

The Attic
By: Richard Hempton

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to and is in loving memory of:

Manuel

Acknowledgments

The following are the people without whose help, this nightmare would never have become a written story.

The Lord Jesus Christ
Neyda Hempton
Richard Hempton III
Bonnie Hempton
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Many others who inspired me

Special thanks to Author Frank Peretti; who laid many of the ground rules of angels and demons for me.

Characters Based on Real People

Mary Leah Rivera
Justicio Rivera
Juancarlo Rivera
Kelinda Munoz
Martin Rivera
Alex Munoz
Juancarlo Raza
Marylia Raza
Matteo Raza
Jimmy Raza
Mandy Noon
Bobby Noon
Tam Griniard
Nanny Mom
Poppa Dick
Nanny
Grampa Ray
John, the Apostle
Gaius
Demetrius
Simon Tordarelli
John Team
Rick Hemilton
Richard Hemilton
August Hemilton

Introduction

On February 16, 1999 I woke from a nightmare. This particular nightmare was different than any one I can remember for three reasons. First, it began as a frightening dream but became one from which I did not want to wake. I do not remember that ever happening to me at any time. Second, I did not forget it. I could not forget it. Most dreams I have had are completely gone from my memory by the time I begin brushing my teeth in the morning, regardless of how horrible or wonderful they have been. In fact, I was still pondering the dream on my way to work, which brings me to the third unusual thing about the dream.

As I drove West on I-20, through the heart of Atlanta, Georgia, listening to my favorite Christian radio station, WWEV, and taking the dream apart in my mind, I realized that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Doctor Jeckyl and Mister Hyde* from a nightmare. In that moment an idea was driven into my brain as a hammer drives a nail. I would write a book.

As thousands of white lines on the highway flew past me, nearly as many wonderful ideas did the same. I knew that the wonderful God of Heaven had given me the dream as well as the motivation to make it into a story. He gave me so much in such a short period of time that, when I reached the small Winn Dixie pharmacy in Powder Springs, I began writing as quickly as I could in between each prescription that I filled. One of the things he showed me was how dozens of Christian principles straight from his holy word could be incorporated into a work of fiction that people who would never think of reading another type of Christian book may read and have to consider.

My son, Richard was my dream and one of the first things I did upon reaching the pharmacy where I worked that day was to call my son and discuss the entire thing with him. Upon doing so, I discovered that he had had a similar dream only days before. It was a wonderful confirmation. It became necessary, therefore, to use three distinct points of view in the story; mine, my son's and that of an omniscient third party, a narrator. To keep the story from becoming confusing to the reader, however, I made certain that I made clear in the first sentence, where possible and always in the first paragraph, exactly whose point of view that part of the story was being told from.

The finished story involved an entire small town. The list of characters therefore is extremely extensive. There may be too many, I fear, for a reader under normal circumstances to keep up with. I eliminated every character that was not essential to the story and, unfortunately, the stories and interesting circumstances that they brought to the book. The list of characters remained quite extensive. I have, therefore, included an appendix (appendix II) identifying and describing the characters as a quick reference. It is designed to be included with a page tab so that it may be turned to almost instantaneously. I sincerely hope that the appendix will be an aid and not a hindrance to the reader. If a particular character is not found in the appendix, it is because that character was only important to the particular scene in which he/she was found and not important enough to have to remember.

It is my sincere wish that each reader will, not only enjoy the story, but also use the Christian principles included. The idea of the Kesane was not mine but came from my dream. I believe it was a gift from our God.

Rick

Double space
Between
Paragraphs

THE ATTIC

Richard Dean Hempton

“Caraaash! Boom! Smaash! Kaboom! Grrraaah! Boom! Smash! Crunch! Grrr! Silence!”

“Dad!” exclaimed my son, Richard, his wide eyes full of terror. The noise had come from somewhere upstairs, probably not the second floor, judging from the depth of the muffle, but the third floor, the attic.

Richard continued to look at me with that trademark Richard Hemilton III question mark face. “Did you hear that, Dad?” He was asking more for reassurance than to find out what I had heard. It was really much too loud to have escaped even my limited hearing.

The noise had me terrified, especially since there was a definite other worldly bellowing and growling mixed in with the crashes, smashes and booms. But I did not want to have my 22-year-old son remain in a state of panic. So, I put on the false calmness that I thought he would most likely believe.

I slowly got to my feet, looking bored but perturbed that someone had disturbed me from my comfortable spot. I was wearing my white shirt with button-down collar, Blue jeans and black hiking boots “I thought you said we’d be the only ones here, Richard.”

“Matty told me that no one would be here but us until he gets here sometime this week.” He said nervously.

“Then,” I said, as I walked toward the dining room where we had hastily set down all of our things including our guns and hunting gear, “It looks like we may not have to go anywhere to get a bear.”

“How do you know it’s a bear?” he asked, a bit of fright still in his voice. His question told me two things: one, that my calm exterior had not been completely successful, and two, that he had detected the quality of the wild sounding voice as I had. I thought of it as a voice because it didn’t sound much like a bear but more like a monstrously large man.

“Well, it’s too big to be a rat,” I said as I began pushing ammunition into my Benefield 0.480 caliber high powered rifle, “and it’s too stupid to be a burglar.” One thing was for certain: unless what ever it was was significantly larger than an elephant, my Benefield would bring it down with one good shot.

I shoved my 9mm Remington down the front of my pants just in case. “You want to come or just wait here?” I asked Richard, “I won’t be but a few minutes.”

He left the couch like he was sitting on a hot stove. “Wait, Dad. I’m going with you.” He wasted no time loading his 30.06.

My son was dressed as he usually was, in a loose fitting pair of jeans, two floppy T-shirts and a large pair of boots.

Did I
read this
in another
place?

Dressed as we were, we began our ascent of the huge dark stained oak staircase in the large recluse of a house far up in the well-forested Cascade Mountains of Northern Washington State.

The house belonged to the family of Mateo Raza, a college friend of Richard's. It was where Matty grew up along with his two sisters and older brother. His father built the house into the side of the mountain in such a way that the walls of the back of the house were actually the solid rock of the mountain with the rooms at the back of the house being carved into it.

Richard and I came to the house ostensibly as hunters for bear, or "hunting bare", as we laughingly said to one another on the trip from Atlanta. The reality of the situation was, however, that neither one of us cared whether we actually got a squirrel, let alone a bear. We just needed the time together away from the trials and stress of the world.

Richard was working himself to death at three different jobs, none of which was in his chosen profession, acting. And I had just lost my job of 13 years as well as having been diagnosed with a very lethal form of lung cancer (I had not shared the latter fact with anyone). We both needed the rest badly. So, when Matty made the offer we wasted no time accepting. I would even have thanked God had I been convinced of his existence.

Unfortunately, due to the condition of the mountain roads, we did not arrive at the Raza house until after dark. We were exhausted and decided to postpone the house exploration until morning. So, when Richard and I made it to the upper landing of the staircase, it was only then that we knew that we would make the left turn to quietly climb the remaining dozen or so stairs and stop in the frozen blackness of the second floor hallway.

When the noises from the upstairs spooked Richard and I, we had been relaxing with the television on, eating the sandwiches that we had brought to the house with us. I was half watching the tube and half thinking about where life had been taking me. I could tell that Richard was also doing the half-and-half. He was watching the television while he dictated into his hand-held tape recorder, a device that he was rarely without.

After shouldering his 30.06, Richard made just enough light with the Zippo from his pocket for just long enough to give us both the high creeps. We saw a hallway from out of the depths of a Stephen King horror novel. It reminded me of the gullet of some huge creature and we were preparing to walk the length of it right into its gurgling stomach. The scenario was intensified by the fact that, although we could see well into the darkness, we could not see the end of the hallway. When I turned on the light we could see the end of the hall but only one of the six wall lamp units was working and it was at the opposite end of the hall. The hall ceiling was very high, at least ten feet. From about shoulder height to the floor was the same dark stained oak as on the stairs. The scary thing about wood finish is that when you are already frightened, you tend to see hideous evil laughing faces and grotesque shapes in the wood grain. As adolescent as it sounds, that hallway was full of them.

The floor was the same dark color and it all soaked up the light. From the oak paneling to the brown orange ceiling was eerie rose patterned wallpaper that looked too much like large eyes. We both looked at each other. I shrugged, "Jeez, maybe we should've left the lights out." Richard managed a nervous grin.

It was well beyond freezing upstairs and our breath filled the hallway and hung in the air like fog. Having left the television downstairs, we could now hear the howling of the February wind, shrieking like some terrible and relentless arctic banshee.

Seven doors were visible including the door to the master bath behind us, the two on the left, the three on the right and the one at the opposite end of the hall.

"I know which door is to the attic." My son whispered sarcastically.

"When I was a kid," I told him, "I once lived in a house where the attic door was in the closet of one of the upstairs bedrooms. And in Nanny and Grampa's house, the door was inside the bathroom."

"Well, that certainly narrows it down." He answered with more of his famous sarcasm. My son was afraid. It was evident not only from his facial expressions but from the way he joked. He had always made jokes when he was afraid, a trait I am sure he acquired from his father.

In fact, we did find another door when we looked in the bathroom. But, it only led to the master bedroom, which had no attic door, either.

Going back out into the hall through the main entrance of the master bedroom, we crossed the hall into a smaller bathroom with a closet but no attic door. We crossed the hall again into a large bedroom, crossed again into a smaller bedroom and again into another larger bedroom. All of the rooms were still furnished just as they must have been when the Raza family all lived there except the last one, which was completely empty but for the drop clothes, painting paraphernalia and smell of fresh wall paint. None of the rooms had an attic door. The only door left was the one at the opposite end of the hall from the master bath.

"It's always the last place you look." I said softly with a stupid grin. It was a gift to my comedian son whom I knew could not resist it, even in a state of fear.

"Hey, did you find the attic?" he returned. "Yeah, but I'm having too much fun searching to quit now."

Both of our bottom jaws dropped when we opened the door and found more hallway and more doors. This hall, however, turned sharply to the right and to the left again with a door immediately to our left, which turned out to be a huge storage room made completely of cedar. The smell, normally quite pleasant, made me think of mothballs, ghosts and dead bodies, especially after seeing the four walk-in closets. None of these, as one might have guessed, had an attic door.

Reaching the door opposite the storage room took us past where the mammoth hallway turned back to the left. In the dim light, I could still see a door on the right, an opening on the left like a door and another door at the end of the hall.

"If there's another hallway behind that door," I told Richard, "Rod Serling is waiting there."

I saw a toothy smile coming over his face but, at the same time, the wind outside must have picked up. I could feel it surge from under the door in front of us and, from the door just behind us, the one that was open, letting in the light from the previous hallway, came the thing that almost caused two heart attacks.

"Bam!" Like an explosion that knocked out all of the lights, the door slammed from the surge of wind, leaving us to jump out of our skin in total darkness. I could feel my heart trying to punch it's way out of my chest as the adrenaline-tingles shot through my

body in all directions. I thought I could hear Richard's heart as well. I reached out and touched his arm to let him know that everything was okay.

"I do believe in spooks. I do believe in spooks." I quoted from *The Wizard of Oz*. Right then, I could well identify with the Cowardly Lion.

"You'll believe in more than spooks before I'm through, Lion." It was Richard's best Wicked Witch of the West impression. I thought a little humor would help him feel better and it did.

Just then I turned back toward the door and took a step directly onto a piece of hard candy or glass or something. It made a loud "Pop!"

"Dad!" exclaimed Rich with the same tonality as one uses when someone jumps out from behind something and shouts "Boo!"

"It's okay, Rich. I just stepped on a piece of glass or something."

"Be careful!"

"Sorry, Bud." I reached behind him and rubbed his back. "It's okay. Don't be so tense. You watch out for glass too."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to yell. I just got..."

"I know. It's okay."

I felt for a light switch and found none but I knew that the strong draft would probably not allow Richard's Zippo to light. So, I reached out and turned the knob in front of me. I opened the door and the wind hit me. That told me that it was the attic. I put my foot forward to feel for a step and I found one, then another and, "Pop!" more glass.

I felt the wall and found two light switches but only the first one gave us any light. I turned to Rich and motioned for him to wait as I ascended the dark stairs.

The Razas must have had an affinity for dark wood because the attic stairs were darker than the stained oak of the front stairs. Another piece of glass popped as I put my full weight on it. I could feel more broken glass under my feet as I continued. Then another piece of glass crunched and, then another before I reached the top. I had to wonder from where all the glass was coming.

The second floor was very cold but with each step toward the attic, the cold intensified. Then I was beginning to detect a strange smell, a smell that was somehow familiar. It was not a bad smell. On the contrary, it was a rather pleasant smell, a clean smell and not a chemical clean but more like a kitten or a baby's hair smells clean.

Our sense of smell more than any of our other senses, can reach out, capture a memory and lock it away in our minds completely intact to be released again by that same smell. A memory can be brought back, often clearly, even from 70 years or more by a smell. Hearing a song that may have been "our song" to someone may bring back a few memories of a high school sweetheart but it just cannot match the olfactory system for bringing back memories.

That particular smell, although it brought back nothing clear and specific, did immediately bring thoughts of the house where my grandparents lived when I was very young. It was strange that I was in the Raza's house doing what I was and, at the same time thinking of Nanny and Grampa's house.

Almost at the top of the stair, I could see that four walls, which allowed for a small walkway completely around the staircase, forming a vestibule, surrounded the entire stairwell. The stairwell had its own light fixture, hence the two switches at the bottom of the stair. The second switch was, presumably for the rest of the attic.

The attic vestibule was quite beautiful with more rose pattern wallpaper on each of the four walls and an intricately carved dark wood banister on three sides of the (well) At the opposite end from the top of the stairs was a set of double doors on either side of the vestibule, each leading out to their respective sides of the third floor. The vestibule ceiling was at least 12 feet high and ornately graced with a beautiful crystal chandelier similar to the one over the first floor staircase, only smaller.

I signaled Richard to turn the second switch on again and come up the stairs. Since the double doors on my right were wide open I could see the light come (in) and, as I reached the top of the stairs, the frozen wind was blowing lightly through the vestibule but like a bull elephant through the rest of the attic. At least one window had to be open.

By the time I had reached the open double door, crunching glass most of the way, Richard had reached the top of the stairs and, when I peeked through the double doors, I saw from where the glass had come.

As I stepped through the open doors into the screaming wind, I thought I was in a china shop shortly after the bull had come and gone. I saw glass, clay, porcelain and pewter collectibles as well as objects fashioned from other materials. These were set up in different ways on various pieces of display furniture.

There were bells of various sizes and shapes. Some were made of glass, some of porcelain, and some were made of a beautiful lead crystal. These were all arranged on the tops of glass-centered tables.

I saw figurines made of pewter, plastic and wood, of porcelain, glass and clay. Some of them were hand painted and many of them were of Biblical scenes – Jesus surrounded by children, all hand-painted pewter; *The Last Supper*, hand-painted porcelain; Daniel in the lion's den, a scene carved out of a single piece of wood; David and Goliath, two larger painted clay figures; Adam and Eve and the serpent. These things were mostly inside of two large display cabinets with sliding glass doors. All were very beautiful.

There were some other figurines too and, although these were a little on the weird side, they too, were beautiful. They were figures of creatures that resembled snowmen, "abominable snowmen," Bigfoot, Sasquatch, yeti, all synonymous. These, however, were portrayed as good and gentle. Some were in scenes with Jesus or with human children. Some were on their knees praying. I had never seen these imaginary animals portrayed in such a way but I liked it. It was like when you see a movie in which an actor, who always plays a villain, is playing a hero.

There were also plates, cups and spoons and wineglasses of various materials. Some of them brought to mind the legend of the Holy Grail. There were knick-knacks, crests and plaques, and even a jeweled metal cross under a glass cover.

Judging by the way the stands, tables and display cases were placed in a disarray rather than being arranged neatly, as one might expect such a collection to be arranged, they were probably brought up from the freshly painted room on the second floor. The "bear" apparently had stumbled or fallen into the center of the collection, causing the breakage of many of them.

Richard appeared at the double doors behind me and, with rifle ready, began a slow search of that side of the attic. There were many things stored on both sides, creating a number of possible hiding places.

Same as pg. 14

“Be careful, Rich.” I watched my son and I thought of how proud of him I was. Even if he did always dress like a slob, He was a fine young man, a young man that would make any father proud. He was responsible and able, intelligent and loving. I thought right then that I would hate to be anyone or anything that he was coming for with or without a rifle.

Richard stood six feet four inches tall and weighed at least 350 pounds without his huge shoes. The truth is that I knew that, deep inside, he was not the ‘frady-cat’ that I sometimes thought of him as. But when I remember all of the times that I tucked the little boy in and chased the boogiemens out of the closet and from under the bed, it was difficult for me to allow the man to be a man instead of a little boy.

My son has always made me proud but I become more aware of it on some occasions. I was even proud that he had found religion. I was proud that he had developed a belief and a devotion to something. I some times wished that I could do the same.

As I searched the opposite side of the attic, not really expecting to find anything, I remembered how, only a few hours earlier, Richard and I had pulled up outside the house, road weary and hungry. It was too dark to see the house well but the moonlight reflecting off of the snow was enough that we could see that it was large and beautiful. We were able to get the front door open and a couple of lights turned on. Rich unloaded the truck while I built a fire in the huge fireplace on the east wall of the living room. We decided, as we pulled the television and two couches from different ends of the ballroom sized living room close to the hearth, that we would sleep there, by the fire, for the night, eat the sandwiches we bought before we came up the mountain roads and get the heat turned on and explore the house in the morning.

We had just gotten warm and comfortable when the noises in the attic crashed both into our ears and into our evening.

I almost finished searching my side of the attic and had come to some open boxes. Of all of the things that could have been right on top of one of the boxes, there were ribbons, the same kind of yellow and red hair ribbons that Sippie, my wife who died, used to wear. God, I missed her. I could see her lying on her back on the bed looking up at me with those sky-blue eyes, so blue that they almost looked white at times. She was looking at me as if I was the most gorgeous and spellbinding man in the world. And she made me feel like I was.

She had those two velvet ribbons, the red one and the yellow one, together holding a ponytail that originated from the top of her head, like Barbara Eden in *I Dream of Genie*. She was so beautiful that I would have to catch my breath sometimes when I looked at her. I never found out what she saw in me that made her love me like she did but I was so very glad she saw it, whatever it was.

She was five-and-a-half feet tall with dark blonde hair and the most beautiful eyes I ever saw in my life. They were the brightest blue accented with very long thick dark lashes and when I looked into those eyes, the most important thing I saw was me. Her mind was always right there with me and never some where else. She was a one-man woman from the beginning. I trusted her and I knew that I could always

She had a band of strawberry freckles across her nose and that often made me think of her as a little girl. And often she was a little girl, as I remember. She did little girl things, like the time she studied for her differential equations exam by throwing the kids,

“Such beauty.” I said out loud. “Mother Nature, the artist.” The snow swirls danced with one another over beautiful February snowdrifts to the wild music of that relentless wind.

There is not much snow to see in Georgia. I do not mean that my state is not full of beauty. It is. But I had never before seen this kind of beauty. I was in awe of the way the snowdrifts looked and also at their size. They came all the way up the house, almost to the roof in places. Here, in the Cascade Range, under the full moon, it was as if everything outside was posing for a postcard for Washington in the winter.

As I placed my face up to the glass, I could smell that same homey smell that I smelled as a boy on my grand mother’s windows, that smell of old wood, old paint and dust.

It was difficult not to think things like “It had to be done by God. It’s too beautiful and perfect not to be. Right?” Then I said to myself, “Let me stop this thumb sucking.” But, still, as I went through life, knowing that I could wander where I pleased, I did find myself thinking of how much better it would be if there were fences to keep me from wandering too far to find my way back or to keep me from wandering in the wrong directions. I thought of how much better it would be if there really were a loving God to protect me from such things, a God who loved me as much as I loved my son. There was no such wonderful loving God. Logic alone told me that. I had been involved in science for too long to begin believing in fairy tales at that point in my life. Besides, even if I had missed something logically, and there was a God, loving me like I loved Richie was out of his league.

Small-minded people who believed that stuff never ceased to amaze me. They were so full of contradictions. God is love, right? It says so somewhere in the Bible. Well, if God is love, how could He have given me lung cancer? How could He have created all of the rotten things that had happened to me? How could He have done these things to someone He loves? I had never seen any kind of scientific proof but maybe there was a God. I did not know, but of one thing was certain: If there was a God, He did not love **this child**.

Suddenly, from behind me, I heard a loud wooden creak. I whirled around mostly from the reflex that goes with being startled, to see the source of the sound. Although I caught a glimpse of a shadow in quick movement, I saw nothing concrete. It was as if a face had been peeking around the door at me. Then it quickly pulled back.

I walked to the doorway and looked in both directions. I saw nothing. “Man, am I getting spooked. I need to get some sleep.” I said aloud and I started down the stairs.

Minutes later I was settling into my sleeping bag next to the fire and across from Rich, who was already snoring. The exhaustion of the day rocked me to the lullaby of the crackling fire. Soon I was dreaming.

* * * *

I woke feeling rested, even though it was still dark. Richard was gone and I could hear a pounding coming from upstairs. I ran for my rifle and up the front stairs without even trying to be quiet. As I ran the length of the upstairs hallway, along with the pounding, I could hear more of the growling and another sound. It was a very disturbing sound. The sound I heard was the sound of a child or a woman loudly weeping. It all

became louder as I reached for the attic door but stopped completely as I swung the door open. I started up the stairs holding my Benefield in the ready position.

Then I saw it. It stood at the top of the stairs with its hands outstretched toward me. It was huge; at least seven or eight feet tall, standing upright like a man. I raised my rifle to my shoulder, positioning my thumb to remove the safety.

Just then I saw the hands rotating, palms facing me as if to say "no" or "stop". Then a familiar voice shouted, "Dad! Wait! Its me!"

At that second I realized that the towering white-haired beast at the top of the stairs was my son.

I woke up drenched with sweat. I sat up and immediately saw Richard across from me on the other couch, still snoring. "What a relief. What a nightmare." I thought, but my son was safe and so was I. I laughed a nervous laugh. Richard's snoring was probably the growling I heard in my dream.

I crawled out of my soaked sleeping bag and shivered over to the fireplace to place two more logs on the fire, which increased the amount of light enough for me to see my way to the downstairs bathroom to shed my soaking wet underclothes and dry myself with the towel. I slipped on a T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts as quickly as my rapidly freezing body could move. Then, after I did the teeth-chattering bunny hop back to the living room, I turned my wet sleeping bag inside out and scrambled back inside.

Once I lay back down, I thought I had better massage my frozen toes, but before I could hardly get started, I was fast asleep.

There were bells of various sizes and shapes. Some were made of glass, some of porcelain, and some were made of a beautiful lead crystal. These were all arranged on the tops of glass-centered tables.

I saw figurines made of pewter, plastic and wood, of porcelain, glass and clay. Some of them were hand painted and many of them were of Biblical scenes – Jesus surrounded by children, all hand-painted pewter; *The Last Supper*, hand-painted porcelain; Daniel in the lion's den, a scene carved out of a single piece of wood; David and Goliath, two larger painted clay figures; Adam and Eve and the serpent. These things were mostly inside of two large display cabinets with sliding glass doors. All were very beautiful.

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Same as pg 10

a prayer before I did anything else. I promised that as soon as my feet hit the floor, my knees would immediately follow.

I knelt there beside the couch with my sleeping bag pulled tightly around me. I thanked him for letting me see another day. I thanked him for this time away with my dad. I thanked him for every blessing that I could think of and for those blessings that I could not think of right then, for those blessings that I was too short sighted or self centered to realize. I thanked him for spoiling me, his son, rotten with blessings that I did not even know about yet. I prayed for the knowledge of his will and for the strength to carry out my part. And I prayed for those close to me who had not accepted him yet. I prayed a special prayer for my dad, that the Lord would do whatever it took to show him the truth.

When I had finished praying, I tiptoed into the dining room, where we had hurriedly set most of our things the night before. I was thinking about the voices in my dream, "A man does not have to be hairy" I whispered as I removed my Bible from my backpack, "to be the Master's man."

I also removed my small battery-powered taped recorder. I seldom went anywhere without it. I used it to hold all my ideas, whatever came into my head that I did not want to forget. Sometimes I used it almost as a diary. I kept a journal but my tape recorder usually held the thoughts first. I pushed the record buttons and spoke softly into the recorder; "A man does not have to be hairy to be the master's man."

What in the world did that mean? Was it a message from God? Who was John and what significance did he have in my dream? Why were Matty's mom, dad and brother mentioned? I wanted it all to come together. I have learned that God does speak to us in ways that we must learn to recognize but I wished that, sometimes, he would just speak plainly and not in riddles that I had to strain to understand. Then I realized that he does, right there in my hand, his word. In the Bible He speaks very plainly.

I opened my Bible to the book of John as I got back onto the couch under my sleeping bag to get my nourishment for the day. "John!" I said to myself. Maybe I was supposed to read the book of John. I began to read "After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews were waiting to take his life." Was Jesus hairy? And what constitutes hairy? Was someone going to try to take my life? I could not get that dream conversation out of my mind. One thing was certain. I had been there less than 24 hours and being there, in that house, had already made an impact on me.

We had arrived the night before after dark and, being road tired, we decided to sleep in front of the fire instead of trying to get the heat turned on right then. We had quite a scare with some noises from the attic, which we investigated. My dad thought that it must have been a bear but we found only some human footprints in the snow outside. It bothered me, when I thought about it, that the prints led into the house but not back out again. I fell asleep pondering the fact. I am not sure which was stranger, the fact that they led in but not out, or that they were bare feet. I knew that the light of day would tell us more.

I heard movement and looked up to see my dad rousing from sleep. I watched him sit up slowly, still draped in his sleeping bag. And I watched his breath as he said something I have heard him say for 22 years, "Morning, Glory."

I have never understood the significance of the statement, except that it was something that his father always said. Many times I have pictured myself married with a family and waking them with a statement that I never fully understood but verbalized as part of my genetic framework, "Morning, Glory." I know that I will spout it to a collection of children who will scratch their heads, repeat it to themselves in wonderment and pass it on to their children, along with all of the other nonsensical genetically passed statements like, "Colder than well digger's behind" (I have heard variations of that one); "Hungrier than a female wolf on the back of an empty gut wagon" (I never understood that one); and "Get outer doors" (I never knew if that meant to go outside or to grow new body parts).

"Good morning, Dad. You sleep okay?" I have never quite known how to respond to "Morning, Glory."

"I slept fine, after the nightmare." Answered my dad with breath billowing. I was not certain if he meant that he had had a bad dream or if it was another genetically predetermined saying that I would never fully understand. I decided to take a chance.

"Nightmare?"

"Yeah, I dreamed about hairy monsters," he said with eyelids at half-mast.

"Hairy?" I thought "There's that word again." My response brought about an answer that took me off guard and I said aloud, "What kind of hairy monsters?"

"Big suckers, seven, eight feet tall. They were up in the attic, and the weirdest part was that you were one of them."

"Me?" I asked, my head still reeling from all the talk of hairiness. At that moment, it seemed to me that the word for the day must be "hairy".

I watched my father dress himself as he spoke. He put on a pair of jeans, a blue and white plaid flannel shirt and a pair of hiking boots. He wore white socks but he almost always wore white socks, even when he wore a coat and tie when he went to work. Seeing him in his present attire was strange to me. I was so used to seeing him in a pair of dress slacks and a dress shirt. He even dressed that way on the days that he was off work except he did not wear a tie.

As he shared with me the details of his dream, I could not help but suspect that there was a connection between it and the voices I heard in my dream. It reminded me that the Bible says somewhere in the book of Joel, and also in the book of Acts, that in the last days "I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions."

"Or, hear voices." I thought. I felt that poignant confusion that one experiences when several pieces of a mystery are about to come together. There was something definitely going on **with**, as well as **in** the house. I did not believe that our presence there was coincidental. I believed that God wanted us to get to the bottom of it. In fact, that was the only thing clear to me at the time.

While my dad swept up every little piece of tinder and put it onto the glowing embers in the fireplace, I watched the wood catch fire and blaze. My father has always been obsessed with not wasting anything. He often took it to silly extremes. He made sure that he swept up and used every little piece of tinder that was spilled onto the stone in front of the fireplace before reaching into the tinderbox to get more.

I watched the fire blaze and I thought that whatever was going on with the house was like those embers, which, at first glance, appeared to be completely out but, upon closer examination, one could see that they still glowed. I thought, as I walked to the kitchen to make some hot coffee, that we had to add tinder and fan those flames to get the needed answers but, first, we had to get some heat into that place.

Soon the aroma of fresh coffee could be detected throughout the downstairs. I sat facing my father, wrapped in my sleeping bag, with my cold hands around a hot cup of coffee. The coffee was very good, better than I usually made or, maybe it was just more appreciated in the icy cold. I held the mug close to my face and allowed the rich aroma to penetrate my nostrils and the rising steam to warm my face. I thought of a commercial I once had seen and I repeated it, "There's nothing quite as good as that first cup of coffee in the morning."

"Nothing but the second cup." I heard my dad answer. I sipped as deeply from my mug as the temperature of the wonderful hot liquid would allow. I felt the warmth go all the way down to my stomach. It was all good, not just the flavor and the warmth of the coffee, but also the realization that I was in a place away from the day-to-day madness that, too often, kept me from some of the really important things in life, like my relationship with my dad.

I had been working two part-time jobs and a full time job in Atlanta, where most of my family lived. It seemed that I was always just trying to make ends meet while I waited and searched for that big break that all actors dream about, hope for and pray for. I had allowed the business of everyday life to keep me from my relationship with my siblings and with my father. It felt so good to know that my dad still loved me and very much desired my love, my time and my company, in spite of the fact that we had drifted apart somewhat over the past few months. It felt good to know that he was still my dad and that he was still there for me.

"Dad," I said as I slurped my coffee, "let's see if we can get that furnace on."

"Good thinking, Rich-ter." He said through nearly chattering teeth. I do not know why he often called me Rich-ter, more genetically predetermined stuff, I suppose. I am not complaining about these personalized family colloquialisms, on the contrary. I have learned to love them, as I love my dad. And besides, considering all of the things he has been through in his life, it is a miracle that he is not more eccentric or even crazy.

He is a Vietnam veteran, you know. I like to tell that. It is one of the things about him that I am proud of. He could have gone to Canada. Many men who did not agree with the war did that. He chose, instead, to go to Vietnam, knowing that he might be killed. In fact, he almost was. He was in a tank that was blown up in a place called Subgum or Chow Mein or something. He was the only survivor. He was wounded and they sent him home.

Once in awhile, when his mood was just right, he would tell us, my sisters and me, about the war. He was filled with stories, most of which we had heard more than once, but we never told him that. We just listened. I have come to the conclusion that it is a kid's duty to listen to the stories of parents and grandparents several times, always as if they had never been told before.

My dad never had any "flashbacks" or went crazy and shot people like some of the Vietnam vets in the movies. He said that that was mostly hogwash, and that if a man were not insane when he went to Vietnam, he would usually not be crazy after he returned.

As I was saying, he was in some kind of tank that he called a "one one three", and boom! He said the next thing that he remembered being aware of was being in a helicopter on the way to a hospital in Saigon.

He was in the "First Cav". Cav, that is the abbreviated form of "cavalry". When I first heard him say it, I was very young and I thought he was saying "calf" and I pictured my dad as in one of those old westerns with his saber in his hand, charging into battle on a calf. It always makes me chuckle to think of it that way now.

Being blown up in the war was traumatic for my father but was not the end of the bad trip he was on. The same month that he was shipped home he married Barbie (I asked him if she called him Ken.), a girl he knew from high school. She was pregnant with his child, very pregnant. The very next month my sister Lizzie was born in Ireland Army hospital in Fort Knox, Kentucky, the same place that my sister, Mandy and I were born.

The following month Barbie left my sister with Nanny Mom, my paternal grandmother, and divorced my dad, then disappeared as soon as it was final.

After all of that, it is a miracle, to me, that my father is not completely certifiable. I believe that the reason that he did not go off the deep end, so to speak, is because of my mom, Melissa Elizabeth Beecham Hemilton. My dad met her shortly after Barbie disappeared. They dated for about six months and got married.

My mom adopted my sister but most people think that Lizzie is her natural child. They look alike and my sister's first name is the same as my mother's middle name. My mom always said that that was because God had planned the whole thing.

My mom's name was Mellissa but everyone called her Sippie. It was a name that went back to when her father, who died when she was young, made a parallel between her and the Mississippi river because he said that when she was little she went on and on. He called her Melississippi, which was later shortened to Sippie.

My mom and dad did everything together and I know that, as much as my mom's death hurt me, it hurt my dad many times more. She died almost eight years ago and he is still not over it, not that I am, but my dad becomes completely immobilized by it sometimes. He buried himself in his work at the Centers for Disease Control until he was completely burned out and became chronically late as well as absent due to his emotional state. They were happy to have him work himself to death but when his emotional health effected his job, rather than deal with the problem; they fired him in January.

My mother's death was very unexpected. She was killed in a car accident on April first. Sometimes I think he is still waiting to find out that it was just an April Fools' joke.

He has not often talked with me about his feelings, but I do remember that I came home once and he was there alone. His eyes were red from crying and I will never forget the way he described the way he felt. He said that it were as if he were standing on a bare hill in the darkest part of the night, that it was raining and that the wind was blowing right through a hole in his heart, "No", he said "through my very soul, my very being, and there just is no way to plug it or cover it up to keep the wind out." It made me cry to hear him say that and see him that way. He was my strong and fearless dad. I had never seen that side of him. It was then that I knew how great his pain was. He seems to be doing better nowadays, but sometimes I think that I believe that because I want to. He still has not constructively dealt with my mother's death

"If he could only realize how much he needs the Lord," I thought as we made our way down into the basement to the furnace room. The furnace was a huge coal-burning

type that was powered by electricity. It was fed by an automatic stoker, which had to be hand-loaded from a coal bin. My dad pushed the start button but nothing happened. Although the stoker was delivering coal perfectly, the furnace would not start. He checked the fuse box and found the problem, a blown fuse.

“Looks like we’ll have to make a trip to town to get warm.” He said. He was referring to Wilkeyville, 12 miles away and down the mountain. In a straight line, it was actually about six miles to the southeast and about 30 miles south of the Canadian border. It was a tiny town of about 2500 people and it was situated on the northern-most shore of the bend of Baker Lake.

“Reckon we’d better take a look around the rest of the place”, he continued in his southern drawl, “and see what else we’ll need before we make the trip down yonder, light bulbs, for sure.” He was, I am sure, recalling our encounter with the upstairs hallway the night before.

We began exploring the rest of the basement, which was large for a basement, but small considering the size of the rest of the house. I believe we only missed exploring one room.

“Dad, do you still miss Mom?” I asked, searching for a way to work Jesus into the conversation.

“Every day of my life, Richard.” I could see his mind begin to travel back.

“What did you think when she got saved?” I did not know how else to lead into it.

“That’s hard to say, Rich. I reckon I thought a lot of things. I thought it would pass, for one thing, and then I could see that it was only getting worse, or, well, stronger. There were times when I even thought about joining her in her religion, or whatever you want to call it.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“What the heck is this thing?” My dad was trying to change the subject. He was looking at an old covered brown and white crock that must have been an antique. As he picked it up, I came over to help him inspect it. It was locked with an ancient looking wire clasp. We did not attempt to open it.

I could tell that he was becoming uncomfortable with the conversation but I loved him too much to let him off the hook.

“Dad, do you know that I love you?”

“Yes, Richard. I love you too.”

“Do you know that Mom loved you very much?”

“Yessir,” he said, “I reckon I’ve heard a rumor or two to that effect.”

“Did you know that God loves you more than Mom and me put together?” He looked at me with one of those looks that said ‘Do you really want to pick a fight with me?’

“Richard, I’m not convinced that there is a God.” He said, with his Jack Nicholson eyebrows raised. My father had the ability to look just like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* when he was angry. “I’ve never seen any kind of scientific proof of His existence.” He always said that. He continued, “but if there was a God, I’ve never had any reason to believe that He loves me.”

“Dad, have you ever seen any scientific proof that I love you?”

“I believe you love me, Rich, because you show me. The only thing that God has ever shown me is a kick in the pants.” He said, still looking like Jack Nicholson.

“So, at least you admit that there is a God.”

“I didn’t say that.” His eyebrows were still talking.

“But, wouldn’t He have to exist to give you a kick in the pants?”

“Richard, you are starting to make me angry.” Any sane person would have changed the subject at that point, but I am crazy. I admit it. I am irrational for the Lord sometimes, and I am irrational for my family at other times. At that particular time, I was both.

“Dad, I don’t want to make you angry but Jesus is real and He really does love you.”

“And now that we’re on the subject, who was Jesus?” He began to raise his voice. “I believe he actually lived, but who was he really? Did he even claim to be God, or the Son of God? I doubt it. Who threw that in, and at what point in history? And if there was a God, He sure would have to be full of himself- ‘Praise me, praise me’ he said mockingly. “And if there was a God, what is all of this faith stuff? Why would he want it? If He’s all-powerful, why doesn’t He just come out and talk to us? Why should we have to accept anything on faith? And how could a loving God throw anyone into hell?” I could see that he was becoming very emotional. He was practically screaming. “How could He give me lung cancer and how could He take your mother away from me? He loves me? I don’t think so!” He was crying by this time and, obviously very frustrated and hurt.

I hugged him close to me. “I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry. I just love you. I just love you. I love you so much that I can’t bear the thought of you not spending eternity with me.” I was crying then too.

We just stood there at the bottom of the basement steps, two grown men, hugging and crying, crying and hugging. Finally, I ended the sobbing-in-silence. “Dad?” I said. We both stopped crying.

“Hmm?” he answered as we separated and he dried his eyes on his sleeves.

“I love you.”

“I know, Rich, but is needling me going to get me to change my mind?”

I looked directly into my father’s sad eyes and said to him, ever so calmly, “It’s your heart that needs the change.” I did not know where those words came from. I was not thinking them. His mouth dropped open as if I had slapped him. I could see the tears welling up again in his eyes. They spilled out onto his cheeks.

“What?” I asked, not realizing the significance of my words.

“Those are the exact words your mother said to me the day she died. No one heard her but me.” He said with a crying voice that was difficult to understand. “And I never saw her again.” I hugged him close to me once again.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean anything.”

“No, it’s...” He was sobbing uncontrollably. “It’s okay. You should.” He said and I did not know what he meant. By then, I was crying again too. I had never known that fact, what my mother had told my father before she died.

“Richie boy,” my dad had not called me that since before my mom died, “I know that if anyone can help me change my heart, it’s you.” Right then I knew where those words had come from. It was the Holy Spirit. Praise God. The Holy Spirit had put those words into my mouth. I felt like I had finally gotten through some of that wall that my

dad had built between himself and God. At last, at long last, I had finally gotten through. No, God had gotten through.

We explored the ground floor after that, starting with the huge kitchen, which was at the top of the basement steps. It had a door to the back staircase, which led to the rear hall of the second floor, the one where the attic door was. Toward the back of the house we explored a laundry room and another room that contained a locked door and an old out-of-tune upright piano. "Mom would've loved this." I said as I tinkled a few keys. "Dad, do you think Mom was crazy, I mean about becoming a Christian and being so dedicated to the Lord?"

"No, Rich. It's just that..." He did not finish his sentence. I could see that, even though he was with me physically, in his mind he was far away, in a different place, in a different time. I wanted to address many of the things that my dad shouted at me, especially the thing about God giving him lung cancer but I did not want to be abrupt about it and, besides, I could tell that God was already working on his heart.

The room that we were in was built right into the side of the mountain. I was in awe of the craftsmanship that was apparent in its building. I inspected every detail, as did my father. It was a large room; almost as long as the house was wide and the north wall was solid rock, a grayish color, probably granite. It was beautifully done completely polished stone. It made me think of the analogy that Jesus made to his disciples about the man who built his house on solid rock. Juancarlo Raza had certainly built his house on, and partially in, solid rock, in more ways, it seemed to me, than one.

Our tour, then, took us through the other side of the kitchen, to the dining room, a large room trimmed from shoulder height to floor with a dark oak paneling. This was the room where we had placed all of the things that we brought in from my dad's four-wheel-drive Jeep Cherokee the night before. The dining room was connected to the large oak-trimmed living room on the east side and to the south the dining room led to a very large foyer where the staircase was, the same dark oak staircase that seemed so sinister the previous night. It was actually quite beautiful.

I saw a painting hanging in that foyer, a very strange looking painting. It was very professionally done but what the scene depicted was not something that one would expect to see hanging in someone's home. It was a picture of a dark-skinned woman carrying luggage and following a dark-skinned man, also carrying luggage. Both were following behind a huge smiling brown-haired beast, who was, like the people behind him, carrying luggage.

At once I thought, "A hairy man". Was this a picture of Marylia and Juancarlo Raza following a hairy man? Did this have something to do with my dream? In my mind I repeated, "A man does not have to be hairy to be the Master's man."

I stopped in front of the painting and stared in wonder, not at the painting itself, but more at the realization that it must be connected with my dream. The dream voices mentioned Marylia and Juancarlo, the parents of my friend Matty, who owned the house we were in. Both had been missing for more than a year. They had been missing since about October of 1997 and my visit there with my dad began in February of 1999.

The voices also mentioned Matty's older brother, Jimmy, who also was missing as of almost a month after his parents. He had come back to that house, Matty told me, to find out why his parents did not answer the telephone for a period of over two weeks. Jimmy had asked a friend from church to come over and check on them. The friend did

lots of luggage!

Repeat?

so and then called Jimmy and told him that no one answered the door. It was then that Jimmy drove all the way from his apartment in Seattle. He found his parents nowhere and called his siblings to see if they knew where their parents might be.

Matty, after being contacted by Jimmy, called his two sisters, Mary Leah and Kelinda, who agreed to meet at their parents' house a week or so later. By the time Matty, his sisters and their families had arrived, however, Jimmy was no where to be found either.

The police never found any of them but they did find Jimmy's pickup truck a few days later in a wooded area off the highway on the way to Seattle. It had been hot-wired and vandalized. Evidently, someone stole it, wrecked it, stripped it and did something with its owner.

I knew that I knew as I stood looking at the painting that in it was at least part of the explanation. The knowing that I knew was heartily reinforced by my dream voices.

I immediately removed my tape recorder and dictated, "The painting is of a man and a woman carrying luggage and following a large hairy being, who is also carrying a suit case."

"Dad, look at this painting." I said to him without taking my eyes from it. He came up beside me and studied the picture.

"Kind of goes with the house, I'd say." Answered my dad with a shake of his head.

"Do you think it means something?" I asked him.

"It means whomever painted it was pretty weird."

"No, I mean what if it's some kind of clue?"

"Clue to what?"

"A clue to where the Razas went."

"Yeah, right. The Razas went on a cruise with a Bigfoot. Good thinking, Rich."

"Well, where do you think they went, Dad?"

"I don't know. Maybe they went back to Puerto Rico."

"For a year and four months without telling their kids?"

"I don't know, Rich where does Matty think they went?"

"He has no idea but he doesn't think they're in Puerto Rico. They don't have any relatives there anymore. I really need to talk to Matty."

"Didn't you say that he told you that he'd probably be here sometime this week?"

"That's what he told me."

"You can talk to him then and ask him if his parents had any friends that looked like Bigfoot." We both laughed but, after my dream, I was ready to actually consider the idea, unlike my dad.

We took more time in the daylight exploring the second floor. As we entered the master bedroom, my dad began sniffing the air. "Is that your bloodhound imitation?" I said to him with a grin. He smiled as he answered me but continued to sniff.

"This room has a smell. I didn't notice it last night but it takes me back to when I was little, about two or three years old." He said as he went on sniffing. He looked up and all around the room with his eyes wide as if he were somewhere else. "I was in the upstairs bedroom at the end of the hall at Nanny and Grampa's house on Margaret Street."

I fought off the urge to ask him, since he said it took him back to being a little kid, if what he was sniffing smelled like dirty diapers because I could see how serious he was

becoming with it. He continued to smell the air and then said, "I was in the bed and I was very sick. Someone was there with me."

"Was it Nanny Mom?" I asked, referring to my dad's mother.

"She was there but the smell came from a man who was there with me."

"It wasn't Poppa Dick?" That was my paternal grandfather.

"No."

Right then I noticed something on the dresser, a paper doll scene made of construction paper. It was a man and a woman holding hands walking toward a paper mountain with a Sasquatch figure half out of it. He was motioning for the man and woman to come.

"Dad, look at this." I must have interrupted his thinking because he looked at me with a blank stare at first. It changed to a look of disdain when he saw what I was calling his attention to.

"Richard, are you going to attempt to take this Bigfoot theory to a serious level?"

"Dad, you saw the human footprints in the snow last night just like I did. Are you going to continue with your 'bear' theory or face the facts?"

"You really are serious, aren't you?"

"How else can you explain the footprints and what happened last night? Besides, Dad, I had this dream."

"Dream?" he repeated with a serious look on his face.

"I think it was a dream. I hope it was a dream. It was voices. They were talking about Matty's parents, and being hairy and being the Master's man. I know it sounds really crazy, Dad, but you're a scientist. At least be open to the possibilities."

"I'm listening."

"You had a dream too, Dad." Right then, I saw my skeptical scientific father actually make a facial expression that showed me that he was considering my wild theory. "Don't you think that there is just a little too much coincidence going on here?" I asked as we exited the master bedroom and made a right turn into the hall.

"I will admit that I don't know **what** to think at this point but, I'm just not ready to embrace the Bigfoot theory just yet."

We entered the back hallway, the one with the door to the attic, remembering with a sort of comedy the previous night. We came to the attic door again and this time, in the daylight, we saw that the glass we had encountered on the floor made a definite trail that continued down the hall toward another door. We looked at each other and then at the glass trail, then at the door at the end of it.

"Rod Serling." I reminded my dad. We both smiled. Things are always less frightening in the light of day. I knew that we were of the same mind when I saw him walking toward the door looking down at the trail of glass as though it were footprints left on the ground by some animal.

"Let's see if old Rod is home." He said as I came up to the door close behind him. He reached for the knob and turned it and I heard a noise on the other side of the door.

"Wait," I told him, "Did you hear that?"

"Probably just the house settling." He was trying to allay my fear. My father has always been like that. I love him but he has always been overprotective.

"No," I said, "it sounded like feet shuffling." He reached for the knob again and at that very moment something happened that frightened me out of ten years growth.

From directly behind us, a loud voice said, "Door's locked."

As we both whirled around to face our auditory attacker, my heart whirled around in my chest and then tried to beat it's way through my ribs. I turned and, for a fraction of a second, I had visions of horrible monsters in my head. I saw, instead, an older man, thin and gray-haired. He wore a black and red plaid coat and a stocking cap, a pair of jeans and work boots, a green sweater with the collar of a red and white plaid flannel shirt sticking up through the neck opening and a look of righteous indignation on his face. The look said "I have a reason for being here but who are you?"

My dad stepped forward and in front of me to put himself between the man and me. That must have been comical to the intruder since I am almost a head taller than my father is.

"Who the ___ are you and what are you doing in this house?" He demanded of the old fellow, with his Jack Nicholson eyebrows probably raised.

"I am James Lattimore and I take care of this house for the Rayzas. Now, who in the world are you and what are you doing in this house?" he countered.

I could see that it was time for me to step in to prevent the clash of the titans (they thought). "I'm sorry if we caught you by surprise, Mr. Lattimore." I said in a soothing tone. "I'm Richard Hemilton, a friend of Matty Raza's. He told me that my father and I could stay here for a while and do some hunting. Matty said that you would probably stop by to check on things from time to time. He left the key for us outside."

Mr. Lattimore was busy being offended by my dad's menacing stance and defensive manner. "Well, nobody told me anything about anybody staying anywhere. Maybe we just need to call Mr. Rayza right now." He turned around, opened the door and started back down the hall, presumably to use the telephone downstairs.

I decided that, rather than continuing to stand there dumbfounded, I would follow James downstairs to the telephone and if he did not call Matty, I would. I caught up to him just as he was picking up the phone. Then I saw him feeling his pockets for something.

"Need the number?" I asked him benignly.

"I've got it." He said, but he must have realized that he did not because he came back with, "What is it?" I told him the number from memory and he dialed it. He must have reached Matty's answering machine because he only left a message for Matty to call him.

"If he doesn't return your call, it's probably because he's on his way here. He said he would probably be here sometime this week." I said matter-of-factly.

Mr. Lattimore must have decided that my dad and I were not burglars because 30 minutes later we had all apologized to one another and had become friends or, at least acquaintances and we were all sitting in James' pickup truck headed for town to buy supplies and a fuse for the furnace.

"So, you know Mr. Rayza from college, huh?" James had cast out the ten minutes of silence that crept into the cab of the truck. "You must be a lawyer too, then."

"No, actually, Matty and I went to different colleges. They were just in the same city. We met at a comedy club in Manhattan called New York Stand Up. I was there doing a comedy routine. I went to New York to study acting at the American Music and Dramatic Academy, AMDA. Matty was in his first year of law school at Fordham University. He asked me to sit at his table after my schtick. We discovered that we were a

lot alike and we got along very well, so we just started hanging out when we had the time. We eventually moved into an apartment together. I actually talked him into getting up on stage and doing stand-up for extra money. He was very good for an amateur comedian.”

“Matty was always a comedian.” returned James.

“Yes, but more than that, he is probably one of the main reasons that I got saved.”

“Oh, then you’re a Christian young man?” James almost said ‘Christian man’ but I suppose he was not quite ready to give me that yet. “Matty Rayza has been a church-going Christian since he was little. I knew his mom and dad very well. We all went to the same church until,” he paused, “until his folks and his brother disappeared. Now none of the kids live close by so they don’t go to Acts of Faith anymore.”

“Acts of Faith?” I answered, “That’s the name of your church?”

“Yes.” He responded and after a few moments, in which I could tell that he was in deep thought, he added, “Acts of Faith Community Church, up on Mount Baker Road, been going there for over 20 years.

“All the Rayzas went to that church. They were good Christian people, every one of them. Juancarlo, Mister Rayza, was a deacon there, along with me and Big Zell, old Dave Marsden, Henry Harmon and Sergeant Soule.”

“Sergeant Soul?” I said under my breath. It definitely sounded like the name of a prayer warrior to me. “What denomination is the church?” I asked him.

“What denomination was Jesus?” he answered and already it sounded like a church that I wanted to visit. I have never been any particular denomination either. And I have answered people who have insisted that everyone must be affiliated with some denomination with the exact words that came out of Mr. Lattimore’s mouth. I told him so.

“That is exactly what I say. You know I told a friend of mine once that I had no denomination and she told me that I was confused.”

“She was the one confused.” He said. “Jesus healed a blind man once down by Jericho, just by speaking the words. He healed another blind man by touching him. Jesus asked him what he saw and he answered by saying that he saw men but they looked like trees. Jesus touched him again and he was completely healed. He healed a third blind man by spitting on the ground, making mud and putting it on the man’s eyes. When the man washed it off, he could see.

“Well, the three of them were at a church function and the first man said, ‘Isn’t it wonderful? All He had to do was speak the words and I had my sight.’

“The second man said, ‘No, He has to touch you twice before you are healed.’

“The third man said, ‘No, He has to put mud on your eyes and when you wash it off you are healed.’ They had a heated debate and the first three denominations were born.”

James and I laughed, but I could see that my dad, who was in the passenger seat, was lost somewhere in thought.

“Confusion is something that a confused person is aware of.” I said, agreeing with Mr. Lattimore. “If I were confused, I would be aware of my confusion. Otherwise, it would not be confusion. It would be something else. I told my friend ‘If you gave me two sets of directions to your house, I might be confused but I would be aware of my confusion. I am not confused but, rather, convinced.’ I also gave her some scripture to

read, Romans 14:1, which says, ' Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on him because his beliefs are different than yours' or something like that."

James raised his eyebrow a little when I quoted the latter part of the scripture, and asked me, "Do you consider your faith to be weak, Richard?"

"No, I don't, but that wasn't really the point."

"No, it wasn't" was his response and that statement was followed by another long period of silence that my dad finally broke.

"So, you've know the Razas for a pretty long time then?" he inquired of James.

"Well, long enough to watch those four kids grow up; and long enough to watch their father and mother grow in Christ; and long enough for them to watch me do the same."

"Did you ever visit the Raza's house before their disappearance?"

"Many times."

"What's behind the locked door at the rear of the house on the second floor?"

"Mr. Rayza always kept that door locked."

"Why?"

"Don't know for sure."

"You never asked?"

"Nope."

"Never curious?"

"Nope."

"What if Mr. Raza was a killer and kept the bodies in there?" My dad was even beginning to get on my nerves.

"We're here." Said Mr. Lattimore.

III

Sweetsting

The six evil female spirits hovered atop the trees giggling wildly as they watched the three homeless men below. They were in search of a man who was a stranger to everyone in Wilkeyville and were cackling with evil glee over what they had found, three men who were not only from another place but, as a bonus, would likely not be missed.

“Which is it to be, S-S-Sweets-s-ting?” giggled Toothflower, “There are three to choose from.”

“Take the one with the white hair.” coaxed Deathpetal.

“I don’t want an old man.” Replied Sweetsting, her toothy smile covering her face.

“How about the young one?” asked Poisonette, “He has nice equipment. You’ll enjoy that.”

“I’ll take the tall one.” Answered Sweetsting and they all giggled. “He will be much easier to gain leverage on.”

A succubus loves no one but she does love to trap men in their lust, to humiliate and use them, to allow them to dig themselves into a spiritual hole that they cannot get out of, at least, not by themselves.

“What will you do with him?” Inquired Passionbite.

“Are you stupid as well as ugly?” answered Sweetsting, “I’ll take him to the fair and buy him cotton candy, you ignorant toad.”

“She just wants to hear you say it, Sweetsting. We all do.” Said Deathpassion.

“I don’t have time for that.” Answered Sweetsting. “I must be about the prince’s business.”

“May we watch? I love to watch, s-s-sister.” Said Toothflower.

“I don’t care what you do, only stay out of my way.” Answered Sweetsting. She floated downward and transformed herself.

* * * *

“Everybody’s got to be somewhere.” Remarked Phil Haven, cracking his knuckles as he sat warming himself by the fire with his two traveling companions, Old Bob and Rusty. The three had been traveling together, mostly on railways, since St. Louis. They had gotten off of the freight train as it pulled up to the McGuiness shoe factory on the outskirts of town. They made camp next to a wooded area about half a mile from the factory. They planned to check the town for handouts or short term jobs until they could catch another train to Seattle, where Rusty had a sister.

“Yeah,” answered Rusty, “but **we’re here**. We should’ve stayed on the train. We could’ve been half way to Seattle by now.”

“Don’t be stupid,” countered Phil, “That train was getting ready to...” He interrupted himself when he looked up from the fire and realized what he had just seen. “Holy mackerel, Andy!” he exclaimed, cracking his knuckles.

“Who in the blazes is Andy?” asked Old Bob, straining his eyes in the direction in which Phil was looking.

“Well, I’ll be a...” Phil stood up as he continued to stare into the woods in disbelief. “Now, **that** is fine.” He was referring to the woman standing at the edge of the woods.

She was about five feet tall with long dark hair, medium dark skin and heavy makeup. She wore a very short low cut black dress that fit her tightly, black nylon stockings and a pair of high-heeled leather boots that came up past her knees. She had her hands together in front of her holding a bottle of whiskey.

Spacing

She pressed her lips together in a kiss as she raised her left hand and beckoned to Phil with her index finger. ←→

“I’ll see you later, gents. Don’t wait up for me.” Said Phil. He cracked his knuckles and walked toward the woman. The other two men, seeing nothing, looked at each other with questioning expressions.

“Maybe he’s gotta go for nature.” Said Rusty, shrugging his shoulders as Phil approached the woods.

“Acts like he’s going somewhere for **his** nature.” Commented Old Bob.

When Phil had covered half of the distance to the woman, she smiled, turned and walked slowly away, turning her head to look back at the man quickly approaching her. As he reached the wooded area where he had first seen her, she was already well ahead of him and into the woods. Phil could smell her perfume as he continued to follow her more deeply into the woods. Finally, she stopped, took hold of a small tree and bent over to place the bottle of whiskey on the ground. She straightened herself, pulled her dress back down, turned around to face him and leaned suggestively against the tree. “Are you always so slow, Mr. Boone?” she asked him with a giggle.

“That’s not my name.” Phil told her, “My name is Phil Haven.”

“No,” she said, “Your name is Boone, because if you’re not Boone, we can’t play together. You do want to play with me, don’t you, Mr. Boone?”

“Playing is what I’m all about, sweet stuff.” He answered, cracking his knuckles.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. So, you **are** Mr. Boone, then?”

“Sure, I’m Boone.”

“Let me hear you say, ‘My name is Boone’ she told him playfully.

“My name is Boone.” He answered.

“Very good, Mr. Boone. You will make a fine playmate, indeed. Now, come close.”

As the new Mr. Boone eagerly complied, he heard the woman say, “Do you like it rough, Mr. Boone? I like it very rough.”

“Well, glory hallelujah.” he commented.

Her playful expression instantly turned to one of rage as she violently reached up and grasped his throat tightly. “Don’t you ever say that again. Do you hear me?” she shrieked.

Phil could barely answer. The woman’s grip was like steel. He could not dislodge her left hand from his throat, even with both hands. “I hear you.” He choked.

She pulled his face to hers and passionately kissed him with her hand still gripping his throat. She pushed his face back again and gazed deeply into his eyes with an evil smile. “I told you I like it rough, Mr. Boone.”

As vice-like as her grip had been, she tightened it still more until Phil could not breathe at all. She did it by making her fingers become green vines that tightened as they grew. He could feel the cartilage in his throat crack. Mercifully, he lost consciousness.

He woke choking for breath. He was on the snow-covered ground with the woman standing over him, her hands on her hips and an evil smile on her face. He watched as the vines growing from her left hand turned, once again, to beautiful female fingers. "Get up, Mr. Boone. I want to play some more."

He did not expect to wake up. He thought his trachea was crushed but, as he tried to rise, he felt no more pain. Nor did there seem to be any actual damage. He could also tell that his breathing had been restored. Phil/Boone was now terrified and confused, but still felt an eerie fascination and attraction for the mysterious woman. He got onto his feet as quickly as his confused state would allow and asked, "Who are you?"

"You may call me Ms. Bobb, but that's not important now. The question is, who are you."

"I'm Phil Hav..." his statement was cut short by a high-heeled boot in the groin.

"Wrong answer." She said in a calm tone that belied her actions. Phil/Boone doubled over, fell and rolled on the ground holding the painful area of his body.

"You know what's funny, Mr. Boone? You followed me out here with thoughts of raping me. Didn't you?"

He forced out a groan that sounded like "No."

She bent over and grabbed a handful of his hair, pulling him completely to his feet. "You cannot lie to me, you piece of trash."

"Yes! Yes!" he answered.

"Now, doesn't that feel better? You told the truth, for once in your worthless life. You were going to rape me like you raped that young girl in Springfield. Weren't you?" This man was going to be much easier to gain leverage on than she had originally thought.

No one had seen him. No one had known. The girl certainly did not tell anyone. How did this woman know? "How did..."

"How did I know?" She finished his question. "I know everything about you, Mr. Boone." She was lying. Demons love to mix lies with the truth like their father, Satan, the father of lies. "For instance, I know that when you were 16, you stole your sick aunt's car and wrecked it. The next year you broke into her house and stole her television and stereo. You even stole her dead husband's watch and wedding ring. The same year you dropped out of high school and broke your mother's heart and then, topped it off by stealing her rent money twice so that she was evicted from her apartment. When you were 18, you got a job at Mr. Werker's bakery, the first good job you ever had. Werker treated you almost like a son." She took hold of his throat as she continued to speak. "You paid him back by stealing from him on a regular basis and by forcing his niece to have sex with you." She picked him up off the ground and threw him 15 feet into a tree. The blow knocked the wind out of him. "She never told on you for that." Sweetsting continued, "She was too ashamed. That is why you did it again, and again, and again." She slowly walked toward him as she spoke. "That certainly took a lot of guts, Mr. Boone." She said. She bent over him and stabbed her hand into his abdomen as if it were a knife. "You always did have a lot of guts."

Boone looked down at his belly and saw that she had pierced it and her hand had entered him up to her wrist. She squeezed and twisted his insides as he watched, and with her other hand firmly over his mouth, his screams were too muffled to be heard for any distance. Then, as suddenly as she had pierced his midsection, she removed her hands from him and stood up. There was no wound, no blood and no more pain. But Sweetsting was far from finished.

"You went to prison when you were 20 for raping a woman in Kansas City. You remember prison, don't you, Mr. Boone, your favorite place." She jerked him up by his coat. He came to his feet but stumbled and fell, landing on his hands and knees. "And you remember J.D. too, don't you?" she said as she placed her foot on his rump and gave him a shove. "He taught you things you didn't want to learn. Didn't he, Mr. Boone?" He turned over from his facedown position in the snow to see a man standing behind him, a man he knew from prison, a man he both hated and feared.

"Get up, slickie." The man said, "I've got a present for you." And he broke into a familiar and hated mocking laughter.

Boone covered his ears, "Stop it! Stop it!"

"Do you want me to continue, Mr. Boone?" The woman stood before him again.

"No! No!" By now, he was crying.

She took his hand, led him to a large rock and sat him down. "There, there, now." She said, stroking his hair. "It's not going to be so bad. All you have to do is exactly what I tell you, exactly as I tell you, precisely **when** I tell you to do it. Do you think you can do that, Mr. Boone?"

He looked up at her like a boy who had just been punished for misbehaving and that was exactly how he felt, like a little boy who had just been spanked for going outside without permission. He had no memory of ever having felt so helpless and terrified.

"Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"That's a good boy." She continued to stroke his hair. "Now, take these." She handed him a wallet and a leather bound checkbook. He opened the checkbook. On the checks was printed G. B. Boone with a Terre Haute, Indiana address. He inspected the balance and almost fainted. He saw more money than he had ever had at one time in his life. In the wallet was a driver's license in the name of George Bruce Boone with the same address and his picture. It even had the correct date of birth. The wallet also contained two credit cards and over a thousand dollars in cash as well as a social security card and photographs of people he did not know. There was one exception, a picture of Ms. Bobb wearing a T-shirt that said; "I'm watching you."

"There is a motel not far from here on Highway 11," she told him, "The DuCharm Inn. You have a reservation. Clean yourself and wait for me there. Now, I want to hear you tell me your name, the correct answer this time."

"My name is Boone." He said, and when he looked up, she was gone. He noticed that she left the bottle of whiskey. He walked over, picked it up, opened it and took a long drink to steady his nerves. He pocketed the checkbook and wallet and the bottle of whiskey as well. He walked out of the woods toward the two men he had left by the fire.

"Where in blazes did you go, Phil?" asked Old Bob.

"Name's Boone." He said, and walked past both of them.

* * *

When it became apparent to Mateo Raza that it was time to buy a new vehicle, he opted to buy one that he **wanted**, rather than one that would impress or scream out at people his status as a promising young attorney. Having grown up in a rural setting, he had always been fond of pickup trucks, and the white Ford F250 with an extended cab was exactly what he wanted. Being a little different than the other young lawyers in the firm suited him. His truck did not look like something a lawyer would drive, but he could not have cared less. It suited him well and he was happy with it.

Neither did Mateo dress as one might expect an attorney to dress. Although he was always dressed nicely for court appearances, and usually dressed nicely otherwise as well, he dressed the way he felt like dressing when he was not in court. On this particular day, he wore his brown Timberland shoes, white socks, a pair of brown denim trousers, a blue dress shirt and a brown sweater vest.

Mateo, known as Matty to his friends and family, although his mother and grandmother called him Chachi, was a large young man of Puerto Rican descent. He stood six feet, five inches tall and weighed about 300 pounds. His mother called him a gentle giant and, indeed, he was gentle. His size often made people think of him as dumb or awkward. He was, admittedly, a little clumsy, but he was far from dumb. He was, in fact, a very quick-witted and intelligent young man, graduating with honors from high school, pre-law and law school. He was highly sought after by law firms around the country but chose one in Spokane to be as close to his family as possible. He loved his family and helped them all he could. He often lent money to his sisters and told them to 'forget about it' when they attempted to make payments to him.

Matty was the youngest of four children with his brother, Jimmy, being the oldest, followed by his sisters, Mary Leah and Kelinda respectively. He had always been close to his family and could hardly bear the years he spent in New York at law school.

Most people that knew Matty would say that he had few flaws. He was, admittedly, however, a little too germ conscious. Even as a child, he refused to drink after anyone and he would not eat food that he knew had been touched by anyone's hands. He even objected to having to eat food that he knew either of his parents touched during its preparation. He also did not like to be kissed on the lips by anyone, even Lourdes Gonzales, whom he had a huge crush on in the eight grade.

His older brother and his parents had been missing for over a year. It made each day difficult to face and, even though the days became easier as time passed, especially with God's help, not a single day passed that he did not spend time pondering their disappearances and praying to God to reveal their whereabouts, even if that meant that Matty had to discover that they were with the Lord.

Matty did not believe any of the theories presented to him about the disappearances of his family members. The police said that Jimmy had probably been robbed and murdered. If that theory were true, where was his body? They also said that his parents had probably gone to Puerto Rico or somewhere to enjoy their latter years alone. Matty **never** believed that explanation. Although Chief Cates, of the Wilkeyville police department, said that they would continue the search for his family, his statement not at all comforted Matty. He did not trust that the police department would actually spend much time searching for his lost family members. They had not, after all, spent much energy in the search thus far. He did not believe that it was the priority that Chief Cates

let on that it was. And there was the fact that he did not trust them in general. He thought that they were lazy and had heard stories about them, which implied that some of them were dishonest. Sergeant Tim Soule was the only member of the Wilkeyville police that he trusted. He knew Sergeant Soule, or Sergeant Tim, as he was called at church and, therefore, knew that if he could have done anything, he would have.

Matty loved the Lord with all of his heart and, therefore, loved people, even some that others seemed to find unlovable. He was able to find good in people when others could not. This earned him a reputation for being a bit naïve. His quick wit and his excellent sense of humor, never distasteful, kept his friends and family in good spirits. For this reason, people loved to be around him. His knowledge of scripture and his preoccupation with the things of God made him a blessing to many.

He left his apartment in Spokane, Washington at about 10:00 in the morning, bound for Wilkeyville. He was full of the anticipation of seeing his best friend and Christian Brother, Richard, who was staying with his father, in Matty's parent's home. He had invited them there as a getaway that he knew they both needed. Although they had spoken over the telephone several times, he had not seen Richard in almost two years, and greatly missed him.

As he drove, he thought of the wonderful times that they had spent together in New York City, where they both went to college. He thought of that special afternoon when, after much encouragement from himself, Richard asked Jesus into his heart and his life. The thought brought a smile to his face and he praised God aloud.

Matty had the radio tuned to the only Christian station near Spokane and sang along and praised God as he drove. At last he was going to see his friend. This would be a grand reunion.

Suddenly, just ahead, on the side of the road, he could see a figure hitchhiking. It looked like a woman. He was not in the habit of picking up hitchhikers but he was moved by the Spirit to slow his truck as he came closer.

As he approached, he could see that, indeed, it was a woman, a young black woman, hitchhiking in the bitter cold of February. If Matty ever made a distinction between races, concerning African Americans, he used the word black. He knew that the word African American had become more politically correct in recent years but he rarely used it for three reasons.

The first reason was that he usually did not distinguish between races, even though his last name, Raza, was Spanish for race. He was Puerto Rican, a member of an ethnic group partly European Caucasian (Spanish), partly Native American (the Taino Indians were indigenous to the island) and partly African (slaves from Africa made up a large portion of the population) and, as such, had been a victim of much racial discrimination.

The second reason was that, as he grew up, it was the word he learned and, not being a person who jumped on every bandwagon of political correctness, he resisted the change.

The third and primary reason that Matty did not use the phrase African American, was that it was, in his opinion, not practical. It took seven syllables, whereas, the word black took only one. He felt that, since he was, after all, of African descent, he had the

right to use whichever word he chose. Although he had never met a person whose skin was truly black, he chose the word for its simplicity.

The young black woman that he saw had only a jacket to protect her from the cold. She was also wearing a backpack, a pair of very tight jeans and a pair of hiking boots. She had her thumb stuck in the air and was walking backward in the direction she was going.

He slowed his truck to a stop on the side of the road just past her. He began to back up so that she would not have to walk further. He could see in his rear view mirror, however, that she was running toward him. He opened the passenger side door just as she reached it. She climbed into the truck with a bright but frozen smile.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Wherever **you’re** going, I guess.”

Matty was not one to stare at women but, this young lady was beautiful and he could not help but peek at her every few seconds. She looked to be about 20 and full of energy. Her hair was platinum blonde and very short. She wore a small amount of neatly applied makeup and a pair of hooped earrings.

“I don’t usually pick up hitchhikers.” He said as he turned the radio down, “but I had a feeling about you, so I stopped.”

“What kind of feeling?” she asked him.

“Well, I just felt moved to stop. You know, like it would be okay.” He stole another look at her face.

“I’m sure glad you did. I thought I was going to freeze to death.”

“Do you do this very often?” he asked her.

“No, not often, just when I have to be somewhere and there’s no other way.”

“I guess you don’t have a car, then.” Matty said and then felt stupid for saying it.

“Yeah, I have a car, a Rolls Royce, but I don’t like to get it dirty.” They both laughed. “Actually I really **do** have a car but it’s broken right now. It’s back at my apartment in Spokane. She noticed he was staring and added, “Take a picture.”

“What?”

“Take a picture, then you don’t have to stare.”

“I’m sorry. I **was** staring, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, you were. You weren’t just staring. You were staring with puppy eyes.”

“Puppy eyes?” It was not the first time that he had heard it. His mother always said that he looked at her like a puppy.

“Yes. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that? You have puppy eyes.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, they’re beautiful.”

“Then, thank you.” Matty said, and he began to blush. It was noticeable even on his dark skin.

“So, you never pick up hitchhikers, huh?” she said reaching into her backpack which she now had in front of her.

“Not often.”

“Well, I hate to do this to you. You’ve been so nice and you have such nice eyes.” She pulled out a small pistol and pointed it at him. “But, I’m going to have to ask you to pull over now.”

Matty pulled his truck over to the side of the road and stopped. He opened his door to exit. "May I take my coat?" he asked her.

"Take your coat but do it slowly with no tricks. I **will** shoot you if I have to. And stop looking at me with those puppy dog eyes."

Matty looked down, took his coat and slid out of the truck. He watched her scoot over to the driver's side and said, "Wait, you'll need some gas money."

"Good idea, but no tricks." She said pointing the pistol.

Matty took two twenty-dollar bills out of his wallet and gave them to her.

"Just give it all to me." She said ungratefully, "Credit cards too."

She drove away with all of his money and all of his credit cards and left him on the side of the road. She watched him watching her in the rearview mirror. "Stop it with the puppy eyes." She said. What she was unable to see was the large man in the back seat. If she could have seen him, she probably would not have stolen Matty's truck. And if she could have seen him she would probably not have been able to tell from his sitting position that he was nearly eight feet tall with a muscular build. He was dressed in a white tunic and loosely fitting white trousers with a large sword in its scabbard on his side fastened to a gold chain belt. He was one of a team of angels that was almost constantly with Matty.

Karoni, a dark skinned angel of the Lord with dark curly hair, stroked his black beard as he allowed the young lady to drive away. His timing must be perfect. He poised the index finger of his right hand directly behind her head, and when he was given the signal he inserted it into her brain and removed it. < > Her eyes widened and she shook her head as if to rouse herself from unwanted sleep. Karoni knew that her heart was right but that she had been misguided. He waited for another signal and, having received it, reinserted his finger.

"I can't believe what you've just done. How long will you live like this?" She said to herself aloud. "That man never did anything to you except show you kindness. And even as you wronged him, he continued to show you kindness. What is your problem? Are you so important? Is what you're doing so important that you can act this way, that you can treat him that way?" She was still speaking aloud when she signaled with her right turn signal and took the next exit off of the express way.

* * * *

Matty stood on the side of the road still slightly shocked. He began to pray for the young lady as he watched his truck speed away. As he prayed, he walked. He was a little angry but he asked Jesus to help him with that and continued to pray. "I trust you, Lord." He said and he felt a smile coming across his face.

"Well, praise God." He stuck his thumb out as he walked.

** * *

"It's time for you to turn it around. Yes, the truck, but the rest of it too, for real this time." She said as she reentered the express way going east when she was originally going west. She got off at the next exit and back on, once again headed west.

* * * *

"I'll say it again. I'll say it again. He died for me. He died for me." Matty sang as he walked backward with his thumb out. As he continued to sing and praise the Lord, he saw another truck, one that looked just like his, approaching from the east. As it came closer, he almost could not believe his eyes. His truck pulled off the road just ahead of him. The young woman got out of the cab and slammed the door. The truck was still running.

"Here's your truck back, Mr. Puppy Eyes." She shouted at him, "Your money and cards are in the front seat. Call the police if you want to." She continued walking ahead of the truck talking to herself.

Matty stood for a moment without knowing what to do or say. Then he ran to the truck and climbed in the driver's side. "Praise you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you, Father." He put the truck in gear and caught up with the young lady, pulled ahead of her and stopped. He exited the truck and went to her. "Please," he said, "get in. You'll freeze to death out here."

"That's okay," she countered, "I deserve it."

"That's not true. Please, I'll take you wherever you want to go." She was now passing the idling truck but Matty was right behind her. "Please," he repeated, "There's no need for this." She kept walking. "I won't let you walk. I'll follow you wherever you go." She stopped and began crying.

"Please don't cry. It's all right. You did wrong but you made it right. Please, this is silly. No one is perfect." He was standing in front of her now, facing her. "God loves you and so do I."

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "You love me? You don't even know me." She said in a whimper.

"That's okay," he answered, "God knows you better than **you** do and **he** loves you. And if you're good enough for him, you're good enough for me."

She surprised him as well as herself by reaching out and hugging him close and sobbing into his big chest. Matty hugged her and rocked back and forth with her. Then he picked her up and carried her to the truck. When he had placed her safely inside and gotten in himself, he asked her, "So, what is your name?"

"Ushe" she said sniffing, "My name is Ushe. What's your name, Mr. Puppy Eyes?"

"My name is Matty and I was on my way to a little town that no one has ever heard of, called Wilkeyville. You're welcome to come with me if you like or I will take you wherever it is that you need to go."

She looked at him in amazement. "Wilkeyville? You're going to Wilkeyville? That's where I have to go. I didn't think anyone ever went **there**. That's why I thought I had to steal your truck."

"You see how the Lord works?" Matty said, "Isn't he wonderful?"

* * *

"Ike's Gun and Hardware" Richard read from the sign as we approached the front door.

"Yeah," replied James Lattimore, "Ike Pendergrass. Fancies himself a big game hunter and an authority on Bigfoot and just about any other subject you bring up to him."

"Bigfoot?" repeated Rich as he looked directly at me. It was his way of telling me, "See? I told you there was something to this."

"Yeah," said James, "but most of us don't believe in that stuff."

As we all stood at the front counter and I fished in my pocket for the burned out furnace fuse, a young man approached us. He was very white with dark eyes and his head was almost shaved. He wore camouflage clothing and had an earring in one ear and another earring in his nose. He reminded me of one of those hopelessly confused skinheads, as they are often called, white supremacists of one kind or another.

"Whatcha need?" he asked, as if we were annoying him.

"I need a fuse like this one." I showed him the old one and he took it from my hand and walked away without a word.

"That was Ike's boy, Kyle." James informed us, "used to go to school with my grandson, Jim."

"Used to?" inquired Richard.

"My son took little Jim, my grandson, out of public school and put him in Christian school and I think Kyle quit school altogether."

I left James and Rich talking as I looked around the combination hardware store and gun shop. Trophies hung on the walls all around. I saw at least three deer, an elk and a bear, well, their heads mounted, not the entire animals. There was also a moose and an American bison. There was a stuffed cougar in the middle of the store and several large stuffed birds of prey, including a golden eagle and the largest owl I have ever seen. Killing ~~an~~ animal for meat is something I can understand but killing for trophies I do not understand or condone.

I noticed on one wall a life-sized picture of a Bigfoot with a target drawn on it's chest. There also appeared to be some sort of hand hanging on the wall beside it. I walked over to take a look. It was the hand of a gorilla. I stood staring at it appalled that someone would do that to such a gentle and intelligent creature. Contrary to what most people believe, gorillas, although they can be fierce when they have to, are very gentle by nature.

I heard a voice from behind me say, "It's a Sasquatch hand."

"Yeah, right." I said without turning around. I had spent 13 years working with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. I had become a Primary Investigator, you know, the one who submits a proposal to the National Institute of Health in hopes of securing a grant, the one who courts them and kisses their feet, to get the money to actually conduct research. The job required working closely, at times, with the large apes at Yerkes Primate Center. I knew a gorilla hand when I saw it. I did not share that fact at the time.

I turned to see a man slightly taller than myself. He wore a beard and had a monstrous potbelly. He was dressed in camouflage clothing with a matching ball cap.

"No, really." He said. "It was a beauty. I shot it about ten miles north of here around six years ago. The meat was no good and I couldn't find anybody to stuff it for me. So, I just kept the hand." He extended his hand to me and I shook it.

"Ike Pendergrass." He said.

"Rick Hemilton." I told him.

"You here to hunt?" he asked.

"Well, sort of, I'm here with my son. We may do some hunting."

“What are you packing?” I took that to be a question about my weaponry.

“Benefield 48”

“Lord have mercy! What are you gonna shoot, a mountain?”

“Well, whatever I shoot will stay shot.”

“That’s for sure. You been overseas with it?”

“I bought it a few years ago to take to Africa with me.” I did not share with him that I never actually made the trip.

“That’s quite a piece. We’ll have to get together sometime and walk a few trails before you leave. You got your hunting license yet?”

“Not yet”

“Well, we can fix you right up when you get ready.”

“I appreciate it.” I said and made my way back to the counter where my son gave me the news.

“They’re out of this kind of fuse, Dad. But the guy with the nose ring told me where we might be able to find one.”

“Where’s that?” I asked.

“Over at Big Zell’s” answered James. “I was going to head that way anyhow.”

Zellinger’s super service was only a few minutes away but when we arrived, the owner was on his way out.

“Wait a minute, Zell.” James called as the big man exited the front door telling someone inside that he’d be back after lunch. When I saw him, it became obvious how he got the nickname, Big Zell. He looked to be about six feet, eight inches tall and solidly built. His head was shaved and shiny like many black men like it. He was wearing overalls and sort of reminded me of Mr. Clean, except for his skin color and thick beard. An oversized Isaac Hayes would have been a more accurate description. He sort of looked like a farmer in his overalls and work boots. A white T-shirt was visible under his overalls and an unzipped blue parka. When he spoke, his voice was very deep but soft.

James introduced us and he gave us a mighty handshake and a mighty smile to match. James explained whom we were, why we were there and where we were staying.

“So, You are father and son?” he asked.

“Yes, we are. We just needed some time away to spend with one another.” I explained.

“Well, that is a wonderful thing.” He said, “God bless you both. Will you be attending church while you’re here?”

“We have decided to visit Acts of Faith Church.” My son spoke up, even though, clearly, I had not made any such decision.

“Well, that is another wonderful thing. Did you hear that, Lord?” Zell asked of no one I could see. “You picked the right place. That’s for sure. Not that I’m biased, even though we all know that I am, but Acts of Faith has an awful lot of honest-to-goodness real Christians there, full to overflowing with the love of Jesus. Say, have you fellows had lunch yet?”

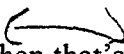
“Actually,” I answered, “we were sort of hoping we could get a fuse for the furnace and go and get the heat turned on.”

“There’s plenty of time for that. You’re on vacation. You can’t be in a hurry. If anybody’s in a hurry, it’s me. I left Simon inside by himself to watch things and he’s

trying to rebuild a transmission at the same time. Come on, all three of you. Let's get lunch, my treat."

It was hard to say no to Big Zell and, besides, I was kind of hungry and I knew that Rich was. So, we walked with Zell to Jeannie's Bar and Grill, the place where Zell said he had lunch nearly every day. I could not help but wonder how a Christian man could let himself be seen in a bar, even if it was just to eat. I mentioned it to him.

"Shoot," he said, "Do you hear that, Lord? He's asking me why I go to Jeannie's. Should I explain it to him?" He was, again, speaking to someone not present. "Well," Zell continued, as we walked toward Jeannie's, "most of the people around here think I'm crazy, anyway, the people at church know me. My life is an open book. I ain't never been too concerned about what people think and besides, the Lord knows my heart, pretty much better than I do even. I know appearances can be important, especially for people not too close to Jesus. But I gotta look at the bigger picture.

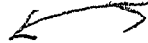
"Sinners are gonna sin. That's what they do. Jesus knew that and expected it from them. He never got real upset with 'em for it. The ones he got upset with for it was the ones claimed they didn't never sin. He went right out in the middle of the sinners to try to win them to God. He ate with 'em, drank with 'em,  joked with 'em. If we're supposed to do what he did, then that's what we gotta do, not stay locked up in some tight little group that acts like everybody outside our group is wrong or evil and keep ourselves on some kind of holier-than-thou trip.

"Jeannie has had that place since her husband, Bill died, and she's good inside, even if she ain't found the Lord yet. And so is old Joel, the cook. I go there for two reasons: to support Jeannie's business and talk to Joel and Jeannie and anybody else who'll listen about Jesus."


As we entered the front door, the first thing I noticed was how brightly lit it was for a bar. It was almost empty. We sat in a booth near the back. A balding older black man came over as we were sitting down. He shook hands with James and gave Zell a hug. Zell introduced us and Richard and I both shook hands with the man. Zell said, "This is Joel Amos, the fastest spatula in the west." Joel took a bow and then took our orders.

While we waited for our food, Zell shared with us about the place. "They do serve alcohol here, but more food than anything else. It's not a place most drinking people come to drink. If they want to drink, they either go to the Pink Pony or Cowboy Bob's, down at Sin Center, southwest of town, or they go to Harry's Pub, a couple of streets over. But..."

"Excuse me," interrupted Richard, "Did you say Sin Center?"

"That's what we call it." Answered Zell. "You know Wilkeyville sits on the north end of Baker Lake. Well, down on the West Side of the lake is a very big resort area. They got skiing, boating, fishing, camping. There's even an amusement park down there. It's about half way between here and Concrete, just this side of the county line. Just north of there is the place that some of us call Sin Center. That's where the  Pink Pony is, along with filthy book stores, nasty movies, prostitution, drugs, gambling, all kinds of places to sin any way you can think of and lots of ways you probably can't."

"How can a place like that exist?" asked Rich.

"Holy Father, please help this young man to understand." Said Zell, evidently speaking to God. The 

devil's got his strongholds, young brother. We've tried everything we can think of to get them out of there. They're not inside the town limits. So, the town council and the mayor can't do nothin'. The state boys say they ain't breakin' no laws. So, we're stuck with 'em, for now. The pastor's got a campaign against 'em, though."

"What can the pastor do?" I asked.

"Pastor Will? He can do plenty. Same thing we all do, mostly, we pray. That's powerful medicine, prayer."

"Who owns it?" Richard asked.

"Lord, why you haven't revealed that to us I don't know." Zell said, again speaking to God "Out-of-towners. Most folks believe it's the Mafia. But, like I was saying, Harry's Pub, Cowboy Bob's and the Pink Pony are the only real drinking places. Jeannie's doesn't even come close. There are only a few regulars that come here. I'm one of them and you see those two women over there? That's Patty Pendergrass, Ike's wife, and Salma Wilkey, the mayor's wife. Patty teaches over at the school and eats lunch here, but Salma drinks here, one of the few that does. I've been coming here for about two years talkin' to Jeannie and Joel. They listen to what I've got to say with a real interest and I believe that the Lord is working on both of their hearts.

"There's a third reason that I come here and here it comes, the food."

Zell bowed his head before the food arrived. I saw Richard and James bow their heads as well. I bowed mine out of respect. Zell thanked God for not only the food, but for the day. He thanked God also for the privilege of meeting Richard and me. Then he said something that I was not to understand completely until much later. He thanked God for allowing him to be part of the fulfilling of the prophecy. Then he thanked God for sending Richard and myself to help them.

The food was very good, just as Zell said that it would be. The sandwich I ordered was hot and juicy. It ran down my wrists as I ate it, the way I like a sandwich to. I thought that I would probably come to Jeannie's for lunch every day too if I worked in Wilkeyville.

After we ate, we met Jeannie Bayton, the owner. She was an attractive woman of about 45. She had long dark hair with a touch of gray and a very kind face. She greeted us warmly, especially Zell. When she shook my hand, her handshake was very firm and she looked directly into my eyes and repeated my name. When I told her that it was good to meet her, it was a true statement. I am funny that way. I never say 'nice to meet you' if it isn't. Little statements and questions like 'How are you?' that most people say without thinking about, I tend to take seriously. When some one says to me 'nice to meet you.' I usually just nod, especially if their statement was superficial, voiced without much of a thought. When some one asks me 'how are you?' or 'how ya doing?' I rarely, if ever, answer with 'fine'. I usually just ignore the question and say 'hello' or 'hey' ('hey' means in the south what 'hi' means in the north).

In the case of Jeannie, she took my hand and looked me straight in the eyes. It was not like some ice-cold phony corporate type who pierces you with their eyes by focusing on the spot between your eyes. She looked at both of my eyes. I could tell because her eyes moved back and forth from one of my eyes to the other. Her facial expression was as if she were anticipating something good or exciting from me. Zell was the same way when we met outside of his service station. They each made me feel as though they were truly glad to meet me, which made it truly pleasant to meet each of them.

Jeannie stood and talked awhile. She asked Zell about his service station and how it was going. She asked me where we were staying and what brought us to a tiny little place like Wilkeyville. When I told her we had come to get away, she said that we had come to the right place because we certainly were 'away'. We all laughed. When I told her that we were staying at the Raza's, she asked if any one had found where they had gone. I told her, "Not to my knowledge." She spoke very openly about them so; I asked her what she knew about the situation.

"I never knew them very well but, from what I've heard, they were very good people, religious and maybe a little strict with their kids but, there's nothing wrong with that. The word is that they waited until all of the kids were on their own, and moved back to Puerto Rico to enjoy the rest of their years without kids. I'll tell you the truth, though. I've never actually believed that. There are too many unanswered questions and their disappearance, if you want to call it that, was just too sudden. No, I think something else happened to them, in spite of what every body else says or thinks."

"What does everybody else think?" I asked her.

"Well, most people think that they left to Puerto Rico to get away from the kids and all of the responsibilities. But Joel says that Bigfoot got them."

"Do you believe in that Bigfoot stuff?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know. Maybe."

"I know one thing," said Zell, "There are more things in heaven and earth than our little pea brains can understand or explain."

"That sure is the truth." Interjected James. This was the guy who just stated that he did not believe in Bigfoot.

"Amen." Rich put in his two cents as he looked at me with an I-told-you-so look.

"All I know is that I need a good bit of hard evidence before I just go believing in things." I answered.

"The thing about hard evidence," returned Zell, "is that it means nothing, unless you see it when you see it, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do know what you mean." I said.

"Well, take Jesus, for instance. I've actually heard people say he was a prophet or a good man but that he wasn't the Son of God. I've even heard people say that he never even claimed to be the Son of God. But, the fact is that he was, and he is, the Son of God, and he did claim it, and, in fact, he spoke very openly and plainly about it. That is the reason that the Jewish hypocrites wanted to kill him. Jesus said, not only that he was the Son of God, but that he, in fact, was God. In the second chapter of the book of Mark and, also in the seventh chapter of Luke, Jesus forgave a paralytic man of his sins. He said, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' According to the law at that time, only God could forgive sins. Isaiah 43:25 confirms that. When Jesus forgave people of their sins, he didn't do it as a prophet or a great teacher. Only God can forgive sins. And knowing that, Jesus forgave sins more than once in the Bible. For that reason, I can see that he was God.

"Now a person may say that just because he forgave somebody doesn't mean that he claimed to be God. But, think about it. He didn't just say 'I forgive you', he said, 'Your sins are forgiven.' If you slapped me, I could forgive you but that's not what we're

talking about. If you slapped me it would make no sense for James to forgive you. Only the one who was sinned against can forgive the sinner.

“The fact that he forgave people of their sins is just one thing. What about his trial? In the 14th chapter of Mark is the trial of Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin. The high priest asked him if he had anything to say about the charges being made against him and he kept silent. But when the priest asked,

‘Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed one?’ Jesus said, ‘I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’

“Nothing speaks more strongly here than the reaction of Jesus’ enemies. The fact that he claimed to be God is clearly established by their actions. They had him killed for blasphemy. The thing about the whole trial that makes it unique is the fact that he wasn’t tried for what he had done, but for who he was.

“The hard evidence, you see, is in the Bible, but if you look in there and read it, but you still don’t see it, then you did not see what you saw.

“Aside from Jesus’ own claim, there’s plenty more hard evidence. For instance, if Jesus was not the Messiah, how could the prophet Isaiah have described every detail of his life over 700 years before Jesus was born? That, alone, would prove it to me, but there are people who look at it and still don’t see it. They say things like ‘Jesus simply modeled his life to fit the prophecies.’ Yeah, right. When he was a baby, he made himself be born in Bethlehem and caused his parents to take him to Egypt. Or, maybe his parents were in on it. There’s just too much that happened in his life that no human being could possibly have controlled for Him to have modeled His life to fit the prophecies. You’ve got to see the hard evidence when it’s in front of you or all the hard evidence in the world does no good at all.

“I’ve actually heard people say idiotic things like ‘Well, I’ve never seen any scientific proof.’ Well, they never will. Scientific proof is based on the ability to show something by repeating the event in the presence of the person questioning the fact.

“What’s that called, Rick?” he asked me, “the scientific, uh...”

“The Scientific Method.” I answered, but I didn’t feel like he really needed my help.

“Yeah, the Scientific Method. You can’t go back and repeat history. So, there’s no such thing as scientific proof of everything. **That** can only be used to prove repeatable things. Josh McDowell said it way better than I ever could in his book, *More Than a Carpenter*. Everybody oughta read that one.”

Without trying, this backwoods mechanic had made me feel more like an idiot than any university professor I had ever had. He had also taught me some priceless things. As much like a dolt as I already felt, Big Zell did not let up. He continued.

“As great as it is to scientists, the Scientific Method doesn’t work when you’re trying to prove or disprove something like a question about a person or an event in history. That’s why they don’t use the Scientific Method in court. What they **do** use in court, though, is proving something beyond what they call a ‘reasonable doubt’. Now, if you look for proof beyond a reasonable doubt, you’ll find it in the Bible. But you’ve got to see it when you see it. Now, do you understand what I mean?”

I had no idea how to answer him. He had just blown the doors off of most of my agnostic argumentation and I had not even given him any of it.

“Yes, I see what you mean.” I said. I had read a few things out of the Bible but I had never seen any of the things that Zell had mentioned. Most of my Bible knowledge came, like that of most non-Christians, ← from things others had told me, from movies, from television and the like. My conversation with my son earlier that morning echoed in my brain. I stole a glance at him. He smiled. It was not an I-told-you-so smile but a sweet smile that simply told me that he loved me.

“Speaking of God,” I said to Jeannie, because I wanted out of the feeling that I was in the spotlight, and because I did not know what else to say, “It looks like we’ll be going to Acts of Faith Church on Sunday. Why don’t you go with us? We’ll be visitors there too and we can all sit together.” I did not know why I said it. It just seemed to come out.

“Well,” she said, “I would but I have to mind the store.”

“No, you don’t” I told her, “All you have to do is put up a sign today saying you’ll be closed on Sunday from now on. You shouldn’t be open on Sunday anyway.”

She shouted across the room at Joel, “What do you think, Joel? You want to go to church on Sunday instead of working?”

“I’d be glad to go if you’re going too.” was his answer.

“Well,” she said, “Do you want to pick us up, or should we meet you there?”

“We can pick you up, no problem.”

“Well, then,” she concluded, “We’ll see you on Sunday, right here about eight o’clock.” She walked back to the kitchen.

“Lord, did you see that?” asked Zell “I’ve been trying to get those two to church for years,” Zell said to me, “and they just meet you, you ask one time and here they go.”

“I reckon it’s my southern drawl.” I told him. “What do you think, Rich?”

“I think we’d better get back and get that furnace turned on,” answered my son, “or it’s going to be another teeth chattering night.”

“Fair enough.” Said Zell and he stood up. While Zell paid the bill, I wrapped the sandwiches that Rich and I had not finished. I abhor waste of any kind.

We walked Big Zell back to his service station. He introduced us to Simon Tordarelli, his assistant mechanic and the percussionist in a Christian band called Rocks of Faith.

Richard and I both found Simon and the stories of his band interesting. We spoke with Simon for several minutes while Zell searched for the fuse. After finding it, he refused to let us pay for it and told us he would see us in the morning. We piled back into James’ pickup and headed back to Raza’s mountain.

As we drove, Richard and James carried on a conversation but I was not listening. I watched the winter scenery. The snow took me back with memories of life in Kentucky in the winter, when the kids were very small and Sippie was a wonder in my life.

Although the snow in Kentucky is nothing like the snow in Washington, by quantity, the Washington snow was still very much a reminder. I was in the Army in those days, stationed at Fort Knox. It does snow there, more than one might think. I’ve seen almost a foot of snow on the ground. It even stayed a week or two sometimes.

We lived in a trailer. OOPS! Sippie never wanted me to say trailer. We lived in a mobile home or a coach. Our mobile home was in Radcliffe, Kentucky, a small town just outside the gates of Ft. Knox.

Life was so very good then. I had no idea, at the time, how good. Life is funny like that. We do not seem to be able to really appreciate the happiest times in our lives until we are looking back at them.

We had three small children. Lizzie was about three, Mandy was a little over a year old and Richie was a tiny baby at Christmas time 1976. August would not be born for six more years.

With the eyes of my memory, I could see Sippie in her three shirts, two pairs of pants, two pairs of socks, boots, a jacket **and** a coat and a stocking cap with socks on her hands for mittens. I was in my pickle suit, the name we called the solid colored olive drab utility clothing worn by the Army before they began to wear camouflage. As soon as I stepped out the front door, a snowball hit me in the chest. I heard a giggle and looked up to see Sippie packing another snowball. I tackled her before she could throw it, however, and held her down making her kiss me as her punishment. She squirmed and turned her head laughing and jokingly called for help. So, I kissed her whole face and tickled her until she submitted.

In her submission, she relaxed her body and kissed me with her eyes closed, and her love open. She opened her eyes and looked at me with a serious expression that told me she was drinking me in. Those eyes looked at me with such warmth and passion. They were the most beautiful I had ever seen. We were very much in love and had made the decision to love one another as well. We knew what love was. We knew that love was not a feeling, even though it does come with feelings attached. Love, we knew was an action, something one does, not something one feels. Being 'in love' is different. That is mostly feeling but the two are quite separate entities. We knew all of this from the beginning and never fooled ourselves by believing that we "fell" into it, as if we had no choice, as many people believe. We had a choice and we chose to love one another.

As I remember her face, it is her eyes that stand out in my mind. They could be so full of love and warmth. They could convey quite the opposite at other times, especially to those at whom she was very angry. Those irises were so lightly blue that they looked white when she was angry. She could appear to be (looks are often deceiving) the coldest creature you have ever seen but, to us, she was quite the opposite. When she was angry or feeling particularly righteous, she was ferocious. She seemed at those times, to have no fear whatsoever. She would attack and pounce on anyone she felt was an enemy, regardless of size or power, and regardless of the odds of her winning. She put me in quite a few precarious situations that way. When she felt she was right she was a lion.

Sometimes the lion came after me. It was not a pretty sight. Actually, it was a pretty sight but it could be a very unpleasant experience nonetheless. It usually happened when I was in the wrong.

As the truck rolled up the snowy mountain road, I thought of one time in particular. It was the time while we were both still in college that we had a heated discussion about the young lady that I had been tutoring in chemistry. Sippie and I both worked part time as lab technicians for the math and science department and part time for the university tutorial agency. This particular young woman had scheduled two 50-minute sessions in tandem for every day of the week. Sippie aggressively reminded me that no one needed ten hours of tutoring a week, not even Victoria Travis, the stereotypical dumb blonde from the nursing chemistry class. I carry no belief that just because a person is blonde, that their intelligence suffers for it. All four of my children are blonde and not

one has an intelligence problem. Victoria, however, could have been the poster child for blonde jokes.

I finally assured Sippie that everything was fine by reminding her that every hour I had booked was seven more dollars for us, a lot at the time, and that money was tight; that I had no interest in Victoria Travis, who could never come close to my beautiful wife; and by telling her that she could fill in for me as Victoria's tutor the second hour of each day, right after her physics class. That did it. I knew because she jumped up on me and hugged me with her arms and legs. Truly, I was looking back on the most wonderful time in my life. I wondered if I had only known, at the time, would I have acted differently? Would I have savored every wonderful second, knowing that it would be cut drastically short?

Suddenly, without warning, I was plucked from my wonderful memories of Sippie. As we approached the house, I heard James exclaim in a way that gave me a serious start, "Dear Lord in heaven." This was followed by my son's exclamation.

"Oh, my God! Dad!"

I quickly looked in the direction both men were looking and glimpsed, only for a second, near the front of the house, the largest two-legged creature I have ever seen as it scratched itself and disappeared around the corner of the house. Its body was covered with reddish brown hair and it walked like a man. It must have been at least seven feet tall, probably taller.

James' truck came skidding to a stop beside my truck in front of the house. We quickly got out and sprinted to the place where we saw the creature going, around the side of the house. We saw nothing and no one. Nor did we hear any thing except a slight wind but we saw that the tracks led up the side of the mountain. The prints were huge, almost twice the size of my own. Most of them could not be seen well because of the depth of the snow. In the places, however, where they were left in shallow snow, they stuck out like a cardinal in a birdbath. There were five toes and a medial arch. They were completely human except for their monstrous size.

A nervous excitement filled the three of us. We stood in silence until James said, "I never would've believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I've lived here all of my life. I've heard rumors and stories but never in my whole life have I seen one 'til now."

"You've heard of the bare foot boy." I said, trying to make light of the situation. "Maybe it was the boy foot bear." I felt like an idiot after saying it and even more when I saw the looks on the faces of James and Richard. And as if looks were not enough, my son added insult to injury.

"What is it with you and bears, Dad?" he asked me.

"You do realize," James asked, "that any self-respecting bear is going to be in hibernation, don't you?"

Actually, somewhere in the back of my mind, not too far back, just a little past my limited knowledge of hunting, I **did** realize it. Still, I came to Washington with bear hunting in mind. I did not, however, let on that I had forgotten such important information. "Y'all, I was just making a joke." I said in my defense.

My son broke out in mock laughter. "But, seriously, folks," he went on, "this **does** shed a lot of light on what happened last night."

"What happened last night?" asked James.

"Come on." I told him, "I'll tell you while we get the furnace going."

* * * *

Boone stepped out of the shower and, taking the large white fluffy towel from the rack, began to apply it to his body. The towel was very thirsty and drank deeply from his wet body. It felt good on his skin so, he took his time. Being clean felt good, very good, and knowing that he was going to be sleeping in a real bed gave him a relaxed feeling. He stepped over to the steamy mirror above the sink and wiped it before hanging the towel back on the rack. He cracked his knuckles and leisurely applied the stick deodorant that he found in the overnight kit that was waiting for him when he checked into his room. He felt better than he had felt in many months. He felt so good that he had almost forgotten the nightmare he had experienced that morning. A twinge of dread filled him for a moment. She said that he was to wait for her there. That meant that he would see her again. Still, a strange feeling of anticipation was with him. She was a very desirable woman. Maybe, if he played the game correctly, she would bring pleasure this time.

After his experience with Ms. Bobb, he walked to highway 11 and found the DuCharm Inn. He checked in at the front desk to find that he did, indeed, have a reservation. He let himself into the room with the key and was astonished to find, not only the personalized overnight kit complete with his favorite toiletries but, an extensive wardrobe hanging on the clothes rack, complete with four pairs of shoes. Also, the drawers were filled with socks and underwear, ties and other articles of clothing. Everything, miraculously, was in his size.

He lathered his face and began to remove the matted beard, anticipating how he would look; smell and feel dressed in his new clothes. Suddenly, he noticed that the lathered face in the mirror was not his own, but that of the woman that he had been both blessed and cursed to meet that morning. She burst forth with uncontrollable laughter that caused Boone to back away from the mirror.

"Finish shaving your face, you silly man." She commanded and, with that, was gone.

Boone saw his own face once again in the mirror. He looked around the bathroom and, seeing no one, He gave his head a shake to clear his thoughts. He finished shaving, combed his hair, applied some of his favorite cologne and looked around the bathroom again. Shrugging his shoulders, he looked back into the mirror and gave himself a smile as he reached for the doorknob.

Still looking in the mirror, he opened the door, turned and ran full force into a familiar grinning woman dressed in a black leotard as if she were going to a gym. His chest slammed into her but she did not move. In fact, he was the one who was knocked slightly backward from the force.

"Hello, Mr. Boone." She beamed and, again, exploded into laughter. Under other circumstances, coming out of the bathroom naked and running into a beautiful, scantily clad woman would have been a dream come true for him. Under the present set of circumstances, however, Boone felt terror. He looked at her for one speechless moment. She was solid in her build, the most muscular woman that he had ever seen in person.

“What’s the matter, Slickie? Aren’t you glad to see me?” she asked mockingly. It was a direct quote from J.D, his prison tormentor. “You look a little pale. Is something wrong? How do you like the clothes I picked out for you?”

“They’re very nice.” He answered and he winced as she put both hands up on his shoulders.

“Then how about a little gratitude, Mr. Boone?”

“Thank you.” He replied, “Thank you very much.”

“You’ll have to do better than that, Slickie.” She said as her iron grip on his shoulders pushed him down to his knees. He looked up at her smiling face as she continued to push him even further down. “On your face!” she commanded. Boone was now flat on his belly with his face in the carpet. He could smell the carpet dust even with his nose pushed flat against his face. “Worship me! Now!”

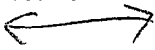
“I don’t know what...oh!” The force of a bare heel coming down hard in the middle of his back cut off his words.

“It was not a request, Mr. Boone. It was a command.”

Boone truly had no knowledge of worship. The only thing he could think of to avoid another kick was, “I worship you. I worship you.” He chanted it. “I worship you. I worship you.” He said it with what he thought must be a broken nose and swollen lips as the kick had knocked his face against the floor. He discovered, however, as he had in the woods that morning, that he had no permanent injuries.

“That is so much better. Now, kneel before me. I have some instructions for you.”

Boone raised up onto his knees with his hands together as if praying. “Please don’t hurt me any more. I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Yes, you will. When I leave, you will rent a car and you will spare no expense. You will be conducting some business for me and I want you to make an impression that lasts. You will speak to the  mayor of the town and you will say exactly what I tell you to say. You will add nothing. Nor will you take anything away. You will use every bit of leverage against him that I give you to use.”

Boone watched her as she spoke. He watched her move and, in spite of his fear of her, found that he had a terrified fascination and that same eerie attraction for her that he had experienced that morning.

As Sweetsting spoke, she paced back and forth giving Boone detailed instructions, stopping only on occasion to briefly bring pain to her audience of one. This was partly to insure that she had his undivided attention, and partly to keep him submissive. More than anything else, however, it was for her own enjoyment. She instructed him on exactly how to have his hair cut, exactly how to walk and carry himself, how to shake hands, how to use his facial expressions. She instructed him in everything he would need to know and on every aspect of the assignment that he had been delegated. She then turned her teaching to a different area.

“I have given you power, Mr. Boone, but only to use as I say. You are not to cower or bend before any man. But you will cower and bend before me. Won’t you, Mr. Boone?”

“Yes.” He answered immediately.

“Say it! Say it now!”

“I will cower and bend before you. I will worship you. I will worship you.”

“You are learning much more quickly now. Do not stand but, on your hands and knees, go to the door and grasp the knob.”

Boone walked on his hands and knees to the door as he was told. When he had taken the knob, Sweetsting, who was directly behind him, said, “Now, with one hand, crush the knob.”

Boone was confused but as he turned his head to look at her, he felt her foot contact him hard in the groin. The force drove the side of his head into the door. “Incorrect response, Mr. Boone.”

His hands went to the painful area as he writhed on the floor in pain. She stood over him with her hands on her hips. “You simply must learn to respond to my commands in a much more timely manner. I have given you a command. I expect it carried out.”

In spite of his intense pain, Boone found the strength to move back to the door on his knees and take hold of the doorknob. He began to squeeze it in his right hand and, to his astonishment; it smashed as if made of wax.

“Now, on your hands and knees, go to the bathroom.” She told him. He complied. “Now, stand up, remove the top corner of the door and give it to me.”

Boone stood and, holding the door with one hand, broke off the top corner with the other and turned back to hand it to Sweetsting. When he did he saw her pointing a revolver at his chest. He put both hands in front of him and began backing into the bathroom. But before he could speak she fired into his chest. The force knocked him backward and blood splashed onto the wall behind him as the bullet passed completely through his torso and lodged in the wall.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Boone. I didn’t hit your big heart.” She laughed. “Now, get up.”

He looked down at his chest. There was no bullet hole, only a quickly healing sore. Yet blood decorated the greater portion of the bathroom wall behind him. He did not even feel bad except for the shock of what had just happened. He checked his chest again and the sore had become a small bruise.

“I don’t want you to think that you are immortal. You can still be killed. It’s just more difficult now. Nor do I want you to think that if I wanted to kill you I would need **any** kind of weapon. Please don’t even begin to think that your new power means anything to me. Try to use it against me and you will lose it, along with your life. I will command and you will obey. If you have any other ideas, I will show you how much power you do **not** have.” She reached out her hand and touched his cheek. He winced.

“Now, sweetie, who am I?”

“You are Ms. Bobb.”

“That’s right. I **am** Ms. Bobb but my first name is Bee. Say it for me, Darling.” She stroked his face.

“Bea.”

“Very good. Can you say my middle name, Elsa?”

“Elsa.” He repeated.

“Now tell me my entire name.”

“Bea Elsa Bobb.” He said with fear in his voice.

“Does that name mean anything to you, Mr. Boone?”

“I’m sorry.” He said most apologetically, “I have not heard it before.”

“Maybe I should be offended but I’m not. I have told you everything that you need to know. Do you have any questions?” She continued to stroke his cheek.

“Yes.”

“Ask away.”

“You told me to meet with the mayor and to say exactly what you tell me to say, leaving nothing and adding nothing but you still haven’t told me what to say.”

“All in good time, darling. Is there anything else you would like to know?”

“Will you be angry if I ask you about yourself?”

“Of course not. Just ask.”

“Is your name Bea, as in Beatrice?” He was probing for a way to gracefully ask more important questions.

“No, my name is Bee.” She spelled it. “B-E-E, as in sting you until you die. If I did sting you, my sting would be so very sweet that you would want me to sting you again and again. Do you believe that, darling?”

“I believe you. Where do you come from?”

“That’s not important, darling. The question is, where am I going? I know what you are wondering, though. You are wondering how a woman only five feet tall can make such a groveling mess out of a man like you.”

“Yes.”

“I am an angel, my sweet, an angel. And I must be going shortly. But before I go, and before you do exactly what I commanded you, we are going to have some fun.”

Fun was the word that she used but there was nothing fun in it for Boone, only immense pain and terror.

* * *

Richard and I related our adventure of the previous evening to James as we replaced the fuse and turned the furnace on. It was a story that he was much more willing to accept, I believe, than he might have been had it not been for the experience we had all shared in the front of the house. We were all sitting in the living room drinking hot coffee by the time the story was finished.

“I’ve been alone in this house many times and I’ve never seen or heard anything out of the ordinary.” He told us. “It gives me the shivers to think how many times I must’ve had company and didn’t know it.”

“I know,” said Richard, “that these creatures are not mean or evil.”

“How do you know that and how do you know that there are more than one?” I asked him.

“Think about it, Dad. They’ve been reported all over the country and all over the world. When I was little I never bought the story about Santa Claus being all over the world in one night. Why would you think that I would swallow a story about one guy, one Sasquatch that could show up all over the world? I don’t believe they are bad or intend to hurt any one because, well, I’m not sure, exactly. But look at those figures in the attic. They portray them as gentle and kind, even Christian.”

“Oh, my goodness.” exclaimed James, “I almost forgot. I’ve still got to move that stuff up in the attic back down to the second floor. I don’t suppose you fellows would want to give me a hand. Would you?”

“Yeah,” said Rich, “we’ll help you move it. We’ve got quite a mess up there to clean^y too.”

Richard and I walked with James up to the attic but we got a bit of a shock when we got up there. All of the glass, including the glass in the back hallway and on the attic stairs, had been completely cleaned up and the two broken display tables were gone.

"Looks like the glass fairy has been here." I said.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed James, "You think that Bigfoot thing was up here cleaning this up while we were gone?"

"Well, I'll admit it's not something I'd picture a Bigfoot doing." I answered, "but it sure does look that way. And this time I'm seeing this hard evidence when I'm seeing it." I looked at Rich and we all chuckled.