

Dead Man

Adventures of Dead Man - Scene 1: Dream?

I woke up feeling the best I had felt in... years. Maybe decades. There was a pleasant breeze and natural summer scent wafting through the open window, and the soft morning light outside could only be described as peaceful. There was only two problems. I had no idea where I was, or how I had gotten there.

I thought I was alone in the room, but I was wrong. Sitting by the window, on what looked like a hand-hewn log chair was a man. I had no clue who he was, but I was sure he was familiar. I thought for a moment that I should be afraid, or at least startled, but couldn't drum up the necessary adrenaline. I was just too bemused and felt too safe. He smiled gently at me, saying nothing, clearly as comfortable sitting there in silence as I was content to be silent.

I vaguely remember feeling almost exactly the same way once as a very young child. Safe at home in bed, on a perfect summer morning filled with country fresh air and lazy summer sounds audible from just outside, with the distinct assurance that all was well, and that a satisfying day lay ahead. No worries. No obligations. Just a sweet and calm anticipation of what the next few hours would bring my way.

But that was very long ago, and while I recall the memory, I didn't recall *recalling* that particular memory for a very long time indeed. Where did it come from, and why now?

I cleared my throat.

"Hello," I said, surprised at the strength of my own voice. Why did that surprise me?

The stranger's smile widened. Perfect teeth, like polished ivory. Not fake looking like he'd been bleaching; just natural, like teeth were always meant to be.

"Hello yourself," he replied amiably. The voice, like the face, comfortingly familiar. I focused on his appearance more closely, wondering why I didn't feel the need to grope for my eyeglasses on the night stand. I shifted my gaze for a split second. Hmmm. No night stand. No glass case. Problem? Apparently not.

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"Questions?" he asked.

"Well... yeah," I said. "Now that you mention it. Where am I, and *who* are you?"

"What is the last thing you remember?"

Him just voicing the inquiry invoked some kind of 3-D cinematic, surround-sound virtual reality in my head. Sight, sound, smells, and tactile sensations poured into my awareness through an open floodgate, so that I was both perfectly aware of myself lying in bed, and simultaneously off somewhere into a distinctly different reality. I liked it. Well, most of it. The unsettling part was an image of a man (more than an image, really), collapsing on the ground, clutching his chest and trying his best to breathe. I didn't recognize him from the back, but the coat and build were familiar. Then he managed to turn himself over and I saw his face as if floating above him. The vivid scene vanished instantly as my heart leapt into my throat. It was me!

My eyes snapped open (I didn't realize I had closed them), and standing next to the bed was the stranger, a look of compassion and understanding on his face. And there was something else, like a gentle and loving sense of humor percolating warmly just underneath the surface. Who was he?

"Are you OK?" he asked.

I really noticed his eyes then. They were a piercing grayish-green. Comforting. Knowledgable. I studied his face more closely. He looked both ancient and young at the same time. Child-like and full-grown. If I stared for any length of time at all, he seemed to shift in appearance; the emphasis changing. For one nanosecond, I saw him as he must have looked as an infant, innocently self-absorbed. In the next, a series of flowing mental pictures (more than pictures) of him as a toddler, adolescent, young adult, middle-aged, and finally an elderly and wisdom-filled old man, ramrod straight and full of vigor. All these perceptions hitting me at faster than the speed of light it seemed, a universe of impressions in the blink of an eye.

"I think so," I managed to reply.

"Good," he said, and smiled wider still. "You are taking it well."

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"Thanks," I responded automatically. Then, "What am I taking well, exactly?"

"Your death," he said.

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Adventures of Dead Man - Scene 2: Dream?

"Say what?" I said in an inexplicably British accent.

"Your death," he repeated softly.

"I do not feel dead. I feel, well, great!"

"Yes. Regardless, you are, in fact, dead...at least for now. Technically." He smiled again.

"You're playing with my head," I accused, starting to feel petulant.

"I am telling you the truth, one layer at a time, because I know you. I know you very well."

"How's that? Granted you look familiar, but I can't quite place the voice or the face. Or the teeth."

"Patience, my friend. Trust me."

"Is this Heaven, then?" I asked.

"Why do you ask? I mean specifically, not generally. I tell you you're dead and you ask if this is Heaven, which makes sense, of course. But what specific detail caused you to ask now?"

I thought about it for a bit, inclined to answer flippantly because petulance demands either flippancy. Or pouting, and I was too old to pout.

"No glasses," I said. But as I answered, so did he, exactly in unison. The same response, in the same tone. He even pointed at my eyes, just like I was.

"Told you I knew you," he said. "And, no. I am not 'playing you.'" Which is exactly what I was thinking.

"Your back doesn't hurt, either, which is the second reason you asked about Heaven," he continued.

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"My back always hurts," I replied, pouting.

"But it doesn't now, because you're dead. And you would have said something about it, but now you won't because I just did, and you hate to play into people's expectations. It makes you feel like a puppet."

"I don't think I like you," I said.

"But you do!"

Damn that smile! Could you even say damn in Heaven?

"It's not exactly a common exclamation, but it's been heard on occasion."

"Now you're answering my thoughts, too? That's not polite."

"No. I suppose not. But it continues to make my point, so you can begin to trust me. Because you'll need to."

"What point? That you know me."

"Yes, exactly!"

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Adventures of Dead Man - Scene 3: Dream?

I waited, mulling. I knew I should be upset, but that peaceful sunlight, and that breeze, and the serene summer sounds. It was hard to remain discomfited. And while I was content to just lay there for a time, I was really looking forward to getting up and going outside under the blue, blue sky, and maybe running again, and feeling the warm air on my face... and my eyes. I hadn't felt that directly, and still been able to see clearly, since second grade; a very long time ago. It was a small thing, but suddenly, very significant. I didn't know why. I didn't care why.

But there were questions, and so far, precious few answers. Actually, no answers.

"So, how can I be dead, 'technically', for a time?"

He chuckled. It was a friendly sound, not at all derogatory.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You saw that one coming."

"Yes, I did. Like I said. I know you. I've *studied* you."

"I'm flattered."

"No you're not. You're annoyed. You think I'm trying to distract you. But I know better than that. Your laser-like focus is undistractable."

"Now you're making fun of me. And that's not even a word - undistractable."

"Yes, I am. A little. But I'm sure you don't mind because..."

"Yeah, you know me. I get it. So?"

"You are aware of the true definitions of death, yes?"

I merely raised my eyebrows. Two could play this game of being enigmatic.

"Relax," he said. "It was a rhetorical question. I know *exactly* what you do and

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don't know."

"You're that good, eh?"

He smiled. Despite myself, I liked him. He was growing on me.

"You have undergone the First Death. Your consciousness, your spirit, has been separated from your physical body."

"So I'm unconscious, and this is a dream. What'd I have? Heart attack? Stroke? What?"

"No. You are not unconscious. You are dead. You were shot."

"Dead? Shot?"

"Yes. Now you're getting it."

"I should be really upset then. "

"Perhaps."

"Who shot me?"

"That's not important. Your family is safe. I know that's what you're now primarily concerned about. You were the intended target. You really do worry too much."

"When you asked me what's the last thing I remembered, I saw me on the ground. I didn't look shot. No blood. I looked old, and well, heart-attacky."

"Nope."

"Whaddya' mean, 'nope'?"

"You saw what you could handle at the moment. Your Father is like that. Merciful. Kind. He knows you far better than even I do."

"And it's not important *who* shot me?"

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"No. Not at the moment."

"So, I'm dead."

"Yes."

"And this is Heaven?"

"A small piece of it, yes."

"What I can handle right now."

"Yes. Exactly."

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Adventures of Dead Man - Scene 4: Dream?

"So, I have become Dead Man, is that it?"

"If you'd like."

"And I am experiencing a bit of Heaven?"

"Well said, yes. The smallest possible bit. There is much more, of course."

"How do you know?"

"I am a permanent resident."

"An angel or a glorified man?"

"Excellent question! I expected no less."

A blatant attempt at flattery, I knew, but this guy, whoever he was, was just too amiable to get annoyed.

"And you are? And don't be evasive this time. It's a nice day out there, and I might just decide that answers are less important than I thought a minute ago."

"It's been much less than a minute, my friend."

"You're doing it again," I said. "On purpose."

"Yes. I promise to stop if you answer one more question from me."

I raised my eyebrows at him. He did the same at me, at the same time, but better. And then that whole image metamorphosis thing occurred again, and I saw him at a variety of ages, as if he were all of them at once.

"Stop doing that! It's disconcerting!"

"I imagine it is, but *I* am not doing it. *You* are. When you reside in Heaven, even as a visitor, what you think is what you see. Or more precisely, what you think *is*

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reality. That's why permanent residence requires an existential transformation. Terrestrial beings cannot stay here for long. They need to put on immortality and incorruptibility. I'm sure you could imagine the resulting chaos otherwise. That's why you are in an Isolation Room, of sorts. Quarantine, so to speak."

I had to admit, he was *very* good at controlling the conversation. The more he spoke, the more questions I had, and it would be very easy to get side-tracked. Plus, while I felt the conversation was extremely important, I lacked a certain necessary sense of urgency about it. That breeze and sky outside were too inviting. And I had not felt so physically good in a long time. Maybe since birth. But then, my laser-like focus would come into question and we couldn't have that.

He was smiling, again. I knew that he knew that I knew that he knew what I was thinking. It was kind of fun, and the blue outside was the bluest blue I had ever seen, or could imagine ever seeing. *But enough of this*, I decided, *I have my reputation to consider*. For some reason, I laughed out loud at that. So did he.

"Alright. What's your question? And remember, a deal's a deal. I answer your question and you answer mine. Yes?"

"Of course. Here it is: how did you get here?"

"I died. You said so yourself."

"Please! Now you're just being petulant again."

I cleared my throat to gain time. I do not like tests, or trick questions. I especially dislike tests that contain trick questions.

"Fine," I said. "If this is Heaven, and I am now Dead Man, the only way I *could* have gained entrance was through my faith in Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, Friend and Brother, the Son of God, who died on the Cross of Calvary for my sins."

It's funny. I knew that was the correct answer he was looking for, and if he were being truthful in his claim to have studied me, he had to have known that's what I would say. So why the test? Why make me say it?

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At that very moment, in addition to the idyllic sky, the warm breeze, the lazy summer sounds, and the perfect and painless physical condition I was in, something else came into focus. Something big and complicated and powerful that was impossible to describe, but indisputably good and pure. It filled, well, everything, and in some ways it was a glorious and stirring symphony, and in some ways light, and in some ways neither of those things at all, but much, much more.

My whole being smiled in utter, inexpressible joy. I am sure my eyes glistened with emotion so deep and profound that I should not have been able to see through the incipient tears. But I could, even more clearly than I had before! I saw my companion's face, and it looked as I imagined my own did; completely enthralled and filled with anticipation that was guaranteed to be fulfilled exceedingly abundantly beyond whatever either one of us could ask or think.

"You did that on purpose!" I said.

"Yes! Consider it a gift. A downpayment of unimaginably greater things to come. And, your welcome."

I laughed then in a way that I hadn't done since I was a boy being lovingly trounced on by a litter of puppies full of life and eager to welcome into the fold a new and interesting, if odd-looking, member.

"Your turn," I said joyously, after some uncountable time. "Who exactly are you?"

He looked at me with that same knowing and friendly smile, and his image fluctuated once more through the stages of human life, finally settling on the form of an ancient, wise, and compassionate man full of love and ageless warmth.

"I am you!" he said with a smile. "Transformed!"

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Dead Man on the Balcony

"I did not see that coming!" I said. "How can you be me, if I am me? There cannot be two me's. I am me, not you. Otherwise *neither* one of us is *either* one of us."

"It's simple, really, " he said. "I am you as you will be in your future, while being the you that God has intended before the foundation of the world. I am you without all the bother of linear time. Don't get bogged down in the details. They're beyond your current understanding. Suffice it to say that I am a glimpse of things to come."

"But I don't like you!"

"But you do! What's not to like?"

"You're, well, unnerving. And a bit conceited."

"How's that?"

"You think you're better than me."

"That's not conceit. It's true. I am better than you. In every way, but so what? I had nothing to do with it."

"I don't like being inferior. I want to be best."

"I'm afraid you're puny idea of best is rather meaningless here. You would not want it any other way, believe me."

This being Dead Man, and talking with a guy who said he was me, who seemed to morph seamlessly from one age to the next, without so much as blinking, was disconcerting. I felt off my game, unable to grasp what was really going on, and trying to desperately to figure out just what kind of dream this was. Because it couldn't be reality. It *had* to be a dream. And an annoying one at that.

"Think of it this way," he advised, "you are not dreaming. You are on the balcony of Heaven about to look down over the railing of existence. True, full-

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dimensional existence, which is not really anything like the skipping-across-the-surface-of-time kind of existence that you're used to. It will be upsetting at first, knowing you (And I do know you, don't forget), but it'll be OK. I promise."

"I hate it when you give me that all-knowing smile after you tell me something that proves you know what I'm thinking."

"You liked my smile before now. You thought it added to my aura of amiability."

"Yeah, but now I know who you are, and I don't like it."

"Ah! So you believe me, then?"

"Let's just say I'm willing to suspend my disbelief in the hopes of bringing this to some kind of sensible closure. And maybe getting outside this room into the sunlight. It looks *really* nice outside, like the world used to look when I was a kid, before I knew what it was *really* like."

As soon as I voiced the desire, I was outside - on a balcony, no less - gazing out over the most fantastically satisfying landscape I had ever scene. It was perfect in every aspect, with that magical proportion of light and shade, brilliant colors, pastel shadows, grand sweeping vistas of majestic terrain, interspersed with intriguing views of cozy woods, undulating, grass-covered hills, and sparkling, seemingly endless bodies clear blue water. And all permeated by a sense of peace and rightness that made me gasp.

As I looked more closely (and here I marveled again at the acuity of my vision, as if I had both infinite-distance and microscopic focus at the merest thought), I saw more species and varieties of plants and animals than I could ever have counted. They seemed to span all know terrestrial climates and ages, extinct, futuristic, massive, minuscule, flyers, crawlers, creepers, swimmers, floaters, and some with inexplicable forms of mobility.

There was a *lot* to take in. I could have spent millennia from just this one balcony vantage point and not exhausted a tenth of what I was seeing. A millionth.

"You need to breathe," he said gently. I glanced his way for just a millisecond,

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unwilling to look away from the amazing panorama before me for more time than that, and was not surprised to see his eyes shining in wonder as much as I imagined my own had to be.

"You said I'm Dead Man," I reminded him quietly, gazing back over the railing.
"Why do I need to breathe?"

He laughed at me then, kindly, affectionately.

"In some ways," he said, "we haven't changed a bit."

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Dead Man on the Balcony (continued...)

How can you tell how long something takes when time has no meaning? All I knew, all I wanted to know, was that this experience, whatever it was, was too magnificent to come to an end. I realized at that instant (ah! there it was again - a reference to time!) that if this, the smallest bit of Heaven, was so enthralling, so captivating (when all I was doing was leaning on a balcony railing looking out at stuff - such incredibly awe-inspiring stuff!), that the rest of it must be beyond imagining.

Heaven, a word to name a place, diluted by overuse, losing its meaning over time and endless repetition, was impossible to stereotype. I supposed that the very attempt to make it meaningless was part of the Enemy's strategy in the long war against the *God* of Heaven - what can't be eradicated, trivialize. What can't be trivialized, stigmatize, and what can't be stigmatized, marginalize.

"Clever boy," he said from next to me. "Did you just come up with that?"

"Your mind-dropping again," I said, not looking over at him. "It's rude. It's not polite to be rude. Glorified men should be polite. And what, there's no right to privacy here?"

"In a place where Omniscience reigns, privacy is necessarily hard to come by. Plus, it's not needed here. Everyone wants to know as they are known."

"I get the distinct sense that I won't be staying here for long. Is that true?"

"Yes. You are on a kind of weekend pass. A tourist, and not the first. And certainly not the last."

"Will I be able to speak of this when I get back? The Apostle Paul said that his experience in the Third Heaven was not lawful to speak about."

"Our beloved brother Paul was taken right to the Heart of Heaven, as was John the Elder. I'm sorry to say, you're not even in the parking garage."

"That's OK. I'll take it. Do I *have* to go back?" I was whining. We both knew it.

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"Yes. But when the time comes, you will understand, and have no regrets."

"So why I am here? Why not just leave me on the planet until my body revives or is resuscitated? Why give me a taste of what I can't keep?"

"You've got it wrong. You asked for this. You prayed for this. For comfort, for assurance, for a glimpse of what it is like. So He has granted it to you because He loves you, and delights to give you the desires of your heart. But more than this glimpse you could not handle. So, as in all things, he has given you only what He knows you can bear."

"Why you, then? Why not one of my departed relatives? Why not anybody else besides me, er, you?"

"I volunteered. I wanted to be your guide. I *like* you."

"I don't get it. Not any of it."

"Of course not. You are a finite being on the edge of the Infinite. Nobody expects you to get it, not right away; least of all me."

"Hang on! Is that an insult?"

He smiled *that* smile again. I ignored it. Mostly.

"What's next?" I asked.

"I would like to direct your attention over *there*," he said, pointing somewhere beyond the horizon.

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Dead Man Over the Edge

At first I didn't see anything but a hazy darkness as I looked down over the edge of... I don't know what. I thought it strange that, where a moment ago there was the magnificent panorama of the "smallest bit of Heaven", now there was nothing. Or mostly nothing. As I gazed more intently I began to see more (*is that how everything works here*, I wondered). At a very great distance, a sphere began to emerge, like a pale, wavy-colored marble. More than anything it looked like a gray-scale rendering of the Big Blue Marble.

"Is it Earth?" I asked. I sensed more than saw him nod affirmative. "Why does it look like that? I would have expected it to be in giga-pixel color depth. You know, trillions-and-trillions-of-colors."

"You are seeing it from the context of Heaven. C.S. Lewis called it Shadowlands. You can see why. In comparison to the reality of this place, the material Creation is quite dull and drab. Of course, it wasn't that way in The Beginning, nor will it remain that way forever, but that is how it is now."

There were so many things I could have said, then. But what I ended up saying is, "why would anybody want to go there?"

"It's destiny is to be recreated, as part of the New Heavens and New Earth of Revelation, but seen at this time from here, you are viewing its true appearance."

"It looks dead."

"Yes, but it's not. It is filled with life; life lived in the shadows of death."

"It is unpleasant to look at. What are those darker patches there and there?" I asked, pointing to where I began to see them appear on the planet's surface. Again, as I willed myself to look closer, the Earth's image enlarged. I felt that if I wanted to, I could have visually dived beneath its lackluster atmosphere.

He sighed then, and it was the first hint I had gotten from him of anything less than a vast, serene joy. I looked over at him. He was sad, and for some reason that shook me to the core.

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"Whoa, whoa whoa!" I almost yelled. "I thought in Heaven there would be no more tears or sorrow or pain!"

"We are not in Heaven proper, nor anywhere near His throne, nor are we in the Time of the Restoration of All Things. Those dark patches are human souls dying in unbelief. We are witnessing the black gateways of Hades opening up to consume their immortal souls, where each one will remain until they are cast, with Death, Satan, and the rest of his minions, into the Lake of Fire at the end of history. And there in Outer Darkness they will remain in torment for all eternity."

The timbre of his voice as he spoke was full of a grief so profound and ancient that it seemed to come from the beginning of time itself. As I turned away from him and gingerly looked back over the edge, I saw an increasing number of the blackened discolorations. These grew larger and appeared more frequent, as if the Gates of Hell itself were multiplying and spreading like some kind of planet-sized malignancy consuming all life and hope. I desperately wanted to turn away, to look once more at the vastness and beauty of Heaven, but I could not. I could only continue to gaze downward through my tears.

But then, a blaze of light! There on the surface below! Tiny pinpoints at first, but a stark contrast to the pervasive darkness. While these did not obscure the black holes peppering the fabric of the earth's drab surface, their appearance seemed miraculous and powerful nonetheless. They were beacons of something, maybe hope, or life, or I didn't know what, but something *good* in a horrible sea of despair.

Then I did know, as sure as I knew anything.

"Believers!" I cried excitedly, wanting to hug my counterpart in a sudden ferocious joy. Instead I pounded him enthusiastically on the back. "Yes! Yes!" I shouted. "It's not all darkness and death and despair! There's..."

"Light!" he finished for me. "And life!" His face was now as it was before, but more... radiant. His smile returned, seeming to dispel the crushing aura from the planet below. "Yes! Brothers and sisters in the faith," he continued. "Young and old. Alive and ALIVE, although their outward shells are perishing, their inward

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parts are being transformed from glory to glory. They are the ones bought with a price. Saved from the fires of Hell by faith in the Son of God!"

Although he was merely speaking, it seemed like he sung a glorious Hymn of the Ages that echoed throughout the Realm of Heaven, accompanied by an invisible chorus of music and voices so sweet, so powerful that my heart soared.

And then a flash of light brighter than all the others, and more sustained, like a sunspot or a brilliant, city-sized flare blazing across the darkness.

"What is that?" I asked, as if a two-year old seeing my first sunrise.

"*Who* is that," he clarified.

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Dead Man Back From the Edge

Timelessness is difficult to describe.

I don't know how long I, Dead Man, knelt there with my counterpart, but it seemed simultaneously to be both very long, and no time at all. I can barely describe the experience in other terms, as well. The best I can say is that the closeness I sometimes felt to my Lord on-planet, was the merest whisper in comparison to the closeness on the Balcony of Heaven.

While I did not see Him face to face, I was fairly certain that future-me could gaze at that Countenance for as long as he desired. I envied him that, because when he looked over at me, his own face shone with a beautiful radiance. If Moses coming down from the mount so long ago required a veil so the people would not see the glow, I needed polarized sunglasses to look at my companion without wincing from the brightness.

"Sorry," he said, smiling. "I'll ratchet down the afterglow a bit so it doesn't hurt your eyes."

In saying it, he did it, of course. Probably just by thinking as much. Heaven's immediacy was hard to get used to. I could see where an unbridled mind would cause chaos here, which is why, sadly, I was only allowed on the very outskirts.

"Give it time," he said, reading my thoughts again. "You'll get there, well, here. And by the way," he added, "you're not supposed to envy in Heaven, either."

I ignored him.

"So lemme ask you this," I said. "When I am you, will I meet me on the Balcony again? Like you are now? How does that work exactly? Won't I already have this memory and know what's gonna happen and everything?"

He just smiled. I knew he would.

"What did you see?" I asked him, then, referring to a few moments before.

"I saw Him," he replied, sheer awe and adoration in his voice. "Seated on the

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Throne, surrounded by all the Host of Heaven and all the countless saints. It was absolute glory personified!"

"Were you close? You know, physically?"

"It was as if I were the only one in His Presence. When He looked at me, it was just the two of us. There is nothing like it. Nor will, or can, anything ever compare to His eyes looking into mine. Like blazing, purifying fire. And the deepest, most profound love you can imagine. Bigger than existence. Life and Light itself. Hard to put into words..."

His voice trailed off as he finished. I could tell he was back there by the Throne in his heart. I knew at that moment what a sacrifice it was for him to be stuck here with me. His companionship was a greater gift than I had realized.

"Why can't I stay here, now?" I asked. "Why do I have to go back?"

"You're not cooked, yet. You're still pretty raw, even though He's been working in your heart and mind every nanosecond since He saved you. His masterpieces, each one of us, takes time. Some of us more than others," he said, his eyes twinkling in affectionate amusement.

"Why did He allow me this preview if I am just going to have to give it up? I can't imagine not being devastated when I'm returned back to the Shadowlands. How will I be able to handle...", and here I had to stop speaking while I searched for the right words.

"The inconsolable grief?" he asked.

"Yes! Exactly! I don't think I'll be able to cope."

"your whining now," he said, gently. "It is unbecoming."

"I know," I admitted. "But you would be, too."

"I was. You'll get over it. I assure you. Be comforted, Dead Man. He works all things together for good. You *know* that."

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I accepted what he said. What choice did I have?

"So, what's next?" I asked.

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"It was as if I were the only one in His Presence. When He looked at me, it was just the two of us. There is nothing like it. Nor will, or can, anything ever compare to His eyes looking into mine. Like blazing, purifying fire. And the deepest, most profound love you can imagine. Bigger than existence. Life and Light itself. Hard to put into words..."

His voice trailed off as he finished. I could tell he was back there by the Throne in his heart. I knew at that moment what a sacrifice it was for him to be stuck here with me. His companionship was a greater gift than I had realized.

"Why can't I stay here, now?" I asked. "Why do I have to go back?"

"You're not cooked, yet. You're still pretty raw, even though He's been working in your heart and mind every nanosecond since He saved you. His masterpieces, each one of us, takes time. Some of us more than others," he said, his eyes twinkling in affectionate amusement.

"Why did He allow me this preview if I am just going to have to give it up? I can't imagine not being devastated when I'm returned back to the Shadowlands. How will I be able to handle...", and here I had to stop speaking while I searched for the right words.

"The inconsolable grief?" he asked.

"Yes! Exactly! I don't think I'll be able to cope."

"your whining now," he said, gently. "It is unbecoming."

"I know," I admitted. "But you would be, too."

"I was. You'll get over it. I assure you. Be comforted, Dead Man. He works all things together for good. You *know* that."

Dead Man

I accepted what he said. What choice did I have?

"So, what's next?" I asked.

Dead Man

Dead Man in the Forest

"How about a walk?" he asked. "I would like to show you something."

Just as I was about to voice my agreement, we were *there*, in the midst of the most incredible stand of trees imaginable. It seemed to span miles, and each tree was a magnificent specimen of everything majestic and solid about stately, monumental trees.

"I love good trees!" I exclaimed, again, like a two-year old when first introduced to something exciting and grand. "They are just so real and friendly and comforting and noble all at once. Is this what you wanted me to see?"

He just smiled for the billionth time, and it was not at all condescending or patronizing. In fact, each repeat occurrence seemed to express his growing fondness for me, the Dead Man he used to be.

"Not really," he replied. "But I am aware of our fondness for forests, and, as heavenly examples go, this is pretty spectacular, yet nothing like what He's provided closer to the Throne."

I didn't waste any energy speaking, but just kept gazing open-mouthed at the vast perfection around me. Unlike planetary forests, with their tangled undergrowth, dead and fallen leaves, damaged and felled trees, and unkempt terrain (all beautiful enough in the natural state, of course), THIS forest was incomparably better in every conceivable way. It was both undeniably natural AND manicured. It was carpeted with a never-ending lawn of cottony-soft, almost emerald-green grass, from which the gigantic trees sprang as if planted there eons ago. The canopy of tree-tops, though incalculably huge, did not obscure the ground with shadow, nor block the light radiating from some source, currently unidentifiable, but nevertheless a pleasant source of warmth and clarity unparalleled on earth.

And the atmosphere of utter peace and safety overrode even the visual effect, as if nothing bad or negative had, or could, or would, happen anywhere within this blessed fortress of trees.

"I'd advise trying to not be so open-jawed in astonishment," my companion

Dead Man

offered, "but there's really no danger of any bugs or flies inadvertently invading your mouth, so stare away my friend, for as long as you like."

I don't know or care how much timeless time passed while we walked through this magic place, saying very little, except for me exclaiming, "Oh! Look at that!" over and over again, as some new and glorious wonder caught my eye. If I were the most gifted painter in history, I could spend the rest of my temporal life attempting to capture these scenes and not do them the least amount of justice. And if the visual arts were woefully inadequate, literary artistry ran out of verbal canvas, easel, colors and brushes before even getting started. There were only so many adjectives in the Universe, and five minutes trying to describe this place exhausted the supply from one end of existence to the other. I was transported in a way that only glorious natural scenery, or heart-stirring music, or the innocent devotion of children could manage. For it was all those things, and much, much more.

Then, as if this were not gift enough for several centuries, and much to my complete shock, I heard three separate, but undeniably familiar *barks* in the distance, heading my way. The next instant, overtopping a slight rise in the ground ahead, I saw three oh-so-recognizable *dogs* coming right toward me.

"It can't be!" I remember saying, or maybe just thinking very loudly, as I dropped to my knees instinctively to greet three very special, long-lost, and faithful companions.

"Clyde! Chips! Little Mac!" I cried out, tears streaming down my face in rivers of child-like joy. "It can't be!"

But it so was. They were here in this place and clearly happier to see me than I had ever remembered them being on-planet. Then, as if to memorialize the significance of this mini grand reunion, all three dogs came to a dignified stop about ten feet from me. I stared at them in utter amazement and joy, unable to speak because my throat was so full of emotion and gratitude.

Clyde was the one who approached first. He looked precisely as he had in his prime, but better, with a shinier and smoother coat. He did not resemble at all the crippled, and stroke-devastated animal I had put to sleep after being my loyal and unconditionally loving dog for 17 years. Of the three, he was the one I

Dead Man

had spent the most time with, and who deserved all the respect and regard I could give him. That tri-colored, mixed German Shepherd-Collie (and who knew what else), stuck by me no matter what, through *everything* and *anything* during a very bad and troubled period in my youth. More than once, I felt he was the only friend I had. And he was *here* with me again!

Next Chips, the diminutive Manchester Terrier, sidled up respectfully next to the larger dog, awaiting his turn for my effusive and tear-filled greeting. Though he had run away from our house when I was just a boy, he had meant much to this lonely country kid as we moved from town to town as my Dad began working closer to the big cities.

Last was Mac, still the puppy he was when he died of liver failure after only one night in our house soon after my wife and I were married. He was the animal that opened my heart again to having a dog years after I had said good-bye to Clyde, and swore I would never leave myself open to that kind of heart break again.

"These are just dogs!" I said finally, my voice hitching like a little kid's who had cried his breath away. "Why?"

"Are you disappointed?" my future-self asked.

"You know I'm not. How could I be?"

"Well, here's the thing, in case it hasn't hit completely home yet:
NOTHING IS LOST IN THE LORD! NOTHING!"

He actually shouted that last thought, but it sounded more like a chorus of praise than anything else.

"He has provided this small taste of the future Grand Reunion, not only because He loves *you* with an everlasting love, but He loves these faithful creatures, as well. He was the One who brought them to you in the first place. And believe me, when these wonderful critters sensed that you were approaching, very little could have stood in their way from seeing you again."

He laughed good-naturedly then, and more than anything else, at that moment

Dead Man

he reminded me of a kindly grandfather whose favorite thing in the world was to see the delight of his precious loved ones.

"He *loves* you more than you can possibly know," he repeated. "This is just the beginning."

"Thank You Lord!" was all I could say.

Dead Man

Dead Man: Bombast and Bravado

After a last few eternal moments with my old friends, Clyde raised his noble head, and lifted his silky black ears. Something only he could hear was gently demanding his attention, and I knew that he and the other two animals would be going soon, heeding the call of Heaven in joyful obedience. He allowed me a final (for now) scruffing on his broad furry chest, and then he and the others bolted off into the Forest in the direction they had come. I watched them recede quickly out of sight, marveling at the energy and flawless grace of their movements. The last time I had been with Clyde in the world below, he had been a helpless, and pain-wracked cripple.

"Why no people?" I asked back in the Halfway House (when did I start calling the place where I had awoken *that?*). I took the sudden and instantaneous transition of place in my stride by now. I was amazed (and a little proud) of how quickly I had gotten accustomed to thought-travel. I was, after all, *me*.

"Do you want the truth?" he asked in response.

There is a choice, here? I thought in my head, forgetting it made no difference.

"That depends. Is it a bad reason?" (I said it out loud this time.)

"I will only ever tell you the truth, or nothing at all. There are many things I could say to you, but you cannot bear them now. This item is borderline. It is not what you will think as complimentary, but it will be helpful, if you allow the truth to have its perfect work."

"Shoot," I said, "I can take it. I'm a big boy."

He nodded, and then took a moment to form his words carefully. He hadn't done *that* before. My one thought: *uh oh*.

"You are not *really* a 'big boy'," he said. I waited for the trademark smile. It didn't come.

"You are, instead, quite fragile. And your level of fear and insecurity is matched only by your desire to appear otherwise. While desiring with your whole heart to

Dead Man

have faith in the One who made and saved you, you have what they call on-planet, *trust issues*. You think they are justified, and you hold onto them like a security blanket. In human terms, they *are* justified, based on the experiences of your past. But those experiences, and everything else about your earthly existence, all the scars and dents and scrapes inflicted upon you by yourself and others, are utterly transcended by your King. They melt away into vapor and nothingness in the Light of His Presence. But you are stubbornly thick-headed, and fail to surrender your heart to knowledge that your brain knows all too well."

"Don't beat around the bush, pal. Tell me what you really think."

"Sarcasm does not play well in Heaven," he said gently. Then finally, *the smile*. Oh how quickly I had become an addict!

I relaxed then, because as broken and disqualified as I felt at that moment by his relatively gentle criticism, I knew he still *approved*. I was completely embarrassed by how vitally important that was to me.

Then it struck me how perfectly orchestrated this last interaction with my companion had been, starting with my dogs. His words had instigated the very reactions he was so carefully delineating, illustrating the objective truth about them undeniably, and with exceedingly, abundant grace and gentleness.

As I thought this, his smile grew wider and, well, *more*.

"You're very good at this my friend!" I said laughing.

"I am so much more than your friend, Dead Man. I am so much more than 'on your side'. But that perception will do for now. Well done!"

His actual praise of me just then, while filling an emptiness that seemed to be there from all eternity, simultaneously felt very, very *risky*.

Ah! All part of the same lesson! I realized, sheepishly. I am a *complicated* Dead Man.

"Indeed!" he said still smiling. "Indeed."

Dead Man

Dead Man: Who Do You Miss Most?

"I don't want to mislead you into believing that complicated is inherently good," he continued.

And this, just when I started to think I was getting somewhere.

"Mistrust builds walls and takes an aggressive posture as a reflex. Threats appear where they really aren't, and since the best defense is a robust offense, some people," he looked at me pointedly, "get *fierce*."

"Fierce sounds better than fearful," I said.

"Neither one is very useful, frankly" he said. "Both evidence lack of faith. Truly brave and heroic people do what they do because they believe what they say they believe about God and His Son. Truly calm people are like that, too."

"You're bringing me down," I whined. "Is all this why I'm only allowed to be visited by my deceased dogs here, and no actual people? Well, besides you, er, *me*."

"Has anyone ever told you that..."

"Don't finish that, please," I interrupted quickly. "And yes, whatever it is, I'm sure they have."

"...you are precious," he finished anyway.

I didn't see that coming. First fearful, now precious. It was ridiculous. Here *I* was telling *me* deep, absurd things about *me*. Time travel - you just can't keep it straight.

"Who would you like most to see?" he asked then.

"Is this a trick question, or a test?"

He shook his head from side to side.

Dead Man

"I'm assuming that means no, even here. Yes?"

He punched me in the shoulder. *Were you allowed to do that in Heaven?"*

"Do they have to be dead like me?" I asked. "You know, like a departed relative, or somebody famous from the past?"

"You can ask to see whomever you'd like, as long as they're here."

That brought me up short, for sure. Anybody? I got the sense this was probably a one-time grant - a Balcony Bonus, so to speak. I anticipated a flood of names and faces streaming through my consciousness as my highly developed intellect and perceptive abilities kicked into gear.

Crickets.

Maybe I should approach it from a different angle? Who, out of all the people in my life, did I miss most?

Sadly, nobody came to mind. (Was that true?) Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, that was most important to me was still alive down below. The truth was, I missed my wife and daughters most. And I was very sure they missed me, as well. But since I was guaranteed a return trip, there was no *immediate* urgency to see them. Had one of them died before me, that would have been my first choice. Other than that, no one really came to mind. Was I really that pathetic?

He smiled.

"Take your time," he said.

Parents? What if they weren't here? Other relatives? Long lost friends? OK, there was a vague interest in one or two names from the past, but none evoked any intensity. I truly *was* pathetic.

Underneath all this, was an idea that had instantly popped into my head at the moment I first heard his question, but was just as quickly dismissed before I even acknowledged it. It bubbled up again. I tried to suppress it, exactly like an impossible longing you know is there but can't bear to look at.

Dead Man

His smile widened. I knew he was mind-dropping again.

The thought became increasingly irrepressible, demanding that I face it fair and square, like a deep wound, or an ancient wish that could not possibly be fulfilled, and was all the more painful because its absence would become unbearable.

I think I was clenching my jaw by then. I was gritting my teeth fiercely trying not to voice the very thing that *had* to be said. Not because the desire would be granted, but precisely because I knew it couldn't. Sweat began running down my forehead into my perfectly functioning eyes; the salt burn just as fierce as on-planet. Finally, I could do nothing other than blurt it out, the words ripping involuntarily from my throat. I yelled it at the top of my lungs. There was no other alternative.

"I WISH TO SEE JESUS!"

Dead Man

Dead Man Undone

I felt like I had just run up a mountain. My dead heart was racing, my lungs heaving. What had I done?

What I felt most was shame and horror. How could I, a Dead Man, qualified only for a brief visit on the most extreme outskirts of Heaven, have the unmitigated gall to ask an audience of the King!

On-planet I had thoroughly studied the passages in Scripture where man met God, and in every instance - every instance - man was undone. John fell down as if dead at a mere vision of His Lord. Daniel's vitality was instantly drained, as if he were a toilet being flushed. Peter cowered in the bow of the very boat he captained. Isaiah fell down in abject shame at the sight of the LORD high and lifted up. Moses had to be hidden in the cleft of a rock to protect himself from the glory of God as He condescended to reveal to him the afterglow of His glory. These mighty men of faith, heroes, warriors, prophets, priests, lawgiver, and holy apostles, all rightly knew their utter unworthiness when confronted with He who inhabits eternity.

And here was me, Dead Man, boldly asking to be in His presence. No, more than that; shouting out my presumption in self-immolating desperation. I was clearly insane.

"What have you just done?" my companion asked me, much more gently than I would have expected.

I could not look up from staring at the rich marble floor of the Balcony, let alone lift my face to see my questioner. I did not think I would be able to hold my head up again. Ever.

"What have you done, Dead Man?" he repeated when I did not answer. I could not speak in my shame to tell him I could not speak. I was, literally, dumbstruck.

"I have sinned against God," I finally managed to croak. My voice was dust and ashes.

"What have you done?" he asked for the third time.

Dead Man

"I have forgotten my place," I whispered, tears of humiliation now streaming down my face. I was shaking as if in the aftermath of some horrible accident that I had barely survived, certain of impending destruction.

He was silent then for a timeless time. That he was not upbraiding me, or cursing me, or decrying my arrogance filled me with ever greater anxiety. And still, I could not face him.

The next instant my knees gave out and I dropped like a meteor. One moment I was upright and trembling, the next I was nanoseconds away from collapsing in a boneless heap.

That is when he caught me in arms rippling with understated strength, like cushioned steel. And he lowered me to the floor, gently, compassionately. I felt like a little child rescued from a precipitous fall.

"No," he said, as he cradled me to the smooth, lustrous floor. "You have not forgotten your place," he said quietly. "You have voiced the deepest cry of your old, world-weary heart, and by doing so, you have *remembered* your place."

Those words unleashed within me a flood of relief and gratitude like I have never known before, and I sobbed uncontrollably in his arms. He simply held me without condition, or the slightest hint of recrimination. It was the very definition of *safe*.

"He purchased you *forever* with His blood; lovingly, willingly, asking nothing but your faith and love in return. He died on that Cross in *your* place precisely, emphatically, exclusively, so you could be in His Presence for all eternity. You are His child. His beloved. His inheritance. His priceless treasure.

"Do not think for even a blink of an eye, do not even let it enter into your head, that He does not want you near Him. That is why He suffered the penalty you rightly deserved. He sacrificed Himself for *you!*

"He loves you with an everlasting love. Don't you see? Don't you understand?"

"This place, this magnificent Balcony He prepared just for you, just as He has

Dead Man

prepared a place for you when you return to remain forevermore, so that where He is, there you will be also."

All this was said to me so gently, so quietly, almost in a whisper. He spoke as if I were a child overwhelmed by longing and grief. He spoke as a father comforting a broken-hearted toddler brought to the utter end of himself by thoughts and emotions beyond his ability to bear.

"Our Lord, our King, our Sovereign God, *longs* for your company, my son," he said. "If you have the slightest doubt, look to the Cross!"

Dead Man

Dead Man Before the Foundation of the World

"Look to the Cross..."

His last words reverberated through the corridors of time, and as I lay collapsed on the Balcony floor, I could once more look over the edge of existence, even through my tears. And instead of the Blue Marble of our Home World, or the expanse of star-filled space, I saw a vast undifferentiated void of darkness. I could sense, but not perceive with my eyes, a roiling cauldron of raw energy. Something entirely unique and inconceivably powerful was taking place.

In the background, barely audible at first, but growing rapidly and steadily in volume, was a chorus of increasingly thunderous song, splitting the darkness in galaxy-sized wave after wave of pure melodious joy. If sound had form and color it would be this. If music could shape reality, it would be this music. I forgot my shame and my relief. I forgot who, and even where I was. I forgot everything about me, and was carried along inexorably in what I came to realize could only be the Symphony of Creation at the very dawn of Time.

And then, and then... the Voice.

It exploded across the vast infant creation so that all else was rendered mute and invisible and insubstantial. It filled all existence with *something*, or perhaps *Someone*, so vibrant, so very *alive*, that life became, from that instant onward, something separate and distinct from the Voice Itself, but still inextricably *of* It, and *from* It and *through* It, sourced and sustained *by* It.

And I heard the very first Words of Power spoken into the void and roiling darkness.

"LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And all darkness fled into nothingness and all around and through everything was light!

It was a light so all-encompassing, so gloriously radiant that it was somehow tangible and solid and more *real* than anything before or since.

Dead Man

And I witnessed and heard the commanding hymn of Creation, and saw the foundation of the world and time and space and energy being spoken into existence by the Voice Himself in a marvelous crescendo of love and power, as I sat enthralled and self-forgotten, and was audience to the Sons of God continuing their chorus of joyous praise at the Dawn of Creation.

And then, somehow, before, and behind, the very center of the New Heaven and Earth, I saw the image of a Lamb, as if He had been slain.

In the next instant, the Blue Planet, the vortex of God's eternal focus and attention, filled my viewpoint, as my consciousness was thrown through layers of time and space, deep down into the atmosphere blanketing the world. And there I was, at the very navel of the planet, where all the slipstreams and incredibly complex threads of redemptive history wove themselves into a brilliant and complicated tapestry of human history. And I saw outside the City of David, the very same all-encompassing Light of Creation condensed and concealed within an oh-so-human Infant wrapped in swaddling cloths, laying atop a rough food trough in a Shepherd's Cave.

And the Sons of God were once more assembled in a chorus of resounding joy that filled the heavens and shook the earth.

And I heard another voice, authoritative and powerful, but merely human this time, speaking ageless words of prophetic comfort.

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel; God with us!”

And the same voice, yet again,

“The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined.”

Then I came back to myself, not willingly, but because I had no choice, else I would have stayed content (and more than content) as awestruck witness to events so majestic and powerful that I could have spent eternity immersed in their everlasting significance.

Dead Man

I knew by the wonder on my companion's face that he had shared with me all that I had just experienced.

"Why has He done this for me?" I whispered. And by that I meant everything, from the Creation, to the end of the Age, and on into Eternity.

"Because He loves you," he said, with unshakable conviction.

"Look to the Cross," he repeated yet again.

Dead Man

Dead Man on the Cross

I knew in my heart what was next and I did not want to see.

The scene at Bethlehem? Yes. It was magnificent in its austerity, majestic in its overt simplicity, and so very representative of the humility and grace of the One who was born to die. There was an admitted sentimentality about it, of course, because of the many memorable Christmas celebrations where those very images were central to the joy and familial love of both my childhood, and especially the precious moments with my own wife and children. Time passes so very, very quickly, and those poignant moments are often bittersweet, and the memories are sometimes hard to bear.

But what was coming next made the most heartfelt ache of a human life absolutely nothing in comparison.

Though still on the Balcony, I was standing again. Next to me stood my guide. Though very far away in time and space, my perspective was that of an eyewitness.

I was there, yet not there. The tumult of the crowd and the cruel hysteria of the direct participants were overwhelming. I smelled the fetid human odor of hatred and fear, and my soul was weighted down by the oppression of spiritual darkness so dense and tangible that it felt to me as if I were being physically crushed.

Then I heard the sickening crack of the torturous lash against the back of a Man who was utterly undeserving of judgment, human or divine. I saw the flecks of blood and skin flayed into the air by the well-practiced arm of a professional killer. His skill was diabolically evident in the precision of his ruthlessly placed blows. The sound of each nauseating strike shattered the very fabric of the Universe from earth to the highest Heaven, and yet it seemed of almost no significance to the majority of the humans in attendance.

Soon after these things there came the demonic cry of the mob, "CRUCIFY HIM! CRUCIFY HIM!"

Then the horrible efficiency of the iron-headed mallet driving the spikes through

Dead Man

innocent human flesh, the dull thud of impact the only thing audible. The victim was resolutely silent, as a Lamb led to the slaughter.

This was followed by the collective groan of the leather-clad Roman soldiers as they laboriously hefted the cross piece onto its stanchion.

The blood of redemption flowed copiously from the thorn-pierced brow and the vicious wounds of of lash and nails.

Evil mocking defiled the human audience with its cruelty and utterly compassionless intensity. Hatred welled up in a vile explosion of purest evil.

And still the Sufferer neither cried out nor cursed.

Then the Voice, that same Voice that created all Time and Space and Matter, finally uttered Words of Power far more profound than those which caused every galaxy to leap into existence from absolute nothingness. These were the utterances that the whole of Creation was groaning for and longing for since the Fall millennia before. This was the most significant moment of all the millions upon millions of moments past or future. It was the penultimate culmination of the eternal counsels of the godhead before the foundation of the world.

"Father!" the Voice called out with surprising strength, "Forgive them for they know not what they do!"

I did not know whether it was unspeakable sorrow or infinite joy that gripped me in an unbreakable vise. I was beyond all weeping or expression, except for one solitary, spirit-breaking thought. *I did this! I made this necessary! He is dying so that I might LIVE!*

Awe and love and eternal gratitude annihilated all thought of myself. There was only One who is worthy of all praise and blessing and honor and power.

Then this heart-stopping cry from the Cross of Love, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!"

How could this be happening? Why was not all the Host of Heaven exacting perfect vengeance on the human vermin (myself included) responsible for the

Dead Man

most heinous act conceivable?

To hear the broken-hearted cry of the One who came to save, to imagine the infinite grief of the Father as He heard the sorrow and pain of His Beloved and denied Him the mercy He so freely gives to us every moment, this should have undone everything! But it did not! Instead, through the unimaginable grace of the One hanging in agony on that cursed wooden Cross, IT MADE ALL THINGS NEW!

Then came the crowning moment of history.

The Voice once more spoke with the magnificent certainty of complete and undeniable victory. The Words rang out from one end of Creation to the other.

"IT IS FINISHED!"

Now my heart SOARED with the incredible beauty and brilliance of it all! By His death conquering Death. By His undeserved judgment, judging sin FOREVER. By His sacrifice TAKING AWAY the sin of the world! My sin!

And then one last saying.

"Father! Into Your hands I commit my Spirit!"

And I looked and saw The Dead Man on the Cross, and knew beyond all doubt that He died for me.

Dead Man

Dead Man in the Tomb

The grief-pierced mother. The traumatized beloved disciple. The sickening crunch of leg bones being deliberately broken on either side of the central crucifix. The mocking crowd silenced by darkness and the shaking earth after the spear-pierced chest of the Son emptied His heart of blood and water.

Two respectable old men coming with servants and releasing the Body from the blood-blackened wood of the crosspiece and lowering it gently to the ground where it is wrapped in linen and spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. The bemused Roman soldiers, battle-hardened and immune to the bleeding and broken flesh of the dead, marveling at the convulsions of earth and sky at the demise of this Man; the same Man who had uttered words of forgiveness as these very men had been nailing Him to the Cross.

In the precincts of Jerusalem, some of the dead are made alive again and walk among the living. Not as zombies, but with *resurrected* life, soon to be led into Heaven by their King, but not for some days. The 18-inch thick veil of the Temple on Mount Moriah rent in two from top to bottom.

All these images with their accompanying sounds and sensations assailed my mind as I looked over the edge of existence from the Balcony. I had wished to see Jesus. My prayer had been granted, this far at least.

The Tomb to which they transported the bloodied and lifeless Figure was a cave hollowed into the side of a granite hill near a garden that was to serve as a rich man's burial chamber. A few men and women followed, trying to contain their heartbreak and grief. Some of the women unable to suppress sobs welling up from their inmost beings. The Body placed lovingly inside on the chiseled granite shelf. The massive stone gate rolled into its permeant place sealing the cave from all light and life.

Before sunset, just as the observant Jews left to comply with Sabbath regulations, a cohort of Roman guards arrived to prevent anyone from entering the Tomb and stealing the body.

The corpse lay lifeless and cold - God become Man become sin become sacrifice.

Dead Man

Did I continue to gaze on that scene for three planetary days and nights? Was time telescoped in some fashion? I cannot say.

What I do know is that as I watched I was somehow transported to the place of the righteous dead; a temporary abode deep within the earth where those who had died in faith, from ancient Cain to the repentant thief on the Cross, awaited the Promised Seed of the Woman, the One who would lead the captives free. And there I saw Him from a distance, the Glorified One, His raiment shining as white as the sun, announcing His victory over Death and Hades and preaching the Gospel of grace. He bade them wait just a little while longer, and He would bring them to their longed for place of rest.

After this, I observed and heard the disciples, less one, hidden away secretly behind locked doors, gathered together mournfully in fear and utter discouragement. These were men and women sorrowful beyond words, feeling as orphans suddenly bereft of all hope and comfort.

Although I sensed the sun rise the next dawn, and the dawn after that, the light that it brought to the earth was pale and without real warmth. And though most of the planet went on as it had from the beginning, those few who knew of the momentous events of the last three years, and especially the last three days, looked upon life and the future as those who had lost a firstborn to an untimely and violent death. They were filled with sorrow upon sorrow, wondering whether what, and more importantly, Who, they had believed was true. Was it all a dream? A deranged vision? What of the miracles? And the glorious teachings? What of this Man who could still the storm, give sight to the blind, heal the sick, make the lame whole, and raise the dead?

And where was God to allow such horror and disillusionment to occur?

Perhaps it was understandable that in their grief and fear they did not remember the words that He had graciously told them about these events *before* they unfolded, so that they might believe. Perhaps in their mere humanness and self-focus, these men, who had been His closest disciples day in and day out for more than three years, could not see beyond their own personal brokenness and despair.

Dead Man

And while they were immersed in mourning and bitter disappointment, the world in their immediate vicinity rejoiced in raucous discord in response to the immensity of the loss suffered. The troublemaking rabble-rouser had finally received His just comeuppance; destroyed on the Cross as a vile blasphemer and criminal.

Then in the darkness of that cavern Tomb, unseen by human eyes, a light burst forth like the sustained and space-bending blast of a supernova, and Life returned to that lifeless Body. He who had died in such agony, made Himself alive again, just as it was foretold according to the ancient Scriptures. He who was the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Door, the Way the Truth and the Life, became alive again forever more.

And as the entire Host of Heaven raised their voices as one in glorious angelic praise to the One who is, Who was, and Who is to come, all the defiled Legions of Hell wailed in demonic agony and terror, knowing that their days were short, and their end in the eternal Lake of Fire assured.

And shortly the cry of HE IS RISEN! would go forth to all the world with the power to change, not only the course of history, but the very human heart itself.

Dead Man

Dead Man Alive Forevermore

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes. But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb...

I saw her see the two angels from my vantage point infinitely far away, and yet so terribly near. I almost heard her heart leap within her at the appearance of these magnificent and radiant creatures, but not because of who they were, but because of Whom they were not. They asked her the cause of her weeping.

That these heavenly beings in glowing white robes spoke to her did not matter. They were not Him. She would not be distracted from her mission - to see *her* Lord one last time. It was the focus of her entire being, and the devotion of her heart would not let even the Host of Heaven stand in her way.

Her response was made with understated agony. "They have taken away *my* Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him!"

Since they gave her no immediate answer, she turned from them. Perhaps she heard the footsteps of the Man who suddenly approached. Mostly, it seemed she had little thought for them at all. *They were not Him!*

In turning she saw Someone who had the appearance of a common day laborer, a gardener by the looks of Him. When He asked her the same question, she leapt at the possibility that this Man might know something. "Sir, if You have

Dead Man

carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

She was not large, nor did she appear unusually strong for a woman her age, but the intensity of her longing was evident, and it seemed to me looking on, that she would have done *anything* to procure a final resting place for the body of the Man who was *life itself* to her. Even if it meant attempting to transport the dead weight of a fully grown corpse entirely by herself. It was as clear as a sunlit spring that nothing else mattered; not defilement from touching the dead; not the weakness of her frame; not the improbability of her success. Her grief-stricken heart would not be stayed.

Then this Man whom she did not recognize spoke a single word to her.

"Mary," He said.

It was the voice of her Creator and Redeemer speaking her name. It was the voice of Love itself calling out to her as no Other possibly could. Though I was mere spectator, my heart soared within me knowing, at least in part, the utter joy that was hers. The deepest, most intense longing of her soul was right there before her, against all logic and odds and probability; an impossible hope beyond all hope fulfilled! What an astounding gift of grace and love! She was the first, the very first to see the Risen Lord, and He called her by name!

"TEACHER!" she cried and flung herself at His feet, grasping Him with all her strength, as if to convey that she would never let Him from her sight or release Him from her desperately longing arms again.

I did not see His face at any time during this encounter, and especially at that moment as He gazed downward at His maidservant from whom He had cast seven demons, and who was now weeping in ecstasy and joy in the Presence of Him whom she had thought stolen from her forever.

"Do not cling to Me," he said gently, "for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'"

She looked up at Him at those words, her face imbued with love and devotion beyond mere speech to describe.

Dead Man

I turned away then. I could not intrude on so intimate a moment between the Savior and His beloved. He was Resurrected King, and yet Gentle Teacher. Lord of Lords Eternal, and yet intimate Friend. In that momentary glance between that woman headed for death, and the One who died in her place so she would live, I saw all the purposes of Heaven from Creation to the Cross.

Had she been the only one to receive His gift, I believe in my heart He would have laid down His life regardless.

But she was just the first to see Him whom death could not destroy, nor grave hold.

And in loving and simple obedience, she obeyed.

Dead Man

Dead Man Walking

After these things I was aware of two men traveling by foot on an ancient road. I knew who they were somehow, as I also knew their destination. Although I was far from them, as before with the Magdalene, I overheard as they conversed and reasoned along the way.

They spoke of the One in whom they had hoped and whom they had followed, who had *seemed* to be the fulfillment of the longing of their hearts for themselves and for their captive nation. Underneath their rational discourse was a deep despair. *Where was God?* was their unspoken cry.

Then they saw Him but did not know Him. How often in human experience has that happened, I wondered. How many times have we seen the One who *is* Hope, and through stubborn hopelessness, been unable to recognize Him?

I smiled wryly when I heard Him ask the men a follow up to His initial query regarding the subject of their conversation.

He who is the central theme of all history, who is the Knower of all things, who was the very core of what the men discussed with such sadness, condescended to encourage two of His lowly creatures to speak their thoughts by voicing a simple inquiry.

"What things?" he asked gently.

After they had expressed their incredulousness at His apparent ignorance, and their bitter disappointment at the unexpected turn of recent events in Jerusalem, I found myself astonished at the softness and grace of His rebuke.

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?"

And then as they walked along the road to Emmaus together, rather than blasting them from existence in disgust at their willful unbelief, He bestowed upon them a teaching from the Source of Wisdom Himself. *And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the*

Dead Man

things concerning Himself.

I wanted to spend all the rest of eternity listening to His Words, marveling at the unending richness and depth of their meaning and purpose. Words that had the power to create all reality, or to destroy it. Words that gave life. Words that *were* life.

"You will," said the voice next to me on the Balcony. "That is the destiny of all His children by faith."

I sighed in real sadness then, as the visions faded, and I was once more merely me, in my own mind. And I was so very, very tired. I would have thought that exhaustion was not possible in Heaven, and then I recalled that I was just on the Periphery, not very close at all to the Throne.

"Come, walk with me," he said.

I was reminded of what I used to say to my young children when they complained of being tired.

"Dad, I can't walk anymore! I'm too exhausted! It's too far to home!"

"Run!" I would say, "You'll get there that much sooner!"

And off they would go, trusting me enough to overcome their natural skepticism that increased effort would invigorate, rather than deplete, their store of energy.

It didn't work for me at that moment, though, even as I found myself along the same Forest path that he had brought me to earlier.

"I can barely put one foot in front of another," I whined. "I am so very tired!"

"I know," said a gentle Voice.

Dead Man

Dead Man Worshiping

I turned and saw His long, flowing brilliantly white robe girded across the chest with solid, almost transparent gold. I could look no further as all else faded from view.

How can I put into words what it is to see even this much of the One by whom, and for whom, are all things? How to describe the immanence of He who is before all things and in whom all things consist? Before there was time or space or causality there was Him. Before sight or sound, before thought or whisper of words, there was Him. And it was He who stood before me with a shining countenance of purest holiness. He who is the Source of all beauty and nobility and strength and royalty and wisdom was utterly and completely *there*.

I was face to face with the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Lamb Slain Before the Foundation of the World, The Beginning and The End, The Word of God.

And all this flashed through my mind in the twinkling of an eye and I was immediately overwhelmed by His *glory*.

Like all mankind before, me I fell on my face as if dead, such was the terrible beauty of the Lord of Lord and King of Kings.

To lift my head for even a split second was an impossibly irreverent thought. The impulse to do so died before being formed, and I trembled from every aspect of my being, feeling that I would vibrate apart by the sheer majesty of His Presence.

"Stand, my Son." He commanded gently.

I obeyed, but kept my eyes lowered. Suddenly, all of the incredible vividness of the Heavenly out lands, all the indescribable beauty of this Place, paled in comparison to Him.

"You are indeed upon Holy Ground, Dead Man, but fear not. I have made you clean. I have washed you in My blood, and what I have cleansed, you must not call common!"

Dead Man

"Lift your eyes, and see Me! It is what you have asked. It is your heart's desire. I have heard your prayer."

His Voice thundered as at the Dawn of Creation, like the sound of many waters, like an ancient trumpet that blasted throughout all existence.

It was all I could do to comply. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and I fell on my face once more a Dead Man.

Then I felt a hand placed gently on my trembling shoulder.

"Fear not," the Voice repeated, but this time it was the deep-timbered voice of a Man who spoke quietly, as if to a frightened child.

His Presence was as overwhelmingly powerful as before, but now there was something else, something that tempered the consuming Fire of His Deity, and I knew then without looking that He had veiled Himself in His humanity to protect such a one as me from the fierceness of His Being - an extravagance of sheer force that not all the stars in the Universe could contain or reflect.

He helped me stand, and lifted my chin to gaze into my eyes.

Oh! The inconceivable LOVE I saw there!

I could only bear that gaze for a moment before I collapsed in great sobs of...

Joy! Yes! It was joy that was washing away all sense of myself, that obliterated all awareness of everything but those eyes.

They shone with a depth of mercy and intelligence for which words had not yet been devised.

And their entire focus was locked so steadfastly on me in such welcome and reciprocal joy that had all eternity ended at that very instant it would have been more than enough!

"I have been waiting a long time for this visit," He said with a smile.

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King

Since becoming a child of the King years ago on-planet, I always thought that when I got to Heaven, I would have a million questions. I was wrong.

Looking at Him now, *being* with Him now, I *knew* the answer to all my questions, save one.

Except for that one exception, the answer to everything else was *Him*.

It's not that I felt my curiosity suppressed in the slightest. That was not it at all. It was that my curiosity was instantly satisfied. In His presence, all the why's and how's and what-if's were either embodied in His purposes and immediately revealed, or rendered irrelevant.

I can't explain how I obtained that depth of information exactly, but I suspect it had something to do with that first look into His eyes. It seemed I almost saw from their vantage point, and while most of what I glimpsed without really realizing it at the time was beyond magnificent, there were some things that, upon just a moment's reflection, were unspeakably hideous.

For one thing, I saw myself before He remade me in His image. I was like a disgusting, parasitic worm, slavishly, compulsively, seeking my own poisoned satisfaction, unable and unwilling to look beyond my own doomed and deathly priorities. Whatever else I was, my essential nature was that of a being bloated with self at the expense of everything and everyone else.

That is who He went to the Cross to save, and that knowledge was more than I could bear for more than a mere moment without collapsing in utter shame and measureless gratitude. No, I could not contemplate *that* answer for long at all.

But there was much more. I understood now in wordless comprehension the depth and loving brilliance of the whole history of Redemption, from before the foundation of the world, stretching endlessly into eternity.

I saw with near perfect clarity God's mercy in sending His Son to take away the sin of the world, a planet full of parasitic and blindly, ruthlessly, self-absorbed sinners in rebellion against all that is good and godly; just like me.

Dead Man

I saw the heartache and death-agonies of the Son as, out of infinite love and filial obedience, He willingly fulfilled the majestic and holy purposes of the godhead in being that once-for-all propitiation for the Father's righteous wrath against our willful ignorance and merciless evil.

I *felt* the overwhelming grace in His withholding final judgment until all who would be saved came to the place of brokenness and repentance in order to gain the right to be citizens of His glorious and everlasting Kingdom.

He gave me all the understanding that my puny, finite mind could contain about His long-suffering heartbreak over the pain, sorrow and death of life apart from Him, endured only because His ultimate purposes for each one of His children were worth all of existence to achieve.

But the one question remained. It was this: How long O Lord until the consummation of all these things? How many more evil days must pass until the vile hatred, deceit, and perfidy of Fallen Life came to its well-deserved and long-forested end?

It was not a question tinged at all with accusation, or tainted by the unspoken thought that *His* timing and judgment were anything less than divine and perfect. No, it was the plaintive whine of a trusting child weary of a long and arduous journey that seemed to be taking so unbearably long. It was the tired complaint of a little one who just wanted, with all his heart, mind and soul, to be *Home*.

"We are almost there," He responded, knowing my question. "For just a little while more, until the time is fulfilled, and I *will* come to bring you to Me, so that where I am, you will be also. Forevermore."

That gentle answer to the cry of my heart, spoken by *that* Voice that brought all Existence into being, and yet so intimately *knowing* of me, brought an endless flow of tears of love and gratitude to my eyes.

Of course! my very soul cried out wordlessly. **He is the Answer to all questions. He is the Purpose behind all things. He is Wisdom and Strength and Power and Glory and Blessing and Honor forever and ever! He does all things well!**

Dead Man

And He knows me by name.

And He has called me to Him and made me know His Voice.

Not because of anything about me, but because of who He is.

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King... Part 2

"What is it you would like from Me?" He asked.

"You have already given and done *all*," I answered through my tears.

He smiled at that in what seemed like genuine approval, but how does a mere creature accurately read the face of his Creator?

"You know," He said, "I became a Man, not just to die for you, but so that you could also know Me, and by knowing Me, know My Father."

"But there is nothing left for You to give," I said, overwhelmed that He was speaking to me!

"I delight to give My children the desires of their heart," He said simply. "Do not think that there is an end to My grace. I made you for Me. I know you and have gone to great lengths to enable you to believe that I love you."

Then suddenly I was back in the birthing room with my wife just before our first daughter was born all those years ago. She was our first, and I did not know Him at that time, or believe that He existed or cared for me. Incredibly, I had not really wanted this beautiful and precious child in our lives, so blatant was my selfishness. And I considered my wife to be in great debt to me by my agreeing to allow this to occur. Knowing He was with Me now in reliving this experience filled me with unfathomable shame. How could He have been so kind, even then?

Then I saw her emerge into the world from her mother's womb and all cynical speech and thought fled from me and I stared in awe at this miracle of new human life. I did not know it, but tears were flowing down my face, perhaps for the first time in my adult life while sober, and I literally could not speak. Everything I thought I knew and believed became as nothing, and I have since come to know that the overflowing and surprising love that I felt for my infant daughter at the very moment of her birth was His gift to me, as much as she herself was. It was Him all along, and I did not know it.

That same evening, right there in that same room, this new gift of life stopped

Dead Man

breathing for the briefest of instants, and when that occurred my whole existence dropped out from under me like a bottomless pit had opened up in the earth below me, to swallow me forever.

This too was His gift.

Frenzied but purposeful action by the attending midwife brought my baby back to life without any permanent harm within seconds, but the lesson of unbearable loss was seared into my heart and mind, and from that moment onward, my self-confidence and my ability to cope with the vulnerabilities of this life began to crumble.

Days, weeks and months passed in my memory once more, but this time I knew He was with Me, right next to Me, as, of course, He had been at the time, as well. I just did not know it. I saw my younger self wallow increasingly in self-pity, striving diligently to deny that anything had changed, when everything had, in fact, changed irrevocably, and I was rapidly deteriorating.

Together we saw me turn in desperation and utter selfishness back to the depths of the well of alcohol, in rigid and brittle moderation at first, but with the sure and certain knowledge that it was a path that this time would inevitably lead me to destruction, and to the loss of the very things I could not even admit were important to me for fear that I would lose them. Lose her.

He stood with me, as my delusion of competence and my ability to cope with life collapsed like the fragile and ephemeral hallucination it was, and I became the epitome of quiet desperation, casting frantically about for some life preserver, becoming harder on the outside, as the man I was inside dissolved in the fierce acid of overwhelming fear.

Yet another of His gifts.

Stubbornly, inexcusably, I resisted the growing conviction that I could not continue in this way for long without having all semblance of living ability ripped away in an avalanche of self-pity and defeat.

Then we saw my wife, grieved beyond words that this child she loved so much would have to be given into the hands of others to be cared for during the day

Dead Man

so that she could return to work, as I so intractably insisted she do as soon as possible. And by His grace, she sought comfort and strength from the only place where they could be found, His love letter to Creation - His marvelous Word.

He comforted her and brought her to Him, so gently, so effectively, so extravagantly lovingly, that she changed fundamentally right before my eyes, and through Him, loved me more despite my utter self-centeredness and self-absorption.

His gifts kept coming inexorably, like wave after wave upon the shore, unstoppable, undeniable, completely undeserved.

Until, at the appointed time, he brought me to the end of myself, and into His all-encompassing arms.

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King... Part 3

"Lord? May I ask you something?"

"Because," He said, before I spoke further, "some will not be saved."

That was, of course, my question, after reliving the moments of my life that had led me to Him. I was still amazed that He condescended to speak with me, but not surprised at all that He knew my thoughts.

"My son, I love everyone I have created; all whom I have knit together in their mother's wombs, but unless their love in return is voluntary it is meaningless. You know that."

"But how can they not love You once You reveal Yourself to them? How can they resist Your kindness and goodness. I do not understand."

"How many years did you resist, Dead Man? How many kindnesses were you shown before you came to recognize Me and to know that I love you?"

Then like a high-speed three-dimensional HD video, all my life before salvation unwound before my eyes, but this time from the immense perspective of Heaven itself. I was instantly overwhelmed with the seemingly infinite details involved in each redemptively significant incident; the intricate, complex interwoven threads of literally thousands of lives and billions of people-moments orchestrated by the hand of God Himself in order to bring about a particular outcome. No happenstance wasted or purposeless. Nothing unforeseen or unexpected from the Master Conductor's perspective, but each complex instant of time masterfully crafted with perfect adeptness and impact, moving one of the most intractable, and stubbornly powerful forces in the Universe, the human heart, one step closer to restoration and renewal.

It bespoke phenomenal, extravagant and persistent effort on the part of my Savior. He was lovingly unrelenting in His pursuit of me, yet never for even a blink of an eye did He violate one iota of the free will He had gifted me with as His creation. I understood then too, just a glimpse, and just for a brief moment, of what it meant to know the end from the beginning, while at the same time having the freedom and divine power to bring that foreseen ending about, yet

Dead Man

simultaneously and miraculously preserving that aspect of me most akin to His image: the ability to choose.

As quickly as it had begun, it stopped. And it left my poor finite mind spinning in a whirl of intricate possibilities played out over a divine cosmic symphony larger than existence. And that was only the minute symphonic movement concerned with my own particular life, without regard to the numberless other lives under His omniscient care. He was Intelligence and Power and Grace and Mercy and Love beyond all comprehension standing before me as a Man, being with me as if I were the only creature in all of time and space.

I had done nothing to deserve such attention. I was nothing in comparison to Him, and yet here He was with me, Savior, Lord, Brother, Friend, Creator, Redeemer, Author of Life Itself!

I was not sufficient for these things. I never would be. No finite being could be.

"Some will not see. Some will not believe," He said sadly, but without any diminution of the boundless joy that radiated from Him; the joy that I knew, that I was certain, came simply because He was with me!

I did not understand. I did not need to understand. All I needed was to remain in His Presence forever. All I wanted was for Him to never leave me nor forsake me. This fellowship, this intimacy, this was why I existed. This was why everything was created.

And I was just on the Balcony of real existence, a mere visitor, receiving as a gift beyond price this taste of eternity with My Lord.

What other purpose could have any meaning?

What other reason for anything would there be?

I wanted to scream this to the world from the Balcony of Heaven with all my heart.

O earth earth earth, hear the word of the Lord!

Dead Man

But I knew with a measureless grief, that most would not listen, most would not hear, and I think perhaps for yet another of the briefest instants possible, I felt the infinite heartbreak of my God.

It was unbearable.

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King... Part 4

"Forgive me, Lord!" I pleaded, barely able to speak. So many of my failings, weaknesses, and sins boiled over into my awareness in His loving Presence that I felt literally scalded by my own stubborn and banal iniquity.

It is amazing how filthy something looks when held up close to something, or in this instance, Someone, so pure. The contrast between His sublime and beautiful righteousness and my feeble and self-justifying sinfulness was almost unbearable to me.

But He looked upon me with unreserved acceptance and unconditional love. He was not condemning me; that was clear. Nor did I feel the compulsion to dwell morbidly on my colossal and voluminous failures. Yet at the same time, it was impossible, in the holy radiance of His glory, to deny the simple fact of my sins, and to mourn over how they obscured His image in me. It truly grieved my spirit to know how far short of His glory I fell.

But none of that was why, at that moment, I wanted His forgiveness. No, it was my fearfulness. Not of Him, of course, but of life and loss on the planet below. Because I knew beyond any shadow of doubt that my fear was due to my imperfect love of Him. If I loved Him perfectly, I would have no fear. I felt the truth of that statement down to the very core of my being.

"Yes, My son!" He pronounced emphatically with a smile. "I have. And I do. And I will."

"I do not want to be afraid, my King, but I am, always. There seem to be so many threats and dangers below. So much potential for grief and pain that... I live my life in fear."

I bowed my head in shame at my admission. I had never felt less worthy or of so little value.

Amazingly, I felt His hand on my shoulder as He came alongside me, bearing me up, giving me strength.

Then suddenly, I was in another vision back on the world. I was in a large

Dead Man

bookstore with my second daughter, born to my wife and I as Christians, another gift beyond price. We were together, my little one and I, in this crowded venue, and then, in the next moment, she was no longer in view. Gone. Out of sight.

The wash of abject terror that swept over me made my knees weak. I was barely able to stand. The blood was pounding through my arteries. Adrenalin coursed through my system as if I were about to be hit by an oncoming train. Without realizing it, I began to run through the aisles, retracing our steps at breakneck speed - God help any poor soul who did not leap out of my way. Countless, unbearable images flooded my brain. My little one! How could I be so irresponsible! How much more could I fail her as father, provider and protector. I was desperately, quietly frantic. Hours seemed to pass in slow motion. In reality, it was mere seconds.

I called her name in a cracked voice. It must have been loud because people turned my way. I did not care. They were not her. They were obstacles, obscuring my sight, crowding my vision, increasing my desperation.

In my mind I cried out to my Lord Jesus not to allow me to lose her. To save her from this horrid and miserable world that could shred a child's heart and mind and soul in an instant.

Then I saw her! Crouched down on her knees calmly perusing one of the many books around her, blissfully unaware of her father's faithless panic, and of the people around her.

I almost wept in heart-stopping relief. I wanted to scoop her off the floor and hold her fiercely in my arms forever, never letting her go, or risking her loss again.

I stifled the sob that threatened to escape my pitiful soul and embarrass my daughter and bring unwanted attention to myself.

As calmly as I could, I knelt down beside her through tear-filled eyes, unmindful of anyone else or the world around us.

She was safe. For now. This time.

She looked up at me and smiled like the loving child she was. Then her

Dead Man

expression changed as she sensed the upheaval in my heart.

"Are you OK, Daddy?" she asked, so sweetly, so innocently, so trustingly.

"Of course," I said with false bravado, hugging her to me tightly.

"I just couldn't find you for a second," I said, "and I got a little worried." It was the understatement of the century. I was still shaking inside.

"Daddy," she said, "I saw you the whole time. I couldn't figure out why you were running like that. I'm sorry I scared you."

"It was my fault, sweetheart. Not yours."

"I wasn't lost. I knew I was safe. I knew you wouldn't leave me alone for more than a second. It's OK. You didn't lose me. I wasn't worried a bit. Well, except for the people you almost knocked down. I was a little worried for them," she said with that smile of hers; that smile that could melt a glacier.

I just continued to wordlessly hug her to me in the middle of the aisle, grateful to My God for being merciful to such a one as me.

"It was my delight!" He said from right next to me now. "I was with you. I was with your beloved daughter. And I rejoiced at your thankfulness."

"And yes, My son. I forgive you all of it. Always."

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King... Part 5

As quickly as I resurfaced on the Balcony, as if to draw a deep breath, I was plunged again back into the underworld of earthly life.

I recognized the moment instantly. It was early in the morning of the day I was "shot dead". I held my youngest daughter on my lap as she wept broken-hearted, and not for the first time, over the loss of someone she had loved dearly for nearly half her short life, and who was taken away from her seemingly without reason or warning or cause.

"Why, Daddy?" she asked me plaintively. "Why did that happen?"

What could I say to her? How could I explain when the whole thing made no sense to me as an adult? What possible reason could I give her that would satisfy her young broken heart?

"What did I do wrong?" she whispered desperately, barely able to voice her question through the flood of tears that cascaded freely down her sweet innocent face.

"Oh, honey!" I said, as I pulled her closer. "You did nothing wrong! This is as far from your fault as it is possible to get!"

She shook with sobs then that fractured my soul as I comforted her as best I knew how.

"Why did Jesus let this happen, Daddy? Doesn't He love me?"

And at that instant, a deep vitriolic fury nearly engulfed me. The deadly and horrible desire to exact mindless vengeance against anything and everything that could so hurt this child's heart ignited like a holocaust within me. It was all I could do to remain quiet and let her grief work itself out as I continued to hold her and stroke her hair.

But I knew I was powerless to remedy anything, and that my anger would avail nothing, and would only exacerbate her heart's pain, no matter what my intentions.

Dead Man

God help me! I heard my mind cry out, as I watched the scene replay from the recent past. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs at the unfairness of it all, even from Heaven.

I could look below no longer. The inflamed nerves of emotion were too exposed, too raw.

I looked up at Him who died to save me.

"Do you know why I have commanded that you love your enemies?" He asked me gently. "Do you know why I have decreed that you bless those who persecute you, and do good to those who hate you?"

I could not sufficiently marshal my thoughts to answer. The image of my heart-broken daughter obscured all rational thought, and instead of responding as asked, I wanted to cry out to Him like she did, Why did you let this happen, Lord? Don't You love me?

He smiled sadly, this benevolent God Who Weeps, and I knew beyond all doubt that He did indeed love me and my daughter, and all His children, more than I could even begin to comprehend.

"Because," He continued, answering, "hatred is a burden too costly to bear. It eats at you from inside out and destroys the most precious part of you and scars your soul as no other sin can. It binds you in chains that strangles your life, and enslaves you to bitterness. It is a crushing weight that prohibits your from soaring in the joy that I long to give you. It forces you to exchange My liberty for a prison entirely of your own making, and blinds you to the truth that will make you free. It is as murder, and defiles all it touches."

"If you allow hatred and anger to darken your heart, it will harden you to My goodness and grace, and you will know neither peace, nor joy. I would not have my children suffer so. Forgiveness and love are the most powerful weapons at your disposal; freely given you through Me. Do you think, Dead Man, that I care for you less than you care for your own child?" He asked.

His voice was gentle and filled with compassion, but His question took the

Dead Man

breath from my lungs and made me tremble.

"Forgive me, Lord," I pleaded yet again, unable to say more as I repented in dust and ashes.

"The trials that come your way in life - yours, your daughter's and all who name me as Lord - are in My hands. They come from Me. They are meant to refine you, in the crucible of suffering if necessary, because I am more concerned for your character than your comfort. Your holiness is of far more value to Me than your mere happiness. I intend for you far more good than you can ask or think. Do you believe this?" He asked.

His eyes now pierced me through me like fire, burning away all pretense and delusional pride, instantly vaporizing whatever paltry, self-serving conception I had of fairness or justice or what I or my daughter deserved.

I could do nothing but fall on my face in abject realization of who I was and in Whose Presence I had thought to remain upright. How could I dare to stand before such a One as He? Holy. Righteous. A Consuming Fire.

Then, after yet another timeless interval where I had neither the strength nor the courage to move, I felt Him lift me to my feet once again.

"Do not fear little one," He said, His countenance less terrible and awesome, His voice filled with love. "It is your Father's pleasure to give you a Kingdom that will never fail, and for you to live in His Presence in fullness of joy forevermore."

And I knew, with more certainty than ever before, that He works all things together for good to those who love Him.

Dead Man

Dead Man With the King... Part 6

I was once more beside my King, overlooking the planet below from a vantage point outside time and space.

I watched His ageless face as He stared downward, and whereas before I had felt His eyes like fire burning through me, now they took on the appearance of fire. There was a smoldering divine anger that seemed to intensify with each passing second.

"Soon," He said aloud, I am sure for my benefit.

I believe I knew what He was referring to; that Day of Judgment that was coming.

I then followed His gaze to try to see at least in part what He was seeing. And I noticed again the trails of intense light streak upward through the atmosphere, and I knew that these were souls departing from physical bodies and entering into the afterlife.

As I watched, their numbers increased exponentially, quickly becoming a broad, expansive wave of radiance lifting off from the beautiful but defiled planet below.

These were deaths, I knew, but why so many, so suddenly? And there were none of those wells of darkness intermingled indicating the departure of unbelievers into the place of torment. All these were heaven bound.

"Come My children," He again said aloud. "Come to the place I have prepared for you."

Then He turned to me with those eyes of fire and spoke in a voice unlike any I had heard Him utter before. I was no longer overcome with emotion, but I began to sense a dreadful storm approaching; an overwhelming conflagration of divine judgment.

"Who are those coming in such numbers to Heaven?" He asked me.

"Lord, you know," I replied, unable to answer any other way.

Dead Man

"They are the innocents being slaughtered each day within their mothers' wombs. The little ones who are sacrificed by the millions to the false gods of pleasure and convenience and commerce. These are the children being ripped apart without mercy before birth, or burned with salt and acid. Those who are guilty of such abominations are as the defilers of old who built the high places of Baal which were in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, who caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause their nation to sin."

As He said this, in a voice suffused with suppressed wrath, I also sensed something else; a grief that if fully expressed would shatter the Universe.

And I watched the wave of light ascend to Heaven, ashamed and undone that I was of this people.

This was my world and my nation that condoned such horror and evil and called it good; that reduced the magnificent miracle of divinely created life to something banal and worthless, disposable in the name of individual freedom and personal rights, like so much unwanted garbage.

This was my world and my nation that vilified those who would dare declare this as sin and unborn human life as precious.

This was my world and my nation that was increasing its condemnation with every passing moment; with every helpless murdered infant.

I was horrified, and knew with unshakable certainty that the just and devastating judgment that was soon to come would be undeniably righteous, and irrevocably final.

I was amazed once more that my Lord would have forgiven this nation and this people even now, after such slaughter of innocents, if they would just humble themselves, repent, and ask forgiveness.

But I knew that they would not, and thus the nation and the world was doomed.

Dead Man

And I praised my Lord for His mercy in dying for the sin of this planet, and making escape from His coming holy wrath possible through faith, knowing that I was inherently as evil as all those below.

And while I understood the wrath to come was terrible, I longed for the evil below to be judged, and stopped.

Forever.

Dead Man

Dead Man: Ah! Lord God

It was all becoming unbearable for me, this viewpoint of the world seen from the outskirts of Heaven. There was so much sin and pain and evil so clearly visible from this vantage point that was otherwise easily overlooked on earth. But not seeing was impossible from here. I could only imagine how continually despicable we humans appear before our holy God, with all history splayed out before him like some gigantic butchered beast.

That He refrained from boiling the planet in rage was beyond me. That He continued to love our race was inexplicable. We are so hopelessly mired in willful ignorance and purposeless rebellion. How can He stand us for even a nanosecond more?

"Ah! Lord God," I said feeling older and more tired than I could ever remember feeling. And within that groan was wrapped crushing discouragement and shame. Aside from the wave of innocent infant deaths, and a few occasional flashes of light from this or that believer dying and making the blessed transition to this place, all was darkness below. I felt the weariness of ages descending upon me and I wanted, above all else at the moment, to be spared this perspective and retreat into the protective and idyllic heart of this sacred realm.

"Not yet, my son," He said gently. "The time for you has not yet come. There is need for you below still, and when your life is done you will surely enter My rest. But fear not, nor be discouraged, nor grow weary in doing good. I AM your Lord and King. I AM all that you will ever require. I AM He who holds all time and space in My hands, and there is nothing that can stand against Me or My desire."

As He declared these things, I began to feel refreshed and renewed. My focus (and with it, my hope) began to shift away from the world and back onto Him. And that was His point, of course. It has always been His point.

There is nothing like your God smiling at you, His face shining down upon you. Nothing.

Dead Man

"What I have shown you is only the smallest portion of all the evil that takes place when I and My Father are denied. The perverse twisting and torture of life without Us is a tale, the fullness of which, you could not bear now, and I have protected you from most of it. But I would have you learn this: that when all you see is darkness your eyes are in the wrong place. I want you to be wise in what is good and simple concerning evil.

"And know this also: I AM coming for those I have purchased with My blood. And I AM coming to repay the evil done by all those who refuse to know My Father and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. Be assured, My son, I AM coming soon, and then every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that I AM Lord, to the glory of God, My Father."

Though He said this calmly and quietly, I felt all existence tremble at His words.

I knelt before Him in worship and awe. One refrain echoing marvelously in my mind: I am His and He is my God!

When I looked up again, I was alone on the Balcony.

Immediately an overwhelming grief drowned my heart. To not be in His presence caused an ache that I could not have imagined possible.

"Ah! Lord God!" I cried out once more. "Do not leave me!"

I felt someone approaching from behind. It wasn't Him - I knew without looking.

I felt a strong hand on my shoulder, gripping me firmly, somehow transmitting complete understanding and compassion without a single word. I understood who it was, then.

"It's you," I said to my companion, the one who had first greeted me in this place so long ago, or so it seemed.

"He has not left you alone," he reminded me. "He will never leave you alone. He is with you always."

And I felt the comfort intended by those words, and while it alleviated my grief, it

Dead Man

made the longing for His Presence that much sharper.

"I don't know what I will do without Him," I said very softly, almost to myself.

"But you do," he said to me. "You will live the remainder of your days below as He intends, eagerly awaiting His return. Or yours."

"I am to go back," I said. It was a statement, not a question.

"In a little while," he agreed with that smile of his. "But first, He has provided you a parting gift..."

Dead Man

Dead Man in the Sky

The physical Universe in all its vastness was before me. I saw it as if outside it looking in, and it was incomprehensibly big.

There are no words for the scales of size and distance involved, and yet at the same time, it looked like a little thing from my perspective. Weird and glorious all at once.

"What would you like to see?" he asked me.

"Everything," I said.

"That would take forever," he answered, and smiled, "even in its current imperfect state."

That was the point of the Universe, I knew - a playground of materiality for God's children; a place of infinite variety, complexity and beauty - all for us.

It was easy to lose sight of that fact on-planet. From the surface looking out, our beautiful, but broken, Blue Marble seemed small and insignificant in comparison to the immense celestial sea in which it floated. But what does comparative size have to do with importance. Our world is like the egg of the Universe. It is the place from which redeemed life will reach out and populate the sky. That was His plan from the beginning.

"Our Father is extravagant in His preparations for Eternity," my companion told me. "You have no idea how much He values us or what He has in store for His children. He made all of this with us in mind, so that He could delight in our delight."

"There are no words," I said marveling at the magnificence before me.

"Precisely," he agreed.

"It's easy to imagine we don't mean much of anything, but we really mean everything, don't we?" I asked.

Dead Man

He nodded.

I understood then that we had lost the assurance of our importance at the Fall of Man, and have been trying to get it back ever since - looking everywhere and believing just about anything except the truth. Not because He hid it from us, but because we rejected Him and therefore would not see.

It all made a kind of tragic sense, like a rebellious child refusing to believe in a parent's love because doing so would obliterate the child's illusion of being the center of his own existence. Returning that love would entail an acknowledgement that the child was not what he thought he wanted to be - his own god. Rebellion against God is the ultimate selfishness; the pinnacle of willful blindness.

"The Father wants each of us to have all this, but we can't without being in Him - the very source of Life itself. Unless we abide in Him, we can have no life. It's simple, actually," he said. "Even a child can understand it."

"Especially a child," I agreed.

A moment more of taking in what was before me brought something else to my understanding: if this gift of everything was made just for us, what must it say about the Maker and Giver?

"Exactly," he replied, reading my thoughts. "If it would take forever to explore and come to know Creation, how immeasurably more satisfying will it be to come to know the Creator as He truly is in Himself?"

In essence by being presented with the entire Universe, I was perceiving merely His footprint in the sands of time and space - the signpost pointing to the true destination: Him.

And in my mind, or perhaps echoing across all Creation itself, I heard that Voice say yet again what it all meant.

"AND THIS IS ETERNAL LIFE, THAT THEY MAY KNOW YOU, THE ONLY TRUE GOD, AND JESUS CHRIST WHOM YOU HAVE SENT."

Dead Man

"There is one more gift," my companion said.

Dead Man

Dead Man at the Center of Existence

I had seen and walked through the outskirts of Heaven, and looked over the edge of its Balcony into time and space, and into the past and present of the Planet below, but nothing I had seen, or could imagine, prepared me for what I experienced next.

Not for the first time I asked myself: How do you describe the indescribable?

John, in Revelation, gives us a glimpse of the utter magnificence of the City of God as it comes down out of Heaven and appears in materiality, and his description provides a sense of its reality impinging for the first time upon our own. The terrible beauty of his words paint an almost incomprehensible image of grandeur and immensity; a single city half as big as the Moon, composed of precious stones and materials of such extravagant proportions as to leave us breathless.

Yet, I did not see the City as John saw it. I did not come that close.

But my experience was nonetheless transforming, for what my eyes did not see, my heart understood wordlessly, and I was overwhelmed with the conviction that here, in this place, in the very Center of Existence, everything was of such solidity, and of such substance, and of such eternity that everything else - everywhere else - was mere shadow.

This was the essential glory from which everything else derived.

From this moment on I will know what absolute certainty means.

From this moment on I will know what it truly means to be, for I have been shown the swirling, immeasurable depths of pure creative power, and have caught a glimpse of the consuming fires of the glory of our God.

And the most amazing realization of all, was that this raw, and wild, and raucously powerful strength, so untamed and infinitely uncontainable in any dimensional space, is that which is expressly embodied in the Person of my Lord Christ - for in Him is all this fullness of the Godhead. He is the image of this Glory.

Dead Man

That this One became a creature like us in order to share with us all that He is, to show us His intent and love for us, to be one with us, beholding His glory, is the greatest, most invisible, yet substantial, gift of all.

To be loved by such a One is unthinkably grand and magnificent and glorious.

And then, the vision of my heart was gone, and I stood for what I knew to be the last time on the Balcony of Heaven.

"He gave you all that you could withstand," my companion said. "Even the smallest bit more and you would have dissolved into vapor."

I nodded, not willing to speak.

I was not grieved, exactly, for I knew that my destiny was to live forever in this realm.

And I was not exactly impatient, for what is a few more passing years on-planet when all eternity was my ultimate reward?

But I was... wistful.

I did not want to leave, but I understood how little what I wanted at any particular moment had any real significance in comparison to His gracious eternal purposes for me.

Who was I to do more than just place absolutely everything in His hands?

Who was I to do anything other than absolutely, unquestioningly obey His loving will for me?

After all, I was, and had only ever been from birth, a Dead Man.

A Dead Man whom He had made alive.

Dead Man

Dead Man on the Ground

There was no sense of transition.

One instant one place, the next hovering telephone-pole high over the lilac bushes in the yard.

Disembodiment is hard to get used to, mostly because while I knew I wasn't attached to my physical form, it felt little different from when I was, except for the lack of aches and pains, and floating in the air and all.

Below me was me.

I looked kind of crumpled up and damaged lying on the ground practically underneath the kayak trailer in the driveway. There was blood oozing out of my one temple, and my ubiquitous eyeglasses were hanging askew from my ashen face, unbroken, but badly bent.

My glasses, that is. Not my face.

It was still daylight, and the last thing I recall doing as a captive of gravity was bending down to pick up a bagged newspaper near the street. It was a newspaper, incidentally, delivered weekly, un-asked for, and unread.

How it had become my undoing, I did not know.

Then, in answer to my confusion, time unwound backwards a bit as I floated, in no rush to touch down.

I witnessed crumpled me suddenly arise moving in reverse, dropping the paper I had attempted to pick up, and then moving away from it, again in reverse.

At the point where I had apparently decided to retrieve the paper in the first place, the 3-D HD real-life rewind stopped, and began to run forward.

The loud roaring of a large, overloaded dump truck from some landscape company rumbled toward me from the highway, arcing around the bend at the top of the hill near our house and barreling toward me like something out of a B-

Dead Man

class action film.

On-planet me hardly seemed to notice. Immaterial me was a bit startled, which was strange in the extreme, not having any physical senses, but what do I know?

At precisely the moment I bent down to pick up the offending newspaper, a fist-sized, decorative, polished river stone used in expensive landscape edging bounced out of the careening truck's cargo bed and headed unerringly toward my head. It looked like a primitive projectile shot from a mechanical dinosaur.

I watched the rock, which at this point was traveling at almost the same velocity as the speeding truck, strike my temple as if I were reenacting the David and Goliath saga in reverse, and modernized.

In my version, Goliath, the truck, slung the stone at diminutive me, as David, and I went down like a felled gnome.

Floating me winced in pain. Physical me hit the gravel driveway in a bleeding crumpled lump.

The rest is visionary history.

I realized that the impending reentry into my physical shell was not going to be fun.

It was going to hurt, and I looked forward to it not at all.

Then I heard footsteps running toward me from the house, and a panicked cry from my youngest child.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "Are you OK?"

...And I opened my eyes from the ground, reawakening with a start that sent shockwaves through my brain.

"Ow!" I croaked weakly, as she knelt down next to me on the stones, trembling in fear.

Dead Man

I could see tears in her eyes even without my glasses.

"I'll be fine," I said, trying to smile. I can only imagine what a ghastly picture I presented.

I managed to hold her as she burst into sobs of relief.

"I thought you were dead, Daddy!"

"It's OK, Sweetheart. It's OK."

Dead Man

Dead Man No More

Before I knew it, my entire household was around me. News travels fast over some kind of metaphysical network in a loving nuclear family.

"Dad! You're bleeding! Do you need me to call an ambulance?" my eldest daughter asked, business-like, focused, anticipating and prioritizing several thousand possible contingencies, and mentally formulating the necessary procedural steps to move the one alternative most likely chosen forward.

"Daddy!" her younger sister cried, crouching beside me on the ground next to the youngest and putting her hand to the wound.

"Ow!" I said. She jerked her hand away like she'd been burned.

"Sorry!"

"Is there anything leaking out besides blood?" I asked.

"You mean like brain-matter?"

"Yeah, basically."

She looked again, critically, objectively, able to put her initial emotional tsunami aside.

"No."

"OK then, no ambulance."

I met my wife's eyes at that moment. Years and years of knowing each other, living day-to-day with each other, raising our daughters, bearing each other's burdens, pains, triumphs, defeats, joys, sorrows, everything and anything was communicated in that split-second glance. It is an intimacy and understanding that only a long investment of time together can yield, augmented to an inconceivable depth by our shared faith in Christ.

"You should get checked out," she said with a calm that I knew she did not feel.

Dead Man

Our daughters made room for her next to me, something she always, consciously, sacrificially, did for them, knowing how important, and short, time was between fathers and daughters.

I am sure we made quite a tableau crouched there together in our front yard; four beautiful females of various ages and one crumpled and bleeding gnome.

"I have a hard head," I reminded her.

"Was it a cricket bat?" the youngest asked. It was a quote from one of our favorite shows.

"Just a rock thrown out by a dump truck," I answered, feeling less, well, crumpled with each passing second. I went through a list of possible bad symptoms in my head: no dizziness, no nausea, no headaches beyond the gash in my temple, no shock, the bleeding was subsiding as my wife compressed a cloth against it - I don't know where she obtained it. In short, I had just been knocked slightly unconscious for what seemed like years but was probably less than a couple of seconds. I'd been through worse in my younger years.

"Did you break the rock, Daddy?"

I smiled. It was what I always asked when one of them fell, or got hurt, in the course of life. It was my lame attempt to distract them momentarily from their pain, and enabled me to assess the seriousness of their injury. If they laughed or got annoyed, then I knew it was probably not life threatening.

"Dunno," I said. "It's over there by the hedge." I pointed where I knew it had landed, having seen it come to rest while disembodied.

I thought that thought like such things crossed my mind daily. Should I question my sanity?

Nah.

"Can you stand?" my wife asked.

In answer, I lumbered upward, involuntarily groaning at the effort.

Dead Man

On two feet again, I adjusted my glasses, grimacing at how they now felt, misshapen on my rapidly swelling face.

I remembered my experience in full. Was it a dream? A vision? An actual, objective event?

I didn't know. I didn't care, because whatever it was, it increased my longing for Heaven and my love for my Lord, and my thankfulness for all His glorious gifts.

"You're just standing there," my eldest pointed out.

I looked at her, so utterly grateful for her presence, for the privilege of having her, and all her sisters, in my life.

I turned toward my wife and my tears began to flow, and she, of all the other billions of human beings in the world, knew precisely what I was feeling without me having to say a word; another of His amazing gifts.

And I was ushered inside, surrounded by the people who cared for me the most, and I knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, now and forever, that I was loved.

And whenever my work on-planet was done, however long it took to complete, there was awaiting for me a Place and a Person, where, and in whom, nothing of value or goodness was lost.

Ever.