

The Seeker of Dishonor

Curiosity will kill me someday. I carry that knowledge around with me like a chain-smoker carries cigarettes. So far I've been lucky, but sooner or later I have to change.

When the alarm went off last Sunday morning I wished I had changed sooner, because what had kept me up far too late Saturday night was not a beautiful woman, a head-banging band, or even a new book that I couldn't put down. No, my curiosity had fixed on one of those ridiculous psychic shows on cable, where some guy claims to be talking to the audience's dead relatives.

How-does-he-do-that curiosity might be forgivable, but I know far too well how the scam works, well enough to appreciate a fine practitioner when I see one. Instead, I spent my time studying his face and mannerisms, and wondering how much longer he can dance to this tune before he has to pay the piper. Not long, I suspect. Somebody should warn him, but he'd probably just laugh. They usually do.

You see, it doesn't matter how big a fraud you are. If you have the faintest repressed shred of mediumship in you, and if you keep announcing that you're open to the spirits of the dead, eventually they'll hear you. And the dead can be very impolite guests, especially if you weren't expecting them. Far too many fake psychics end up needing real exorcists – and not finding them because they know the spirit world is all a con. There's some kind of old-testament justice in that, but personally I don't like it. I guess somebody with my history needs to believe in mercy and second chances.

But by Sunday morning I wasn't going to get a second chance at a good night's sleep. Instant coffee, a day-old doughnut, a shirt with buttons and pants with creases, two not-that-scuffed black shoes – and I was ready for church.

I stepped out of my apartment building's lobby into one of those spectacular May mornings that Massachusetts can produce when it's in the mood: blue sky, bright sunlight, and full leaves so new that their lime coloring still hadn't darkened into the regulation green. The air was cool enough to make walking pleasant, and the scene was highlighted by my already fading memory of a dreary April.

I live by the river in the old industrial part of town, in a red brick mill that got converted to apartments in the Seventies. The next mill over got cut up into storage lofts, and the one after that has become the Calvary Church of God, one of those Pentecostal mega-churches that you didn't used to see in New England.

That wasn't where I was going.

Every Sunday Calvary has three services to our one, so they get started much earlier than we do. Usually some washed-in-the-blood hymn is leaking out their windows as I go past. Sometimes I stop and listen for a verse or two.

I shouldn't. Calvary is another one of my unhealthy fascinations, like the TV psychics. I've been in there. I've wandered around enough to notice that a few of the pamphlets in their rack come from the DeSalvo Institute. I've even gotten up early enough for their first service once or twice, and then hurried on to my own church like a two-timing husband meeting his wife for drinks.

The Calvary folks seem nice enough and they're very friendly to newcomers, but I've never told them who I am. That's the temptation of Calvary – not the old hymns and certainly not the old-time sermons, but the fact that I could walk in there and be an instant celebrity: Miracle Mike DeSalvo, the boy evangelist. I'm sure some people in there watch Dad's network regularly, and maybe even caught my act back in the day. In a minute I'd be surrounded by people wanting me to pray over their aching joints or bless their pregnant wives.

Don't stop, I told myself as I approached.

But I did stop, because Calvary's doors burst open with no warning and three men in dark suits hustled someone out, giving a shove that sent the intruder tumbling down the three stone steps to the sidewalk. Puffing more from anger than exertion, the men looked at each other uncertainly until one passed judgment. "Damn queers," he said. And that seemed to give the three permission to go back inside.

I stood still as a tree. Sprawled on the sidewalk fifty feet in front of me was the worst excuse for a transvestite I had ever seen. A day or more of stubble darkened his face, but his cut-off jeans displayed shaved legs that were long and shapely. He wore bright red lipstick and a Marilyn Monroe wig. I didn't want to get involved, but I knew I ought to wait and see if he was hurt. And I was curious: What the heck did he think he was doing, coming to Calvary looking like that?

Slowly, he picked himself off the ground and stood up straight. And then his appearance began to change without the slightest motion, as if he were a computer-generated special effect. The blonde wig was gone and the lipstick as well. His hair was short and dark now, his face clean shaven and very Anglo-Saxon. His clothes became a suit as dark and well-pressed as those of the men who had thrown him down, and his spike heels morphed into well-shined black dress shoes. He wore a Tucker Carlson bow tie and on his lapel was a W-04 button from the previous election.

This can't be good, I thought.

He did not seem notice me, and when he started to walk I started as well, keeping my distance.

I had the awful hunch that he and I were headed to the same place.

The Society for Rational Ethics is a church that doesn't call itself a church. It's a large white Puritan meeting house with a steeple, and it sits on the town green facing Church Street. Well-dressed people come there on Sunday mornings to sing together and to

listen to a speech about how to live better. Everyone else in town gives directions like “go a block past the old church and turn right.” But Heaven (or whatever naturalistic euphemism substitutes for Heaven this week) forfend that we call it a church. Or any other name that smacks of humanity’s irrational past.

Two kinds of people fit in well at the Society: those who are confident that science will eventually explain everything that needs explaining, and those who believe that the rational world sits on top of an abyss that we are all better off ignoring. Possibly the second group is just me, but I’m not sure. It’s not polite to ask.

If that description makes you want to join, you should know that there is one other unofficial qualification: You have to be a liberal. Not just a Democrat, a liberal. Anne Hanson, the 75-year-old woman who sets out artful cookie arrangements at coffee hour, is the local Green Party chair, and I’ve seen a few of our 60ish members get misty eyed recalling the Gene McCarthy campaign. Bill Clinton was losing popularity when I first arrived at the Society – not because of his sexual exploits, but because he never really tried to get the Kyoto treaty ratified. Society folks take that kind of thing very seriously.

To my ever-increasing dread, the former transvestite and I walked two blocks up to Church Street and turned left. Three blocks later we were at the Green, and then he turned onto the Society’s cobblestone walk.

Peter Galloway, the chair of our Membership Committee, was greeting people at the door. Peter is a handsome man in his forties, and some claim they have known him since college without seeing him frown. He did not frown then, either, but his face froze into a mask when he saw the Bush button. Mechanically, he held out an order of service, but when his mouth opened no greeting came out.

I bounded up the stairs and took the handout from him. “Peter!” I said as brightly as I could manage. I threw an arm over the shoulder of the stranger. For a moment he looked like my brother Jackie, who I am told has not spoken my name in more than a dozen years. Instantly I recalled our ancient argument in its entirety and felt a wave of anger try to push up through my esophagus like a bad meal.

I think I know how this works, I thought, at least a little bit.

“This is my brother, Jonathan DeSalvo.” I said this to Peter, but I looked right at the stranger as I did. His features stopped swimming and fixed themselves as Jackie’s. “I’ve wanted to introduce him to this community for a long time.”

Peter did a double take, noticed the family resemblance, fixated on the button for another second, and then regained his composure. “Welcome to the Society for Rational Ethics, Mr. DeSalvo. I’m surprised I didn’t recognize you from the news magazines. Come in.”

Part of me was tempted to pull my compatriot up the stairs to the lounge, where a quick check of channel 53 would undoubtedly show my brother Jackie preaching at this very

moment. But long experience has taught me that it's a bad idea to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the present moment can't possibly be happening. Keeping hold of "Jackie's" arm, I greeted several other thunderstruck parishioners on my way to finding a seat in a pew near the front. "Won't you sit here with me?" I asked him.

Blessedly, the service started almost as soon as we sat down. Jack, our minister, preached a sermon that I later heard was one of his best, but I could not focus on it. I recall something about Dafur and Abu Ghraib, but two other topics were battling for my attention. On the one hand, I found it difficult to think anything other than annoying thoughts about my brother: Although he lacks my talents, Jackie is richer and more famous than me, and gets ever more handsome as he ages. He has a beautiful wife and four lovely children. Dad is undoubtedly very proud of him. And then there was his behavior. As Jack made his points, Jackie sighed or shook his head or rolled his eyes. He was embarrassing me in front of everyone and it just made me furious.

But the inner core of my mind recognized all these thoughts as static. This wasn't Jackie at all, just as it hadn't been a transvestite at Calvary. This creature had to be some sort of seeker of dishonor. I had thought they were only historical curiosities, but (in between the disrupting bursts of anger and hatred that crackled through my brain) I tried to remember everything I knew about them.

Among humans, the religious practice of seeking dishonor goes back to Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion of India. Reportedly, Mahavira accelerated the dispersal of his bad karma by traveling to regions where his people were despised. Persecution gave him daily opportunities to be mistreated without striking back, a kind of Purgatory-on-Earth. For centuries afterward Jain monks would travel as missionaries to distant lands, not so much to convert people as to be abused. Apparently, overcoming your ego is much easier when you are surrounded by people who think you're disgusting.

I've always tried to avoid testing that theory.

This practice may sound crazy, but the only truly strange thing was that Mahavira did it intentionally. Plenty of other religions have valued the humiliation their followers suffer in the apparent pursuit of some other purpose. To this day, the Mormons send young missionaries out to places where their church is unpopular, and (even if they convert no one) the hostility they face undoubtedly confirms them in their faith.

But several centuries after Mahavira, the short-lived Pasupata sect took the seeking of dishonor to new and bizarre heights. The Pasupatas saw karma as an actual substance, a sort of sludge that forms inside your soul and makes it too heavy to escape the cycle of death and rebirth. Like any substance, it could be manipulated by those who understood its peculiar physics. Pasupatas manipulated theirs by tricking people into treating them unjustly -- by leading a man to believe that you were sleeping with his wife when you actually weren't, for example. As he unjustly beat you to a bloody pulp, the karmic sludge flowed from your soul to his.

I didn't really believe that I was sitting next to a modern-day Pasupata that morning, or a human of any sort for that matter. But I wondered if the same principles might apply. The bouncers at Calvary had probably not done their souls any good by tossing that transvestite down the steps, and any bad behavior Jackie could incite at the Society might well rebound against us in some way, maybe magnified.

But what good it did him, I couldn't figure.

I did figure this much: My best chance to control the Seeker was to be nice to him. That had been my first guess at the meeting-house door, and the more I thought about it the more sense it made. Beings (whether human or whatever) are usually well defended against the response that their personalities are designed to provoke. It's a sort of Pepe Le Pew principle: Made repulsive by Nature, Pepe could tirelessly pursue a female who ran away from him, but could not cope with one who didn't. If the Seeker was designed to provoke anger and violence, force was probably useless against it. But gentle behavior might take it by surprise, or even (given the quirky, rule-bound nature of the spirit world) put it under an obligation. The Seeker had been so docile as I led him in and invited him to sit with me. Maybe he was bound to accept any kindly invitation.

When the organ struck up the recessional, I thought about trying to hustle the Seeker out the door before my fellow parishioners had any more chances to acquire bad karma. But that would be ungracious, and doubtless the Seeker had defenses against ungracious behavior. No, this was bullet-biting time.

"Jackie," I said, noticing that he had sprouted a second button saying Support Our Troops, "I've made so many new friends since I left the family business. Why don't you come to coffee hour and meet some of them?"

He looked hard at my face, studying it for signs of sarcasm or hostility. Finding none, he seemed frozen for a moment, and then replied mechanically, "Thank you. I'd love to meet them."

Instinctively, I tried to lead him to the right-hand door which went directly to the Common Room. But the Seeker was having none of it, and pulled me left, to the door where Jack was receiving comments. I surged forward to get between them.

"Lovely sermon, Jack," I said. "This is my brother Jackie, who I haven't seen in nearly fifteen years." I had told Jack about my family problems when I joined the Society, though I admit I glossed a few of the details. But I was counting on him to remember enough to realize what a difficult situation this must be for me. "I asked him here to show him that liberal secular humanists don't bite. I thought he was very brave to come."

"I hope we don't prove you wrong," Jack responded. He attempted to sound jovial, but could not seem to take his eyes off the new button.

“To an extent you already have,” the Seeker offered. “Mikey always claims that the Blame-America-First characterization of liberals is just a stereotype, but it seemed to me you were giving the terrorists a free pass for their bombings and beheadings so that you could condemn relative misdemeanors committed by our troops.”

Jack blinked twice quickly as the words piled up inside him. “Misdemeanors? Tell that to the Iraqi peasants whose houses we’ve blown up.”

I inserted my head into their line-of-sight and then turned to look at the parishioners waiting behind us. “Well, that’s too long a conversation to have here,” I said. “Perhaps I should bring Jackie to the Tuesday night discussion group. I’m sure his point-of-view would create a lot of interest there.”

Jack stared at me darkly. “All opinions are welcome,” he said as if reading a cue card.

As I led the Seeker away he commented just loud enough for Jack to hear: “A bit defensive, don’t you think?”

The Common Room was empty but for the Hospitality Committee when I ushered the Seeker in. He got the urn’s first cup of coffee, and I released his arm briefly to fill my own cup. When I looked up, Jackie had a peanut-butter blondie in his hand and steam was rising from Anne Hanson’s elegant white hairstyle. “I think if more men just took the time to compliment women’s cookies,” he was saying, “we wouldn’t have all this feminist nonsense.” His second button was larger now and read: Pro-Life – Stop the American Holocaust.

“Anne,” I called cheerfully as I approached at flank speed, “I see you’ve met my brother Jackie. He’s visiting from Oklahoma.” Frowning, she turned to face me. I decided to appeal to her sympathy. “I think he and Dad had a bit of a blow-up,” I added conspiratorially, “I thought he needed a place to run away to.”

“Really,” she said flatly.

She wasn’t buying it. “But it’s good I ran into you. I wanted to sign up for the coffee crew for next Sunday.” Like many bachelors in the Society, I am a notorious non-coffee-maker. I was counting on the pleasant shock of my offer to distract her.

“Really,” she said.

“For the second Sunday of each month,” I added.

Just as I saw the corners of Anne’s mouth turn up, I heard Ron Tolbert yelp “What?” from the other side of the room.

“Gotta go,” I said.

Jackie’s button now showed a Sierra Club logo with a slash through it and the slogan End Junk Science. “All that scare talk about the ice caps melting,” he was saying to

Ron, “no one has done any solid research to back that up. It’s just a way to raise money from gullible tree-huggers. If anybody really believed in it, they’d be buying up land near the coast and waiting for the ocean to come to them.”

I wedged myself between them by giving Jackie a brotherly bear-hug, and then I signed Ron’s petition to stop off-shore drilling. After that I tried to stay closer to the Seeker and stop conflicts before they started. But during the next forty minutes I wound up volunteering to teach Sunday School in the fall, to help build a sundeck onto the parsonage, to clean up after the annual talent show, and to get the office’s wireless network online again.

At last the Common Room was empty but for me and the Seeker. “If that had gone on a minute longer, I’d be treasurer,” I complained. “Do you have any idea how much trouble ...” I stopped. The Seeker was smiling the way Jackie used to when he was beating me at Chinese Checkers. I raised my index finger. “You almost had me there.”

“You seem to know what I am,” he said.

“Sort of.” I took a deep breath and summoned up the mental focus I’d been lacking all morning. I let my vision blur and did the Magic Eye trick I learned from the Castaneda books when I was 12. The Seeker had an aura full of tiny red flames. I’d never seen anything quite like it and could only guess at what to do next. Tracing a sigil in the air and trying to look more confident than I felt, I demanded in Hebrew that he show his true form.

“Where’d you pick up that one?” asked a blonde, slightly overweight young man with a Southern accent. His t-shirt and jeans were worn and his work boots had oil stains. Something was not right about his eyes; they seemed far older than rest of him.

“I had a rebellious youth,” I explained. “At the time I thought I was learning witchcraft.”

He smiled. “I bet that made your Dad happy.”

“That was the idea,” I admitted.

Given that the sigil had worked, I could probably banish him now. That was clearly the sensible thing to do. I knew that. Any person with his head screwed on right stays far away from creatures that he doesn’t understand. Especially magickal ones.

“Want to have lunch?” I asked.

The Seeker was obliged to accept.

The Aegean Diner sits on the other side of Church Street. It is always full before church, but seldom after. It’s close, cheap, and you don’t look out of place wearing soiled work boots. “What should I call you?” I asked as we crossed the Green.

He thought for a moment. "Bill. It was my name, back when I ... back before." We stopped to wait for the traffic light on Church Street. He looked down at his boots. "I haven't seen those in a while. How did you ... notice me?"

I shrugged. "I see things. Always have, all the way back to when I was a kid."

"That's quite a gift."

"Or curse. In the land of the blind, I like to say, the one-eyed man is certifiably insane. How do you think Jack and Anne and the others would react if I told them what just happened back there?"

"Maybe not as bad as you think," Bill opined. The too-old eyes looked me up and down. "They might listen. They like you, you know. That's how we got out of there this clean."

I didn't have a response for that. Being liked is something I've never let myself get used to. It's like a safety net that I don't want to test. In the Aegean, I picked a corner table away from the other diners. When the waitress brought coffee, I ordered the Greek omelette and Bill asked for ham and eggs. He gave her a hard time for not having grits, but she didn't rise to the bait. I stopped him from lighting a cigarette so that she wouldn't have to.

"You're off duty now," I said when she left. "Otherwise I'll have to banish you."

He shrugged as if he didn't care. "I should be getting back to work anyway. It hasn't been a very productive morning."

"But you don't get many chances to talk," I guessed, "do you?"

He held out his palms in a gesture of defeat.

"So what are you exactly, anyway?" I asked.

Bill wore an expression that probably appears on my face from time to time. He wanted to explain but didn't know where he could start. "What do you think I am?"

"Some kind of seeker of dishonor," I speculated. "People who lash out at you probably have something nasty happen to them down the line."

He nodded as he stirred some sugar into his coffee. "Close enough. I'm avenged seven-fold. I bear the Mark."

Maybe he should have started somewhere else. Conversations with the paranormal tend to be like that. People say bizarre things as if they make perfect sense, and sometimes you just have to go with it. "So a bearer of the mark is a particular kind of seeker of dishonor?"

He frowned at me in disappointment. “Not a bearer of the mark. *The Bearer of the Mark*. There’s only one. One at a time, anyway.”

“The Mark?”

“Of Cain.”

I set down my coffee cup and leaned back in the booth. “Get out,” I said in surprise. “There’s a real Mark of Cain?”

Bill seemed offended. “What? You think people just make up crap like that?”

Actually that’s exactly what I thought, but it didn’t seem tactful to say so. “So where is it? What’s it look like?”

Now I got a serious frown. “Don’t ask me that again. You’ve been nice to me and I’m doing you a favor here. I really am. Say you knew how to inscribe the Mark of Cain. What would you do with it?”

“Do?” I hadn’t thought about doing anything. I was just curious. But then I imagined knowing that I had the Mark copied into one of my notebooks. Eventually I’d get curious about what it could do, wouldn’t I? “I guess I see your point,” I allowed. “So how does a nice-looking young Southern man like yourself come to bear the Mark of Cain?”

He sipped his coffee, then added two more packets of sugar and stirred them into a whirlpool. “It wasn’t fair at all,” he said. “It never is. It was back in 65, that summer when Martin Luther King was stirring up all that trouble.”

“The Selma march.”

“Yeah. And a bunch of stuff. Anyway, around then me and two other guys from the garage were at a diner kind of like this one, except that it wasn’t Greek. And I’m sitting next to the window when a car pulls up. It’s full of niggers – blacks, I guess you call them now – and this short Jewish guy jumps out of the back seat. Just as he’s getting out, I see this pretty little coffee-colored girl, she couldn’t be more than about 14. She’s practically falling out of her dress and she lays this big kiss on his lips.

“Anyway, they drive off and he comes in by himself. And he no sooner gets in the door than he’s laying down some line of crap about where our niggers are. And he knows we’ve got niggers in the kitchen, but why don’t we put any of them out where the customers can see them? And why don’t we let niggers eat here? And it’s nigger-this and nigger-that and it’s all coming out in that fast, loud, New York Jew accent.

“So the guys and I, we went and stood by his table and said we’d appreciate it if he kept his voice down, because we all had our own things to talk about and didn’t necessarily want to listen to him. And sure, we went over there to scare him, but we didn’t really mean anything by it. We just figured we’d go over and scare him a little and he’d shut up.

“But he didn’t shut up. He lit into us like he knew us back three generations. I don’t even remember what he said, he got me so mad. Anyway, we took him out back behind the diner, and even then I don’t think we were going to hurt him much. We just wanted to tell him to get the hell out and not come back.

“But somebody hit him. I don’t even think it was me, not the first one. But then we were all hitting him and he still wouldn’t shut up. And he was down on the ground and we were kicking him. We were all kicking him. It was just luck it was me. It could have been one of the other two. But it wasn’t one of them. They suffered the usual sevenfold. But I got the Mark, because it was my kick that killed him.”

I was beginning to see how this thing worked. “He was the previous Bearer of the Mark,” I guessed. Bill nodded. “But how could you kill him? I thought the whole point of the Mark was so that people *wouldn’t* kill Cain. God makes Cain a wanderer, and he’s afraid people will kill him, so God gives him the Mark.”

Bill shook his head impatiently. “It’s a little more complicated than the book makes it sound. Once you’ve got the Mark, somebody killing you in anger is the only way you *can* die. It’s the only way you can end it. You can’t shoot yourself. You can’t jump off a bridge. You can’t drink acid or grab high voltage lines or anything. I’ve tried it all, even modern stuff, and whatever you do, you don’t die. Not until somebody kills you in anger, and then you pass on and they have the Mark.

“And Cain, well, Cain never did die, not really. We’re all Cain, all of us. When you get the Mark, you get the memories. Thousands of years of it. Of bringing destruction wherever you go. Of people wanting to hurt you and being punished for it. All the way back. That’s why you try so hard to get killed, because you just want it to be over.”

I figured that must explain the eyes. I wondered what it must be like to have hundreds of lifetimes of memories battling it out in your head. “But it’s not over,” I said. “It just passes on to someone else.”

“It’d be over for me. I can’t take it sometimes, the memories. That’s another reason to get somebody yelling at you or beating on you, because it forces you to live in the moment and not remember anything. But ...” He stopped, and I could tell he was torn about whether to go on. “We were the Black Death. Back then, we looked like a sick beggar, and any town that was afraid and sent us away, they’d get it. Some that were really nasty to us, they got wiped out to the last little baby. Sometimes we’d get lost and go back somewhere we’d been before, and then we’d see it.”

I have my own bad memories that I get lost in sometimes, but I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have those.

“And Sodom. Sodom was the worst.”

“Sodom? That was real too?”

"You think people just made this crap up? Of course Sodom was real. Except there was just one of us, not three and then two like in the book. We went to Abraham first. For years, soothsayer types had been going to Abraham and saying that he could still have a legitimate son. At first it had been a good way to get handout from a rich man, but eventually it started to tick him off. And so that's what we tried, the phony soothsayer bit. And it worked on Sarah, she got really mad. But Abraham saw through it, the way you did, and he got in the middle and stopped her before she could do anything she'd be punished for.

"And he tried to convince us not to go to Sodom, but we had to go there. It was just too promising. Because Sodom was famous for hating foreigners. Inhospitability, taking advantage of travelers – back in the Bronze Age that was the biggest sin there was. All the Bronze Age cultures have stories about it. And that was the sin of Sodom: xenophobia."

"*Xenophobia?*" I asked skeptically. "I always heard the sin of Sodom was ... well, sodomy."

"Yeah, sure," Bill snorted. "God would have scorched the whole Earth by now if he cared about crap like that. Sodom gets fire and brimstone and Athens gets a Golden Age. Does that make sense?"

"I guess not," I conceded.

The food came, but Bill didn't seem hungry any more. I wasn't sure he even saw me. The old eyes fixed on the center of the table as he relived memories that weren't even really his. "So Abraham must have sent a runner to warn Lot, because he did everything he could to get between us and the Sodomites. I don't think he was sharp enough to figure it out on his own, so somebody must have told him.

"Anyway, when we – I, Cain, whatever – came strutting through the square like the richest, most obnoxious foreigner the town had ever seen, Lot saw through it. We had to accept when he invited us home with him, but on the way we managed to piss off a few dozen of the major citizens. The first part of the story in the book, about them gathering in front of Lot's house and wanting to gang-rape us, that's true. But it wasn't lust. When was gang rape ever about lust? They just wanted to humiliate the foreigner the best way they knew. That's the significance of Lot offering his daughters and the crowd refusing them. It wasn't lust.

"But the second half of the story, that's what Lot told Abraham later. It isn't what happened. When the mob threatened to burn down the house with us all inside, Lot's wife made him cave in. That's how fire got into the story; they shouldn't have done that. So Lot let them take us, and he packed up to leave as fast as he could, before he got caught in their punishment or acquired any more guilt of his own. And they tore the fine clothes off of us and they did what they said they would do. But they didn't kill us. All that, and we didn't even get to die.

“But when they were done, when the crowd was straggling off home one by one, the fire started falling. It couldn’t hurt us, of course. Nothing but human anger can hurt a Bearer of the Mark. But we could watch, and we did. We saw it all: the city pounded flat, everyone burning alive. We even enjoyed it at first. But I have to tell you, sevenfold vengeance is like the meal that makes you sick. It’s too rich; it’s too much. However much you hate these people, you didn’t want this. Sevenfold is too much.”

I had managed to eat about a quarter of the Greek omelette while he talked, but by now my appetite had faded too. On the wall next to us was a picture of the Parthenon, and the tables and booths near us were still empty, as if we were bearers of a plague.

“What about the people today?” I asked. “The people at church, the ones at Calvary. What’s going to happen to them?”

Bill took a couple deep breaths, appreciating the chance to shift gears. “I’ve got nothing to do with the punishments, but I don’t think your people have much to worry about. They got angry, but they didn’t do anything about it. Probably they’ll be in a bad mood the rest of the day, and then it will be over. At Calvary, I don’t know. The punishment tends to fit the offense in some exaggerated way. The man who pushed me down the steps directs the youth choir. Homophobia, youth choir, ... you don’t have to be a genius to figure that one out. As for the community, I’d expect some kind of sexual scandal to blow up. A schism. Lots of back-biting and anger and wrecked friendships. Sevenfold – it’s one of those Bronze Age numbers. It doesn’t actually quantify anything. It just means ‘over the top’. I don’t wish it on them; I’m just trying to get done with it.”

We were silent for a moment, and then I thought that something didn’t add up. “It can’t be that hard to get yourself killed, can it? It shouldn’t take forty years.”

Bill shook his head. “It usually doesn’t. I’m just bad at this. My heart just wasn’t in it for years and years. I was never a bad guy. I just got unlucky. I don’t want to hurt people. I don’t want to see sevenfold vengeance. I tried to find loopholes. I tried to get out some other way. But really there’s only one way.”

Puzzles are part of what drew me into the occult to begin with. Loopholes, ways to invent your own rules and circumvent the ones you were given – it wasn’t all just to get back at Dad. “OK,” I said. “You can’t commit suicide. But what if somebody killed you out of mercy?”

He shook his head. “No. No single person could do it. It’s the rules.”

“What rules?”

“It takes a minyan. Ten men. Or maybe just ten people these days. Who knows? They all would have to be united in mercy, without a shred of anger in their hearts.”

It sounded like some pretty heavy-duty magick, the kind where you have to make sure to dot all your i's and cross all your t's. "And this ritual wouldn't have any interesting side effects like ending the World or anything?"

"No. It wouldn't even bring the Messiah. But it might as well. There's a reason it hasn't happened in thousands of years. Think about it: Ten people who've met me and bear no anger towards me."

I searched his face and then searched inside myself. Was I angry at him? Sure, he'd made a bad mistake, but he'd been paying for forty years. *It has to stop somewhere*, I thought. "I'd be up for trying. How many would that make?"

"Three. If the other two are still alive."

I reached across the table and put my hand on his. "Keep looking," I said. "Think what it would mean to get this curse out of the world."

He looked at the ceiling and sighed. "Can I go now?" he asked. "I don't see much mercy these days. It's a nice idea, very *kum bay yah*, but I think I'll have better luck finding somebody to kill me."

"You can go," I said. I wasn't all that surprised. My rare bursts of idealism usually don't catch on. "But don't try your luck around here any more. I really will defend my people."

He laughed sadly as he got up. "Oh, I won't be back here. You can count on that. I have a hard enough time when no one is working against me."

I stayed seated. "I could work *for* you, too," I offered one last time, "if you found the nine others. Come back then."

"Yeah, sure," he said with false optimism. "I'll let you know."

I watched him walk out of the Aegean. On the sidewalk he transformed again, into a homeless man with bloodshot eyes. The diners by the window didn't seem to notice. I sat and drank coffee until my appetite came back. And then I finished my omelette.

The Seeker seems to have kept his promise to leave town. In the week since, I have taken a lot of long walks and kept my eyes open, but I haven't seen him again. In cynical moments, I believe that I never will.

But someone is seeing him. Of that I have no doubt. Someone sees him every single day.

Doug Muder

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