I met Jeremy in the Elder’s Quorum and you and Diana met in Relief Society.”

“Actually, we met in the nursery,” said Diana.

Jeremy’s eyebrows furrowed inquisitively, “Um, what were you doing in the nursery?” Talk of children was always a sore spot between Jeremy and Heidi.

“Well, the Relief Society President – Janice Stevenson I think it was at the time – introduced herself to me right away and, when I told her I had older siblings with young kids, she mentioned that they could use my help in the nursery that day as one of the people that normally worked in there hadn’t come.”

Heidi filled in her side of the story, “Janice had told me the same thing.”

“If Janice knew where her social machinations would lead, she probably would not have thought she was being inspired to get you two together at the time.”

They all chuckled at the thought, though it was somewhat forced as the sexual tension was still present.

“Have your parents gotten any more receptive toward you leaving the Church?” Heidi asked of Paul.

“If by accepting you mean able to speak to me, then yeah. But I’m fairly confident I’ve been written out of whatever meager inheritance they manage to keep from giving to the Church.” Turning to Jeremy, “How about your parents? Have you had anymore debates?”

“My parents are too old and too unwilling to bring it up. My siblings are the ones that won’t let the topic rest, which is stupid on their part.” He paused to sip his wine, “Things are fine as long as we ignore the topic, but invariably one of them will make some comment that will turn things downhill. I start out ignoring it, especially since a decent relationship with my family is far more important to me than religion, but once the ice cracks just a little, someone falling through and getting angry is just a few minutes away. It usually ends so uncomfortably that I’m not sure I want to keep visiting with them; it would almost be easier just to stay away.”

“My parents couldn’t be happier, though if I told them that I was now an agnostic that didn’t believe in Jesus they would probably freak out,” Heidi offered.

“Yeah, I’m not sure evangelical Christian parents are going to be any more receptive to agnosticism than are conservative Mormons. You just have the benefit of having converted rather than being raised in the religion,” responded Paul. “If only we were all as lucky as Diana...”

“I still can’t believe your parents didn’t have a problem with you leaving,” said Jeremy.

“It’s not that they don’t have a problem with it; I’m sure deep down they do. It’s just that they never really talk about it, though I think at least in part it’s because my Mom is a bit more liberal than everyone else’s parents. She’s far more conservative than I am, but for a Mormon, she’s liberal.”

Heidi and Diane carried the remaining food to the table and they began filling up their plates. The conversation changed back to work and they ate and chatted. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the conversation refused to return to their venture that night until dessert.

“So, is there dessert?” asked Jeremy as he mopped up the last of his lasagna with his garlic bread.

Heidi turned to him with a look that lay somewhere between a smile and discomfort. Paul and Diane knew Heidi and Jeremy well enough to know that Heidi was accusing Jeremy of breaking social mores. Jeremy, however, didn’t get what he had done.

“Ahh, dessert. Well, that’s one way of putting it.” Paul had come to Jeremy’s aid. “But, Heidi, we do in fact have a small dessert before the other *dessert*.” He added a wink to relieve some of the tension and stood to prepare the bananas foster.

Heidi’s accusation of custom breaking now fell squarely upon her. Ironically, it wasn’t the hormone plagued man that had returned the conversation to sex, but his generally timorous partner. As a result, Heidi was blushing, but Diane was quick to enter the discussion in her frank manner, “Paul uses euphemisms for it all the time. I prefer ‘making love.’”

“But ‘making love’ can mean so many different things. Of course it includes the word ‘love,’ which, by itself, can mean anything from I care about you to I like being battered by you. But it could also refer to just being together and building our love,” offered Paul from near the stove.

“Whatever...” Heidi chimed in, now recovered from her foray into social blunder world.

“Nobody uses ‘making love’ to refer to just being together. Sure, you could interpret it that way, but the literalism required is beyond the pale. Making love is sex, pure and simple.” Diane had obviously had this conversation with Paul before.

“Well, if it is simply sex, why not just call it sex? Why complicate things?” retorted Paul.

“Because ‘making love’ sounds so much better than sex.”

“But if it means the same thing, why does matter how the word itself sounds? You could interchangeably use fuck, screw, bang, etc. and it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“I hate that word,” Diane complained, doing her best to cut off Paul’s pithy tirade.

“But fuck is the same as sex.”

“Yeah, but it just sounds so vulgar. It’s like... It’s like gratuitous, violent sex between two people that don’t care about one another.”

“But that’s just because that’s the way some people use it. You said it before, they’re all synonyms. That you find some more or less appealing is just the result of your socialization.”

Heidi couldn’t pass up the opportunity to bug Paul about his wasted Master’s degree, “And so the sociologist speaks.”

“It may not pay to have a Master’s degree in sociology as a computer programmer, but it changes the way you look at the world. The only reason you and Diane have a problem with the word ‘fuck,’ which is purely arbitrary, is because society has defined that word as vulgar.”

“I prefer ‘Belgium’. It’s far worse than fuck, depending on the context,” Jeremy said, his laughter bubbling just under the surface.

Only Paul got the joke, and Jeremy quickly had to explain to their partners that it was the only curse word left in *The Hitchiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The point being, curse words are entirely arbitrary.

“But I don’t care if they are just arbitrary, it’s a social custom,” said Heidi.

“But that is precisely my point. As long as people continue to believe curse words are curse words because they are traditionally curse words, they will find them objectionable. This is no different than openly talking about one’s disbelief in God. In the U.S. today, where so many people continue to believe in God, specifically the God of the Bible as defined by Christianity, it bothers people to hear someone deny the existence of God. For instance, Diane and I were in a Thai restaurant the other day when I remembered a news story about religion that had gotten on my nerves. In the course of talking about it, I began

to heavily criticize Christianity, at which point Diane tried to get me to talk softer. My reply, ‘the people in here need to learn to accept these viewpoints eventually.’ Breaking social mores forces people to deal with social mores. As much as I dislike the tedium of Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, he did teach us that much.”

And with his diatribe at its end, he picked up his lighter and set the bananas foster on fire, burning out some of the alcohol.

Diane stood to begin clearing dishes but Jeremy and Heidi were already putting their dishes together for transit to the sink. Moments later, the dishes were in the dishwasher and they were back in their seats eating the non-euphemistic dessert.

“So, did we work out all of the details of what happens next?” asked Paul. He said it so nonchalantly, that no one seemed disturbed by the fact that he was addressing it so directly.

Heidi, who had been given responsibility for the evening, took charge, “Jeremy and I brought a few things in the duffel. But since we just ate, I thought we could maybe play a game or two of cards to let the food settle before we split up.”

“That works,” said Diane. “I don’t like making love while I’m completely stuffed.”

Paul and Jeremy nodded their heads, acknowledging that the plan was sound.

“I’ll get the cards,” said Paul as he finished his bananas foster.

As he returned to the kitchen with the cards, where the table was being cleared, Paul glanced at Heidi and wondered what it was going to be like. Sure, he found Heidi attractive, but it was just the awe at knowing he was going to be with someone other than Diane that caused him pause. His mind was filled with so many ‘what ifs’, but the decision was made weeks earlier and it was too late to change his mind. If he did, it would likely be just about as awkward as going through with it. At this point it was just a matter of putting on the proper guise – a discreet balance between intrigue, acceptance, and hesitation. He obviously didn’t want to offend Heidi by pretending to be uninterested in her, but neither could he show too much enthusiasm or it would offend his own wife. The price one pays for knowledge was causing him pause. Four years ago he never would have predicted he would be doing this. But rather than lament that fact, he added it to his list of examples as to why he should never attempt to make predictions about the future.

Dropping into his seat, he stole one more glance at Heidi then began shuffling the cards. He couldn’t help but wonder what the others were thinking at this point. Was he the only one that was trying to balance his excitement and

hesitation? Surely the others were. Though, having convinced Diane that he would not be bothered by her sleeping with another man, he believed she had really accepted it and wouldn't expect him to be bothered by it. But would he be bothered? There was only one way to find out.

Paul began dealing the cards as the others made their way back to their seats at the table.

Thirty minutes into the card game, it was time to begin asking when they were going to do this. Heidi, having pushed past her reservations at this point, brought it up first, "So, is this going to be the last hand?"

Nods and 'yeahs' around the table showed the universal agreement. The hand didn't last long and more than one person was tempted to call for another hand. But when Heidi stood, they all knew the games of chance were over.

"I'll get our bag. Jeremy, do you want to come get your stuff out of it?"

Jeremy nodded and followed her toward the entryway. Diane gave one last, concerned look at Paul, who nodded ever-so-slightly. She then headed off to double check the rooms and light the candles. Paul cleaned up the cards and waited for everyone to return. His thoughts were racing now and he was worried that there was going to be a problem; he didn't know what, but there was bound to be something.

All three of them returned to the kitchen at just about the same time. Jeremy was holding a bundle and Heidi was carrying the duffel. Try as he might, Paul couldn't make out the expressions on their faces. They seemed nervous, but he was also nervous. Maybe his nerves were interfering with his regular ability to read people. Either way, it was the moment of truth; well, not quite The Moment, but one of 'the moments' leading up to that Moment.

"Jeremy, if you'll follow Diane, you're in the master bedroom. Heidi, you and I are in the guest bedroom." It was a matter-of-fact statement and Paul said it with a small smile, hoping to put everyone else at ease. It didn't work all that well, but everyone nodded and they separated, Heidi following Paul to the guest bedroom and Jeremy following Diane.

Diane knew she had agreed to do this, and even though she had nothing against Jeremy, she didn't feel particularly romantic toward him. This was simply an experiment, nothing more.

"I put some lingerie in the bathroom so I could change into it quickly. I got several pieces ready; do you want to choose between them?" said Diane, pointedly.

“Um, yeah, that’s fine.” He paused as they entered the master bedroom. Several candles were providing the light and the covers to the bed had been turned down. It was far more romantic than what he was used to, but if you’re going to have sex with someone else, you may as well make it nice. “Is it okay if I just change in here?”

Diane replied as she made her way to the bathroom, “Sure. No sense being timid at this point; I’ll be seeing you naked shortly anyway.” With that, she disappeared into the bathroom.

Jeremy set his bundle on the night stand and unwrapped it. Inside were several condoms, a small tube of lubricant, a pair of silk boxers, and a bottle of cologne. He took his shirt off and carefully placed it next to the nightstand. As he began undoing his pants, Diane came out from the bathroom holding up three pieces of lingerie. He had to admit it was odd looking at Diane’s intimate apparel, apparel she had undoubtedly worn when making love to Paul. But he also had to admire either Paul or Diane’s taste in lingerie – quite the variety, ranging from provocative yet classy to simply provocative.

The first outfit Diane held up was a nearly see-through chemise. It was light blue, with a small amount of lace around the edge. Jeremy nodded to indicate he wanted to see the other options as well. The second outfit was a three-piece getup, made up of a bustier, garters, and see through stockings. Jeremy repeated his nod, though his growing erection was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and distracting. Thoughts of seeing Diane in these outfits were passing through his imagination. The last outfit Diane held up was a silk gown with a matching robe.

Jeremy continued to nod, slowly, showing his approval of all three. The bustier combination was certainly the most provocative, and he had a hard time imagining Diane in it; not because he didn’t want to, but because it didn’t seem to fit Diane. But he wasn’t really here because he wanted a romantic relationship with Diane; he was simply having sex with her – something he had been telling himself over the last few weeks. He had also realized that, as a man, he would probably be okay having sex with just about anyone, but women were more discriminating. Considering this, his primary concern was that Diane be comfortable. Obviously she had considered him sufficiently ‘doable’, and he had no intention of ruining that sentiment.

Curbing his intrigue, Jeremy went with the safe answer, “Do you have preference?”

Diane, as succinct as ever, seemed to have a ready reply, “Lingerie is for the man, not the woman. You choose.”

He knew Diane well enough to know that she wasn’t being rude, just to the point, but it still upped the tension a little bit. Well enough, he’d choose, but he wanted to give her a good impression, “Um, the light blue one is really

nice.” It was a compromise; it was provocative, but not slutty. Hopefully she would recognize his intent.

Diane picked up the outfits, singling out the blue chemise, and turned back toward the bathroom. Paul finished undressing, put on his boxers and dabbed a little cologne around the optimal locations. He had gone over this whole thing in his mind hundreds of times in the last few weeks, to the detriment, even, of his work at times. Even though he had played out the scenario, with every possible variation he could consider, he had never had a good answer to the question he was now facing: How do you go about making love to your best friend’s wife, especially when he knows you’re doing it? He was about to find out.

Diane’s thoughts, however, were not on what she was about to do, but on what Paul was about to do. She had just carefully piled her clothes on the counter near the sink and was putting on the blue chemise that Jeremy had chosen. She was going to put on some perfume and makeup and retouch her hair before heading back out to Jeremy, but her primary thought was on whether or not Paul was going to enjoy making love to another woman. He never had made love to anyone else. He had only ever been with her, which was the reason they were doing this. Certainly there was a lurid sense of intrigue surrounding the whole situation; she was intrigued as well. But she figured that having sex with a man was about the same, no matter who he was. Her logic probably held true for men as well; one woman was just like another and in the end, the only thing that really mattered was that he ejaculated.

But she got the impression that perhaps Paul was interested in making love with Heidi on another level. It wasn’t so much that it was Heidi, simply that it was not her. She had the impression that men seemed curious about what it would be like to make love to just about every woman they met. Rather than consider something else about women, they simply wondered what they would be like in bed. Perhaps she wasn’t giving men enough credit, and Paul had never indicated that this is how he sized up women, but she caught his occasional glance at other women and realized that he had once looked at her that way. She didn’t see that look toward her any more, not since they had married. There was no sense of intrigue between them anymore – they both knew what to expect.

Putting the finishing touches on her makeup and adjusting her breasts for optimal exposure through the chemise, Diane took one last deep breath and opened the door. Jeremy was sitting in the bed with the covers pulled up to his waist. He was trying to lean casually against the headboard, as though this was not a big deal, but she was certain she had never seen Jeremy this nervous since she had known him. She slipped gingerly into the bed next to him and smiled.

Paul had been leading Heidi down an opposing hallway toward the guest bedroom when he felt her hand reach out and touch his rear. He nearly jumped, but decided, instead, to slow just slightly. Heidi pushed herself closer to him, pressing her full breasts into his back. Before he could say anything, Heidi spoke, “No sense in this being an awkward encounter. Just let yourself go and let’s see what happens.”

Paul was initially stunned. This wasn’t a scenario he had played out in his mind. Actually, that wasn’t true. As with most men, he had played out the scenario of a woman throwing herself at him with regard only for pleasure. But he hadn’t considered this scenario with Heidi. And now that she seemed to be indicating this was what she wanted, he was surprised. It was a pleasant surprise, but a surprise, nonetheless.

Suddenly he felt her hand wrap around his waist and drop under his belt, heading straight for his penis. This brought him back to the immediate situation, though he couldn’t help but come to a complete stop in his progress toward the bedroom. Casually turning away from the hand that was down his pants so it would slip out unharmed, he brought himself face to face with Heidi in the hallway and kissed her.

Heidi had initially thought Paul’s pause indicated he was bothered by her strong advances, but she had guessed right about him. He was a man after all and what man didn’t want to have a woman throw herself at him? She kissed him back then realized Paul had put one hand on her rear and the other was slowly making its way up her side, headed for her breast. Realizing he was acting on her advice, she encouraged him by shooting her tongue into his mouth.

If her initial advance had poked a hole in the damn, her tongue had let the floodgates loose. Paul’s hand shot to her breast and they twisted, passionately, until Heidi was pressed against the wall of the hallway. They continued like this for several minutes before Paul pulled away.

Raising his eyebrows to match his hesitation, he looked at her inquisitively then asked, “Are you sure this is how you want to do this?”

Heidi smiled and replied, “Of course. But it may be best if we continue in the bedroom. Besides, I’ll have two hands then.” She raised the duffel to emphasize her point.

Paul nodded, not realizing that Heidi was now thoroughly in control. She stepped out, grabbed Paul’s hand, and led the way to the guest bedroom. Closing the door behind her, she threw the duffel near the entrance to the bathroom and pulled Paul toward the bed. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down on top of her, moving back in to kiss him. He kissed her back. The initial kissing gave way to more passionate kissing then touching and groping... Soon they were little more than a writhing mass of tangled arms and legs on the bed.

As the intimacy proceeded, Paul slowly made his way down Heidi's neck, but moved on to the more succulent hills that lay beneath her shirt and bra. Eventually he worked her torso bare and proceeded to lavish enormous attention on her nipples. As his passion slowed, Heidi put a gentle finger on his lips and carefully paused the encounter.

Before Paul could ask if he had done something wrong, Heidi whispered, "There are more surprises in the bag." Though it took a second, Paul understood. There was a carefully scripted scenario that was supposed to be taking place here. They were supposed to go to their respective rooms, get ready, then... Do whatever happened next. He and Heidi had just added to the scenario a fifteen minute make-out session and had not changed into their more intimate apparel.

"Right. Uh, well, we should change then." He rolled away from her and she casually stood, shirtless, with wavering shadows from the candles playing their way across her chest.

She made her way toward the bathroom and softly said, "I'll be right back."

Unlike Diane, Heidi wasn't particularly interested in giving Paul a choice in lingerie. She had guessed, correctly it seemed, what Paul would like. She may not get paid for sex, but she was nothing short of an expert at controlling men's passions. Slipping out of her pants, she donned an open-tip bra and crotchless panties. Touching up her makeup and re-applying her perfume, she opened the door and made her way elegantly toward the bed.

Paul had shed his clothes and put on a pair of tight-fitting briefs. Several condoms were now lying openly on the night stand next to a bottle of cologne. Paul had been sitting on the side of the bed when she opened the door, but he stood as she exited and made his way toward her. Stopping short, he examined her outfit, his eyes dripping with desire. His first examination was quick and appreciative, and only involved his eyes. Moving closer, his second examination of her outfit included a pass with his hands. Leaning in toward her, he whispered, "You look stunning."

Never one for letting the man take the lead, she deftly reached up and wrapped her arm around his head. Slowly applying force, she guided his mouth to one of her protruding nipples while edging him toward the bed. This time, when they reached the bed, Paul was on bottom. She scooted him up onto the bed, then proceeded to pull her nipples away from him and straddle him. Taking up one of his hands, she led it toward her groin and revealed that her panties had no crotch.

Paul seemed to hesitate, at first, but quickly got the message. Raising himself up with her still straddling him, he reversed their positions, laying her deftly onto her back. Gently pressing her legs apart, he spread open her thighs,

clearing the way to her groin. Quickly positioning himself, Paul lowered his head toward Heidi's exposed genitalia.

"So, now what?" asked Jeremy.

They were sitting side-by-side with their backs propped against the headboard. The outlines of Diane's breasts were clearly visible through the chemise, as were her nipples and areoles. Jeremy's bare chest was just about all that was visible, though his growing uneasiness was becoming increasingly so.

"Well, when Paul and I do it, we'll usually engage in at least a small amount of foreplay. What about you and Heidi?" While clear and to the point, this answer didn't seem to help Jeremy's anxiety. Intellectualizing sex facilitates sex like telling someone with depression that they should be happy facilitates happiness.

"Is that what you want to do?" was the only response Jeremy could think of.

"We could do that. Though I'm not sure what interests you that way." Diane paused, considering the options. "Or we could just get straight to it. Are you hard?"

Jeremy's brow furrowed, not understanding the question.

Rather than trying to explain her question, Diane simply reached under the covers and toward Jeremy's penis. Jeremy stiffened, still very aware that this was his best friend's wife.

"You okay?" queried Diane, angling her head back to see Jeremy's face.

Realizing this was why he was here tonight and that it was finally happening, he let out the breath that had locked in his chest, nodded and pressed out a meek response, "Yeah, fine."

"Would it help if I started with some fellatio?"

A little surprised, Jeremy replied, "If you'd like. You don't have to."

"Remember, Jeremy the idea is to experiment here for comparison's sake. We may as well try several things." She pulled down the covers enough to expose his groin, then eased his very hard penis out of the flap in his boxers. Leaning over him from the side, she wrapped one hand around his penis and slowly began to stroke it, starting slowly.

Still unsure of whether he wanted to ask the question that was now floating in the back of his mind, Jeremy paused, then decided he needed to ask it, "Do you want me to touch you?"

"I'm not sure how we can have sex, otherwise?" Diane thought she was being witty, but it again came across as far too rational for intercourse. "Just pretend you're making love to Heidi."

It wasn't actually a very good answer, had Jeremy been thinking very hard. If he had, he would have realized that what Diane had just done revealed how she was approaching this – she was imagining she was making love to Paul and not actually making love to him. But that connection was beyond his ability to reason at this point: his penis was being stroked by a sexual stranger and Jeremy's focus was almost entirely on that. Though he did have one more question, "Is there a certain way you like to be touched?"

Diane was just about to put her mouth over his penis. Rather than look back to answer him, she simply said, "I like back rubs. And if you want to play with my breasts, be gentle."

It was a short pause, then she dropped onto his penis. Jeremy hesitatingly reached out and began to slowly rub Diane's back. He finally realized what she had said about imagining he was making love to Heidi, and realized that if he were, it wouldn't be proceeding like this.

Paul's erection hurt, but he was doing his best to focus on the task at hand. He was performing oral sex on a woman with whom he had never had sex before. He started slowly, licking carefully around her labia, then began focusing more specifically near her clitoris. Heidi's moans helped guide him. The more he played with her clitoris, the more excited she became until he almost thought she was going to scream. Muffling her outcry, she grabbed her own hair instead. Paul, never having experienced anything quite like this, wasn't sure how to proceed. Should he continue, or should he pause? But as the sensation of orgasm began to subside, Heidi once again took charge.

"That was mine. You ready for yours?" she whispered.

She reached her arms out and cupped his head, lifting it slowly from her groin as she spoke. It was a rhetorical question, as the interlude between erection and ejaculation for men was entirely distraction from the primary aim. Of course he was ready.

Still cupping his head, she slowly pulled his face toward hers, simultaneously dragging his body up and onto hers. Paul followed her direction, but hesitated as his penis neared her vagina. Did she want him to go inside her now?

"I should put a condom on." It was more of a question than a statement, as the way Heidi was acting it didn't seem like she cared one way or the other.

Heidi pulled his head toward hers, kissed him, then nodded that he should.

Paul eased himself up and reached toward the nightstand. Heidi, rather than lose the momentum, reached for his penis and began to stroke it while he

tore open the condom wrapper. Once it was open, she gingerly plucked it from his finger and rolled it on.

Paul eased himself down until he was lying on top of her, with his penis rubbing against her pelvic bone and began to slowly thrust back and forth, increasing his excitement. Pausing briefly, he asked, "Is there a certain way you want me to come inside you?"

Once again using the finger-on-the-lips method, she stopped him and replied, "That is entirely up to you. But don't tell me how you want me, guide me there.

It took Paul a second to process what she had said, then, understanding, he pushed himself up and, with her legs spread, he pushed his penis slowly into her vagina. Heidi, meanwhile, was caressing his back gently with her long nails. As he pushed in as far as he could, she dug her nails softly into his back. The shock pushed him in even further, and Heidi smiled.

Starting slowly, Paul began a slow, rhythmic back and forth, then lowered his mouth to Heidi's. As the tongue play intensified, so too did the speed of his penetration.

Jeremy, meanwhile, had ventured so far as to begin feeling Diane's breast as she worked her way up and down. The thought required to eventually decide that he was going to feel her breasts prevented him from fully enjoying Diane's efforts, but now that he had done it, his focus returned to the fellatio.

Diane was now cupping his testicles with one hand while moving up and down his penis with her other hand and surrounding it with her mouth. As she increased the up and down, he moved closer to climaxing, but Diane seemed to feel it and slowed. Lifting her lips off his penis, she asked, "Do you want to come this way?"

Jeremy didn't, as he still wanted to engage in vaginal intercourse and once he had come, he probably wasn't going to be able to again during the hour and a half they had allotted for their escapade. But he was certainly enjoying the fellatio. Reluctantly, he said, "No."

Continuing to stroke his penis, she continued, "How do you want to come, then?"

Jeremy wasn't sure what she meant, so his reply was framed more as a question than a specific response, "I thought we could try vaginal intercourse."

"Well, sure, but is there a specific position you like?"

Not expecting this response either, Jeremy just shrugged, "Not really."

"Okay," was all she said in response. Letting go of his penis, she reached over to the night stand and grabbed a condom. Jeremy, seeing what

she was doing, quickly removed his briefs. Tearing it open, she didn't hesitate as she slid it over his penis.

"How does that feel?" she asked.

"Fine."

"Well, I can just lay down then." As she said this, she pulled back the covers on her side of the bed and lay down.

Taking the cue and the initiative, Jeremy inched his way toward her and slowly eased himself on top of her. She still had on the chemise, but Jeremy knew she wasn't wearing anything underneath it. Straddling her, he lowered his head toward hers but came up just short of kissing her and instead kissed her neck. He paused, as he felt her stiffen just slightly. Raising himself back up, he paused, "Do you not want me to kiss you?"

She hesitated, then replied, "No, it's okay. I just wasn't expecting it."

She had stolen some of his thunder and she didn't sound too convinced, but Jeremy took her at her word and continued. Again dropping his head toward hers, this time he started at her cheek, moved to her mouth, then down her neck. His hands, meanwhile, had begun to edge the straps of the chemise off Diane's shoulders and pull it down slightly, exposing her breasts. Continuing the motion, Jeremy kissed down to one nipple, then took it into his mouth and sucked, gently at first but increasing the pressure just slightly. Forgetting her hesitation, he moved across her chest to the other nipple and repeated the motion. He had wanted to do this from the second he saw her in the chemise and now that he had, he was ready to continue with the intercourse.

Raising himself back up, he caught the end of a strange look on Diane's face as it quickly changed back to a low smile. Choosing to overlook it, he queried, "Do you want to keep your lingerie on?"

"I can take it off if you'd like."

Jeremy nodded, then helped her ease it up and over her head. He couldn't help but notice the small tuft of hair near her groin that was now exposed. Looking one last time into her eyes, he waited for a small nod from her, then spread her legs, lowered himself down, and eased his penis inside her.

Paul's rhythmic back-and-forth had sped up to a near feverish pace. Even had he wanted to, his motion was far too quick and powerful to allow him to continue kissing Heidi. A new look had spread across his face – he was lost in the pleasure of sex.

But the speed was short-lived, as his pace began to taper off. Heidi looked at him, inquisitively, and finally caught his attention, "Why are you stopping?"

“I don’t want to come in this position.”

“Go ahead,” she smiled as she said it. “I’ll make sure you get to try coming in a differing position.”

Paul cocked his head, not sure if he understood her. But even if he had, how did she plan to pull it off? He was, with few exceptions, a one-trick-stud.

“You sure?” he asked, trying to confirm what he had heard.

“If you’re willing to put in the work, so am I.”

“Okay.”

Closing his eyes, he slowly began increasing his speed of penetration, working his way back up to the feverish pace. Continuing at that pace for just a few moments, his eyes rolled back in his sockets and he propped himself up as high as he could on his arms for maximum penetration. Heidi, recognizing what was happening, grabbed his rear and dug in her nails enough to make it noticeable but avoid any pain.

In a matter of seconds, it was done. Paul reveled in the pleasure for several seconds, before slowly lowering his torso onto Heidi’s. He kissed her once, briefly, then lowered himself as far as he could, in essence collapsing on top of her. Heidi passed the fingers of one hand through his hair and rubbed his back gently with the other while waiting for Paul’s resolution stage to pass.

They continued like this for a minute or two before Paul propped himself back up to look in Heidi’s eyes. “Amazing,” he whispered, kissing her again.

Heidi took this as a cue that his resolution period after orgasm was completed. Using the kissing as a distraction, she again took control and rolled him onto his back. Raising her pelvis up, she allowed his penis to come out. Deftly, she removed the used condom. As she tossed it into a nearby garbage can, she also grabbed a napkin and wiped both of them clean.

Scooting herself lower on Paul’s legs, she angled her head towards his chest and kissed his nipples. Slowly, ever so slowly, she began to kiss down his torso, across his stomach, and moved toward his groin. As she grew closer to his groin, she enclosed his limp yet blood-soaked penis in one hand and began to coax it ever so softly. Paul moaned softly in response.

Heidi’s kissing moved to his penis even while she continued stroking it with her hand for several minutes. To Paul’s surprise, his recently lost erection began to return. As his penis grew harder, almost to the point of a full erection, Heidi looked up from her work and smiled, knowingly.

At a loss for words, Paul repeated his earlier whisper, “Amazing!” and closed his eyes in a preternatural ecstasy.

When his penis was completely hardened, Heidi took it into her mouth and gradually began to bob up and down, emulating the sensation of vaginal penetration Paul had been experiencing moments earlier. She continued to increase the pace until she felt Paul's abdomen tighten, indicating he was nearing orgasm. She then dropped the pace to a near standstill and removed her mouth.

“You wanted to try a different position?”

Paul opened his eyes from his dream of rapture and took a second to process what she was saying. He had wanted to try a different position, and to his surprise, she had prepped him to come a second time. Paul nodded sensually.

Leaving one hand on his throbbing penis, Heidi reached back to the nightstand and grabbed another condom. Biting it open, she unrolled it onto his penis and tossed the wrapper toward the garbage.

Paul, prepped and with a free ticket to try whatever position he wanted, sat up quickly and kissed her breasts deeply, before easing her off him. He then moved to the side of the bed and stood, then tugged on Heidi's leg and gently pulled her toward him. Following her advice earlier and simply positioning her with prompts from his hands, he turned her onto her back with her pelvis at the edge of the bed. Raising her legs nearly straight up, he pressed his penis into her exposed vagina and began to rock back and forth. His pace quickened, briefly, but plateaued. He was preventing himself from coming just yet.

He continued at the same pace for a minute or two, and then pulled out. Again using his hands to guide her, he turned her on to her stomach and had her stand, leaning over the bed. Entering her vagina from behind, he placed his hands on her upper thighs to anchor his motion and quickly turned up the steam. Reaching a frantic pace, his back and forth humping suddenly stopped as he pressed his penis as far in as possible and ejaculated for a second time within twenty minutes. Paul's eyes closed slowly and re-opened with his eyes swimming in their sockets. His face mildly contorted as he experienced the primal pleasure of intercourse.

When the climax had ended, Heidi carefully leaned forward, extricating Paul's penis, and turned around to face him. Smiling, exultantly, at the look of pleasure on Paul's face, she pulled him toward her then laid him down next to her on the bed. Looking into each other's eyes, they simply lay there, soaking up the moment.

Jeremy's pace of penetration increased very slowly. He interlaced it with random kisses on Diane's face and neck. He also eased a hand down and cupped her breast, kneading it gently. As his pace intensified, so did the force of his kisses and the pressure he used in kneading her breast. Lost in his

efforts, Jeremy didn't seem to notice the increasing discomfort inching its way onto Diane's face.

As he reached his fastest pace and neared climax, he closed his eyes and pressed himself against her even harder. Forgoing the kissing for maximum penetration, he propped himself up off Diane's torso slightly and his pace surged in a final burst of excitement.

When his eyes finally shuttered open, Diane was smiling at him, weakly. Not understanding the look on her face, he queried, "Are you alright?"

Diane nodded, but it was unconvincing.

He pulled his penis out and said, "You don't seem alright."

"Sorry..." she replied, hesitatingly. "It's just that my breasts are very sensitive and you kind of squeezed them too hard. It was just a little uncomfortable is all."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean too..."

"No, don't worry about it. They're okay now. The one you were playing with is just a bit sore, but I'm fine."

Dropping to her side, he collapsed uncomfortably onto the bed.

"Diane, I'm really sorry. I didn't realize it was so uncomfortable for you. I guess I just... I guess I just got lost in the moment." Jeremy looked very apologetic.

"Really, it's okay. I understand that when men get excited, it's harder for them to think. I know you didn't intend to hurt me and I think my breasts are overly sensitive. So, don't worry about it." She seemed sincere, but Jeremy was still worried.

"I'm really sorry. Is there something I can do...?"

Diane could see his apology was heartfelt and was beginning to realize that the situation was growing increasingly uncomfortable. "Well, once you remove your condom, if you want to... Nah, it's okay..."

"No, really, what?" He began removing the condom and wrapped it carefully in a tissue before tossing it onto the nightstand. "What can I do?"

"I just really like backrubs. Paul occasionally gives me one after we make love and it helps me relax."

Jeremy nodded, enthusiastically, "Sure, I'd be happy to." He paused, tempering his enthusiasm momentarily. "But will you tell me if I'm hurting you or if you like it better one way than another?"

"Yeah... Just don't do it too hard."

Jeremy scooted in closer to her and looked her in the eyes, intently, "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

“I know... It’s okay.”

With that, she kissed him once, dryly, on his cheek and rolled on to her stomach. Jeremy sat up, straddled her, and slowly began massaging her back. He started very softly, not wanting to repeat his earlier mistake.

It wasn’t long before she began giving him instructions, “You can do it a little harder” and “Over to the right a little bit.” She may not have gotten aroused during the sex part of the encounter, but at least she was getting a good back rub out of it.

Sitting gingerly on her rear, Jeremy did his best to focus on the back rub, but his naked penis was touching Diane’s naked rear at the small of her back, and it became increasingly distracting as he began to get aroused a second time. He dutifully continued the massage, following Diane’s instructions, until Diane seemed to notice.

“Is your penis getting hard again?” She was remarkably frank.

“Uhh... Yeah.” He paused, then continued apologetically, “Sorry. It’s just rubbing against you as I move around for the massage. And, you are attractive and naked.” He wanted to say, ‘and you’re not my wife,’ but thought better of it.

“Did you want to come again?”

“I’m happy just giving you a massage.”

“If you want to do it again, we can, just so long as you don’t put too much pressure on my breasts.”

“Really, I’m fine just doing a massage.”

Diane, if anything, wasn’t stupid. She knew that if he had gotten a second erection he would want to come again. Suddenly turning herself over with him still on top of her, she looked first at his penis then at him, and insisted, “I know that it hurts if you get turned on but don’t ejaculate. I can make you come again.”

“But I don’t want to hurt you and I was enjoying giving you the massage.”

“Apparently...” It was the first humorous thing she had said since they had begun their encounter and it eased some of the tension.

Rather than ask again, she simply reached toward his penis and began to stroke it. Not knowing how to respond, Jeremy leaned back slightly and let her continue. With her second hand, she cupped his testicles and gently rubbed them. Increasing her pace, she worked intentionally toward a quick orgasm and was not disappointed. Just a minute or two after beginning to stroke his penis, he climaxed. Capping one hand over his penis, she caught the bulk of the ejaculate and held on for a few more seconds to maximize his pleasure.

Jeremy was amazed at how skillfully she had brought him to climax the second time. When she let go, finally, he collapsed onto the bed beside her. She reached over to the night stand and grabbed several tissues. She used one to wipe the semen from her hand and handed the other to Jeremy to clean himself.

Once everything was clean, she rolled to the side of the bed and stood. “I need to use the restroom. While I’m at it, I figured I’d just change back into my clothes as our time’s just about up.”

Jeremy nodded, dully. He was still in his male, post-coitus stupor.

Diane gathered her chemise and disappeared into the bathroom.

Paul and Heidi laid next to each other, saying very little, for several minutes. Gently rubbing each other’s bodies, they periodically locked eyes and smiled.

Finally, Paul spoke, “Did... Was that... Did I get you turned on when I was...”

Before he could finish, she cut him off, “I can fake an orgasm, but I chose not to. It was very good.”

“Is it easier for you to get turned on that way? I mean, orally rather than vaginally?”

“That’s the only way I can get turned on.” She blushed, slightly, and then continued, “I’m not sure why that is, but I’ve kind of learned just to accept it.”

“Okay.” He paused, then said, “I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t the only one enjoying myself.”

“Paul, don’t worry. I always enjoy myself during sex. I’m not sure how it works with other women, but for some reason I just happen to be a very sexual person. Whether I’m giving or receiving pleasure, I enjoy it.” What she didn’t realize was that the part she really enjoyed wasn’t the sex, per se, but the power that came along with it. While making love, she was always the superior partner, both intellectually and physically. She held her partner’s fate and controlled the outcome. Yes, it could be physically stimulating, but it was also psychologically empowering, for her at least.

“I think our time is up. We should get ready.”

Heidi nodded, gave Paul one last kiss, then rolled off the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

Paul rolled to the other side of the bed and began cleaning up and putting back on his clothes. He made a half-hearted effort to put the bed back

together while he waited for Heidi to finish getting ready in the bathroom. All the while, he was processing what had taken place in his mind.

Heidi took her time changing back into her clothes and fixing her hair. She also reapplied her perfume so Jeremy would not be bothered by the smell of Paul on her. She was a little nervous about reuniting with Jeremy, but wasn't anxious. As she put the finishing touches on her makeup, she smiled, resolutely, in the mirror. She came, he came, and she conquered. It was only with the very last smile that the bothersome question popped into her head: Was pleasuring men a sell-out of her womanhood?

She hated the question because she so often pleased her husband and had only recently been exposed to the question through the feminist literature a student had given her. She knew that sex was natural, but she also couldn't deny the power imbalance between the sexes. And even though she felt somewhat powerful while engaging in intercourse, she wasn't sure if she was actually in control or simply convincing herself she was in control to make the experience easier.

With a final inward pucker of her lips to spread her lipstick, she tucked everything into the duffel and opened the door. Paul was waiting on the edge of the poorly made bed. He stood as she exited and crossed to meet her.

"You ready?" he queried.

"Yep. Let's go see how things went for them."

Paul put his hand on the doorknob, but hesitated, "Um, one thing, before we go... That was really great, Heidi. You were amazing."

Heidi smiled and replied, "You weren't half bad yourself, Paul." Knowing a kiss would undo what she had just cleaned up, she took his hand and squeezed it softly.

Paul nodded and opened the door.

Jeremy put his clothes on and began to pace slowly around the room, waiting for Diane. While she had certainly been willing, she hadn't seemed to be excited to engage him in intercourse. He couldn't help but fixate on the possibility that their encounter tonight had ruined their friendship and that it would be too uncomfortable for them to get together again in the future as friends. Of course he had enjoyed himself, but it had also been very awkward. His inability to predict how things were going to turn out was irksome; he liked to know where he stood, and he certainly didn't know that right now.

Diane did, in fact, need to use the restroom and quickly did so. She often felt the need to urinate during sex, and often needed to afterward. She put her earlier clothes back on and tossed the chemise into a heap on the floor.

It would need to be washed. Rather than try to fix her hair, she decided it would be easiest just to pull it back.

As she pulled her hair back and reapplied her perfume, she was considering how things might have gone for Paul. Even though she and Heidi were very good friends, one thing they had never really discussed was sex. Of course they had talked about a few things, like how often they had sex and whether or not it was painful, but the actual act of intercourse was highly nuanced. Those nuances, in fact, were the primary reason they had agreed to swap partners for a night – to see how others engaged in intercourse. Diane couldn't help but wonder how Heidi approached sex.

For all her thinking about how Heidi approached sex, she seemed oblivious to how her approach might have been perceived. She hadn't considered that her frank approach to intercourse might reduce the romantic and intimate aspects of sex and make someone that was used to a more romantic and spontaneous format a bit uncomfortable. To her, sex was a biological act that involved the exchange of bodily fluids. It was messy and often pleasurable, even though she wasn't always being pleased. But in the end, it was Paul that wanted sex; she was fairly certain she could live without it entirely.

After a few minutes, the door opened and a re-dressed Diane emerged. She had pulled her hair back and Jeremy soon smelled a fresh application of perfume. He smiled, weakly, hoping for a positive response. Diane smiled back, weakly, then moved toward the door.

“You ready?”

He nodded, and followed her toward the door.

As she opened it, he reached an arm out to her shoulder and touched her softly, “Diane, wait.”

She turned to face him, a look of worry taking over her face, “What?”

“Are we...” he motioned between them, “Are we okay?”

The look of worry disappeared as she realized he was concerned about what they had just done. “Of course. Jeremy, think of it as an experiment. We wanted to know what it was like to make love to someone else and now we know.”

He visibly relaxed somewhat, but this also gave him the courage to ask his follow-up questions, “Okay. But, did you enjoy it and would you do it again?”

Diane hedged, a little surprised by the questions and by Jeremy's forthrightness. “Well, it was certainly interesting and I'm not sure yet if I'd do it again. I'll have to think about that.”

“That makes sense. But you're sure we're okay?”

“Jeremy, it was just sex. People do this all the time. We do this all the time. It’s not going to affect our relationship...” She hesitated, realizing what she was saying, then rephrased her thought, “It probably will affect our relationship, at least a little bit. But we’ll still be friends. Don’t worry about it. Okay?”

Jeremy nodded. He needed her reassurance. “Alright. Let’s go meet them, then.”

Diane turned away from him, shot one more glance at him to let him know it was okay, then led him down the hall.

Paul and Heidi reached the front room first. Knowing that Jeremy and Heidi were going to leave right after the exchange, they didn’t sit but instead leaned against the back of the couch. Heidi set the duffle down and reached for her and Jeremy’s jackets. Paul held Jeremy’s while she put hers on, then returned it to her.

They sat in silence for a moment or two, then Paul asked, “How do you think it went for them?”

Heidi’s delayed response indicated she was seriously considering the question. She finally replied, “I’m not sure. Jeremy’s a little shy... Well, not shy, but he isn’t one for taking charge during sex. So, I’m not sure. It will be interesting to hear how things went with them.”

“Hmm... That is interesting. Diane is usually not very insistent during sex either, though she can be with certain things. Yeah, I’m not sure.”

Heidi smiled and turned to Paul before asking, “So, what are you going to tell Diane about how things went for us?”

Paul froze, not sure how to respond. Was he going to tell Diane that his encounter with Heidi had been the most amazing sex he had had in years? Luckily, he didn’t have to answer Heidi’s question as Diane and Jeremy exited from the hallway into the front room.

Diane was the first to say ‘Hi’ and a flurry of greetings followed. Paul and Heidi straightened up and moved to greet their spouses.

Paul was the first to say anything, even though it wasn’t much, “So?”

Diane was quick to respond, “So... We agreed we’d discuss the experience next week when we get together to play cards.”

Everyone’s heads nodded, remembering the agreement.

Diane continued, “It seems odd for you to just leave, but that is what we agreed to do.”

Heidi replied, “Well, we don’t have to follow our plans exactly.”

Jeremy now chimed in with his opinion, “No, we don’t. But perhaps it’s best if we talk with our spouses about the experience first before we talk together as couples. What do you think?”

Everyone seemed to agree with that logic and Paul summed it up, “Okay then. It’s settled. Um, Jeremy, Heidi has your jacket.” As he said Jeremy’s name, he looked into his eyes and realized that things were different between them. It was as if they had both just found out that the other person had had an affair. This, in fact, was what they had just done, though it wasn’t really much of an affair considering they had agreed to do it. Either way, the look indicated that something had definitely changed between them.

Heidi handed Jeremy his jacket and, strangely, Diane helped him put it on. She only did this because she was still standing next to him, but it seemed odd considering she had never done it before. They all noticed it, including Diane, but they said nothing.

Paul again took charge, “Alright. Well, if you need anything or forgot anything, give us a call or instant message us.” He walked slowly toward the door as he said this. The others followed and he opened the door as they arrived.

Diane piped up as Jeremy and Heidi made their way out the door, “Drive safe.”

Jeremy and Heidi both replied with customary farewells as Jeremy closed the door.

Turning to his wife, he raised his eyebrows in inquiry. Strangely, Diane did the same. There was an awkward feeling in the air.

“That was weird,” Diane was the first to speak.

“Yes it was.”

“So, what do you think? Did you like it?”

Paul thought for a minute then realized this was a loaded question. If he said yes, that he liked it, was Diane going to think that he meant he liked it better than having sex with her? But if he said no, she’d know he was lying. She knew that he had been curious about what sex would be like with another woman for a long time. Donning a politician’s care in phrasing his response, he replied, “Well, of course I liked it, as a man. It was sex, after all. But it was very... Um... What’s the word? It was interesting.”

“Interesting good or interesting bad?”

He paused. She knew ‘interesting’ was a euphemism and she wasn’t letting him off the hook. Maybe, just maybe, “Just interesting. I’m still

processing what happened. But what about you? What was your experience like?”

“It was just sex. Jeremy does have a strange looking penis – it has a weird curve in it that felt weird – but it was just sex.”

“I thought you thought all penises were strange looking?”

They laughed, briefly, then Paul continued, “So it didn’t seem any different than sex with me?”

“Not really. Men get aroused and ejaculate. Of course the smells were different, and it was awkward doing it with someone for whom I don’t feel any real attraction, but in the end, sex was just sex. It wasn’t anything special. Was it for you?”

He had been raised in a home where he was taught never to lie. Now that he no longer followed the precepts of the religion of his youth and did not adhere to a black and white moral system, he knew that there were times when a lie was a better and safer answer than the truth. He just wasn’t sure if this was one of those times. As he weighed his options, he realized that Diane was realizing he was thinking too hard. He wasn’t going to be able to lie now because she knew something was up. But if he couldn’t lie, at the minimum he was going to have to minimize the difference; but how?

“Well, let’s just say that Heidi is...” He was looking for a good word, “Heidi’s enthusiastic.” The moment he said it he knew it was the wrong word.

“Enthusiastic?” Diane repeated it as a question, confirming that was what he meant.

“Well, in the sense that she really jumps right into it. I mean, it’s not that you’re not enthusiastic, it’s just that...” He’d dug himself a hole. The only way to get out was to deny that it was a hole; maybe he should become a politician...

“Look, we said we weren’t going to compare this experience with sex with each other. I don’t think it will do us any good if we do.”

“But Paul, you’re going to be comparing the two experiences in your mind anyway. You may as well tell me what it is your thinking. What do you mean by enthusiastic?”

“Well, she... She kind of threw herself at me and... It was just different.”

“So, you’d like it if I threw myself at you? You want someone that does that?” It wasn’t really fair for Diane to make the comparison, especially since that wasn’t Paul’s intent. To Diane it seemed that Paul was indicating Heidi was better than she was. But the conversation’s tone had changed with her statement – it was no longer an informative discussion but was instead the beginning of an emotionally charged fight.

“Well, no, not necessarily. It was just different. Look, I’m sorry I even said anything because now you’re going to be thinking about that. I’m not saying sex with you isn’t good, it was just different.”

“I’m not going to dwell on that, Paul, but it would be a lie to say that it isn’t going to affect me or make me wonder what you’re thinking the next time we make love.”

“Look, Diane, the whole reason we did this was to see if sex with other people was different. You didn’t seem to think that it was, but I did. Is it wrong for me to admit that?”

She paused. He had a point; she had asked and, even though she had wanted his answer to be the same as hers, she also didn’t want him to lie to make her happy while he was thinking something different. But she still wasn’t satisfied that he wasn’t ranking Heidi higher than he ranked her, “So you want me to throw myself at you. Is that it?”

Paul hadn’t caught on that Diane was feeling like she was being ranked against Heidi, so he responded to her question without imputing additional meaning, “No. That’s not it. I mean, sure, every once in a while it probably wouldn’t hurt if we were to do something different with our sex life. But no, I don’t want you to be Heidi. I want you to be Diane, the person I married.”

“But you enjoyed sex with her?”

“I already told you – I’m a man; men enjoy having sex. It could have been Heidi or it could have been Winona Ryder; a woman’s a woman.”

“You already said that. But did you like it better with her than with me?”

Paul was getting frustrated now because he knew there wasn’t a good answer to this question. He scratched his head intently to indicate his hesitation, then it hit him, “Diane, I’m not saying that Heidi is better than you are in bed. All I’m saying is that it was different. Better, worse, it doesn’t matter. It was different.” He paused, weighing whether it was the appropriate time for a reference to his sociological studies, then decided it was.

“Look, just because something is different does not inherently mean that one is better than the other. There are some people that think that; some feminists make that argument, claiming that as long as people make the distinction between men and women, they are also claiming that one is better or worse than the other. Neither you nor I believe that men are better than women or vice versa. They are different – there’s no denying that – but that doesn’t make one better or worse than the other.”

Diane nodded, knowing he had a very strong argument here, but her intellect was having a hard time convincing her emotions – she was feeling jealous and threatened and a philosophical discussion wasn’t going to fix that. But Paul, not realizing that, continued.

“So, when I say sex with Heidi was different, I don’t mean to imply that it was better or worse, just that it was different.”

“I understand that, Paul. I could say the same thing about sex with Jeremy, it was very similar to sex with you, while different at the same time. But my point is, you seemed to really enjoy sex with Heidi.”

Jumping into her sentence, Paul said, “I already told you, I enjoy having sex. You know that.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean... Would you want to do it again? That’s what I want to know. Would you want to do it again?”

“I’m not sure...” He paused, then tried to turn the question back on her, “Would you?”

“That’s not the issue.”

“But it is, at least in part, the issue. If you can ask me, I can ask you.”

“But you don’t seem bothered by the fact that I just had sex with another man.”

“Why are you bothered by the fact that I just had sex with another woman? We agreed that we were going to be okay with this. Was it unreasonable for me to take you at your word that you wouldn’t be bothered by it?”

An awkward pause ensued as they realized they were talking past each other and not with each other. Diane felt like he enjoyed sex with Heidi more than sex with her and Paul just wanted her to realize that, while he had enjoyed it, it didn’t mean he didn’t love her. But they didn’t seem to be able to get their points across to the other person.

Paul finally made a stab at it, “Look, just because I enjoyed sex with Heidi doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy sex with you and don’t love you. I do love you; having sex with someone else doesn’t change that.”

Diane realized that that was what she had wanted to hear all along. She just needed to know that he still loved her. She still felt a little wary that maybe there was something more there; that perhaps he found Heidi more attractive than her or cared about her, but what she needed was for him to love her.

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course I do.”

“So it doesn’t matter that you had sex with another woman; you love me?”

It was beginning to make sense to Paul – Diane felt threatened. She could handle the threat to her sexual prowess, but not the threat to her relationship with Paul and her sense of comfort that stemmed from knowing she was loved.

“Diane, it was just sex. At the end of the day... Right now, I don’t want to be with Heidi. I want to be with you.”

“But you said that it was different...”

“Sure, it was different, but that doesn’t change the way I feel about you. I could have sex with any number of women and it wouldn’t change the fact that I care deeply about you. It’s just like looking at porn or watching an erotic movie or seeing an attractive woman – they may get me turned on, but that is a biological reaction. I can have that reaction with a lot of women. And, if I hadn’t met you, I probably would have developed a loving relationship with someone else – we aren’t all destined for one specific lover and you know that. But the point is, even though I’ve had sex with someone else, I choose you to be with. I care about you and enjoy being with you.”

She had teared up during his diatribe. She was hesitant to admit it, but she was beginning to realize he was right. In fact, what they had done that night had illustrated his point – even though she had made love to Jeremy and it was different, it didn’t really change the way she felt about Paul. She had tried something different and realized it was different, but it was just an experiment for her. In the end, she was still in love with Paul.

“So you don’t want to be with Heidi?”

“Diane, I care about you. I want to be with you. Would I have sex with Heidi again? Possibly. But I would never do anything like that until I had cleared it with you because I care about you and how you feel. If you say right now, after having tried sex with someone else for the first time, that you never want to do that again, I never would, because that’s what you want. I may wonder what sex is like with other women and may even want to find out at times, but my priority is our relationship. It’s that simple. If you aren’t okay with it, then it won’t happen. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“That our relationship comes first.”

“Exactly.”

“So you don’t care if you ever have sex with anyone other than me?”

“Why would I? I’m getting sex and I’m with the person I love. What more do I need?”

“Then why did we do what we did tonight?”

“Because we could and we wanted to and we wanted to see what it was like.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Her emotions were still in turmoil and she still had questions, but she knew Paul loved her despite having had sex with someone else. She hesitated

then looked him in the eye, “I care about you, too. Being with Jeremy didn’t change that.”

Paul opened his arms, and with a soft, “Come here,” he wrapped her close to him. It had been awkward and would continue to be awkward as they worked through things, but they had each other, and that was enough to get them through.