

Prologue

Hosanna Sings, the previous piece of this story, told how Martha Scott came to write a novel about the life of Hosanna, a young woman who was the daughter of God. By dint of a life spent in adverse conditions Martha developed remarkable powers, both spiritual and psychic, and she in turn endowed Hosanna with them and more. (After all, she is a divine being.)

Hosanna, whose story was told in segments of Martha's novel, was determined to take a different journey from the one Jesus, her half brother, took. She referred to her miracles as lessons, because that was what they were. She started with turning gasoline to wine as a demonstration of how people were over-dependant on cars. This was followed with a succession of actions designed to make people aware of their transgressions. She tackled lust, lying, greed and bigotry only to find her lesson plan was not appreciated.

She rejected martyrdom as a part of the package and fled the mobs by restoring a derelict wooden schooner and sailing off to tropical isles where she hoped she could create a simpler life.

Even with this synopsis, this book will make more sense if you read *Hosanna Sings* first. (But that's just the author's opinion – and he may be prejudiced.)

The story resumes seven years later with Hosanna, a single mother living on the schooner.

Chapter 1

Sitting on the foredeck of *EXODUS*, a restored Alden schooner, Hosanna looked across the turquoise water to the tropical shore. Her twin daughters, Faith and Hope, were climbing on the bowsprit, but she paid them little mind as they were quite surefooted and the dolphins gamboling just underneath were practiced in kid overboard situations.

An emerald hummingbird, brilliantly iridescent in the morning sun, landed on the edge of her glass and helped itself to a sip of mango juice. After swallowing it preened for a moment then spoke. *"So has motherhood mellowed you any?"*

Hosanna had been expecting something like this since they dropped anchor the previous morning. After five and a half years of idyllic anchorages this was the most perfect. The bay was sheltered from wind and waves. To the left there were sandy beaches, to the right a cliff from which a waterfall tumbled directly into the sea. All this in a place where the chart indicated the water was two thousand feet deep. The island was uninhabited yet more beautiful than any she had seen, and they had the anchorage to themselves. God had said She would be in touch, and Hosanna had been sensing a presence the past few days.

Hosanna answered, "Motherhood is a nicely defined mission. Even if I don't always know what to do, I generally have an idea."

The hummingbird turned its head and watched the girls as they teetered over the water. *"Maybe you can understand why I left you to climb about on your own?"*

After thinking for a moment, Hosanna replied, "Maybe, but they know how to swim, and the dolphins are there just in case."

"You had dolphins too, but that's not why I'm here."

"I'm not sure I want to know. Nice island though and I like the humming bird getup."

The little bird launched its-self and did a quick intricate flight over her head, then settled back. *"I think you're ready to go back."*

"What about motherhood?"

"You will find they are a help, as will be the others."

"Others?"

"You will follow the stars. The first will lead you to Haiti just two days north. The child will be there waiting. Others will have seen the star and will be gathered around. You will make yourself known, and your daughters will gain a playmate. Later you will find the others, one by one."

Hosanna nodded, "Sounds like you have a plan," she said.

The bird cocked its head. *"I can hardly wait until you have a cabin full of children all asking, 'Why'."*

"I've learned quite enough with the two I've got." Hosanna said, thinking that even with some miraculous powers, motherhood was far harder than she'd imagined.

"Besides, I'm not sure I've recovered from the last time I made like a messiah."

The hummingbird landed on a slack rope that led from one of the furled jibs. After a moment it spoke, *"That's why I decided that you need some help."*

“Children? What happened to all those years of my not being ready? Wouldn't it be better to send some older men or women – maybe people would listen to them.”

“They listened to you, that wasn't the problem.”

“What?”

“They didn't like what they heard.”

“And just what was wrong with my message?”

“Nothing.”

“Let me get this straight. You, the all powerful creator of heavens and earth, grand Pooh-Bah of this end of the galaxy and maybe more, send your children to Earth - Jesus, and then, if I'm not delusional, me. Maybe others too.” She raised a second finger, “We do a good job, speaking at least a semblance of your will.” She raised a third finger and, after taking a quick look to see that her children were not in imminent danger, continued. “And your flawed creations, nailed Jesus to a tree, and were headed in the same general direction for me, but I got out in time.” She shook her head. “And all this was after you had once used a flood to wipe the slate clean.”

“And now it's time to go back.”

“So society can teach Faith and Hope about Captain Crunch breakfast sugar before they measure them for martyrdom?”

“Trust me, will you? I have a plan. This time they will listen.”

Chapter 2

Martha sat back and stared at the screen. She didn't think she liked using the word processor better than writing on pads of paper. It was too easy to go back and change things, and that stopped the flow. She wasn't at all sure that she wanted to do this. It had taken a year before she could go to the supermarket without someone coming up to her wanting a miracle of some sort or another - and that was after she moved and bought a hundred secluded acres in an area where minding your own business was a source of pride.

She hadn't told anyone that she was even thinking about this, even though her agent and Greg, who took Sally's spot at the publishing house, kept trying to convince her to write a sequel. It wasn't as though she had a choice.

The dreams had started a month ago. In them someone was knocking on the door. It continued softly, but persistently, with pauses now and again as if whomever was listening for an acknowledgement.

Martha put her hands back on the keyboard, "I'm coming – I'm coming."

** ** **

"A plan, you mean like in God's perfect plan? I'm waiting."

"In the old testament a remark like that would gotten you turned into a pillar of salt."

"Give me that old time religion."

The hummingbird took a deep breath, expanding its chest and kept growing. In a moment it morphed into a pelican. Stretching out its neck it leaned towards Hosanna and

opened its mouth wide. A fish slid out of its bill and landed on Hosanna's lap. The twins noticed and gave a little cheer.

After tossing the fish over the side, where it was caught by a dolphin before it hit the water, Hosanna stood. "Kids, why don't you go aft and see if there is a melon in the ice box?"

The twins seemed not to hear and stood watching the pelican. Faith spoke, "Maybe bird has melon."

Hosanna turned to the pelican. "Of course the bird has a melon, but it would be all slimy from being next to the fish. The one in the icebox might even have ice cream inside.

The kids scampered aft.

"Not above performing mini miracles are you?"

"Not at all. Life is full of them. So what's the plan? And don't give me any of that 'more will be revealed stuff,' this time I'm not buying it."

"I told you about the stars and the children." The pelican hopped off the rope which was not a good perch for so large a bird. *"Of course the media will be all over this, and when you have picked up the last child you will set course for New York."*

"I don't think so."

The bird raised its wings slightly in what was a shrug. *"Ok. A hurricane will come and will blow you to New York. Your choice. Once there you will find someone waiting and you will be offered a contract for a television show called "Out of the mouths of babes." Or some such drivel. A segment on the morning news. You won't have to do much, the children will know what to do and say."*

"I can't believe you want to get into reality TV. Have you planed for when the mobs gather outside the Studio?"

"I'll come and drop fish on them. How's that? Big fish if need be."

"It may take more than fish."

A shout from the deck behind them interrupted, "Mommy! Hope made the ice-cream strawberry, and I wanted vanilla."

Hosanna turned to the pelican, "Are you sure that this is God's perfect plan?"

** ** **

Martha looked up and wondered the same thing. Why was she writing this? She didn't need the money. She certainly did not want the renewal of fame or attention another book would bring.

* * *

As they approached the island they saw the hills around the small town had been stripped of all their trees. The small river that flowed through the crowded village carried a carpet of brown out to sea as the rains washed the last of the fertile soil from the already poor fields. Looking through her binoculars, Hosanna could see a large crowd standing along the waterfront. There was no port to speak of so she anchored far enough offshore to discourage visitors.

After lowering the shore boat, built of varnished wood with sleek lines designed to make it easy to row, she said to the twins. "Get in, you might as well get used to crowds."

As they drew within a hundred yards of shore she heard a pulsing buzz and realized it was the crowd. Closer, she could make out that they were calling her name

with a lilting patois accent. As they approached shore a pod of dolphins appeared and gently pushed back the people who were surging into the water towards them. Hosanna shipped her oars and told the twins to stand on the aft seat. "See if you can spot your new friend."

When the boat touched the beach a large woman pushed through the crowd and grasped the gunwale. "We have been waiting. The child is ready - his name is Jacques." She lowered her voice, "We should be fast. There are those who do not want him to go."

The sun was hot. This was not a tropical paradise, not with the stench coming from the river and the decaying hills ready to slide into the town with the next deluge.

"Perhaps an exchange," Hosanna said, raising her hand. She pointed to the hillside and swept her hand back and forth as though painting. A forest appeared, tall and lush, the trees filled with fruit and birds. The bay turned from brown to blue. The scent of gardenias replaced the foul sewage smell. "The trees can not be cut, they will dull any blade, stop any saw."

The crowd was now quiet and parted, making a path wide enough for her and the girls to walk abreast. The woman led them up onto the street to a building made of scraps of wood with a rusted metal roof. The crowd followed, filling the narrow street. Before entering Hosanna pointed again and long tables burdened with food appeared on the far side of the crowd.

Hosanna walked into the shack, the boy was standing in a patch of light where the sun came through a break in the roof. She reached out for his hand. He held hers for a moment, but soon pulled away and went to Faith whose hand he took. As they emerged

Hosanna said to the woman, "He will return when it is time." She did not know what this meant, but it seemed to make some sense.

For the most part the crowd had surged towards the tables and ignored Hosanna who now walked back towards the narrow beach. The children followed behind but stopped before leaving the street. Hope raised her hand and, using the same painting gestures as Hosanna, quickly transformed the ramshackle dilapidated town with a coat of paint and new walls where they were needed. Her color scheme favored pink, purple and yellow, with a few polka-dotted buildings thrown in for diversity.

The boy raised his hand and filled a vacant lot with a flock of chickens. He laughed, and made more, filling the street behind them. It was a lot of chickens. He paused and pointed his finger at one. As he giggled, it grew - turkey sized and then larger until it was taller than he. It cocked its head to the side and clucked.

Faith took a step towards it and with a pass of her hand transformed it from brown to a glorious blue with a yellow topknot.

Hosanna called, "Come on. There will be time to play with evolution later."

Later, as they sat on deck watching the hills recede behind them Faith asked.

"Why did we go and get Jacques?"

"We followed the star, silly," said Hope, "and the bird told mommy to, don't you remember?"

"I remember that. But why did the bird tell us to go? And where is the next star?"

Hosanna who had been looking up at the darkening sky turned and said, "We should see it pretty soon. And I don't know where it will take us. The bird didn't give a lot of details." She paused for a moment, "What has Jacques told you?"

"That he was waiting for us. His mommy is dead. He knew we were coming."

"Could you tell him we don't need any more chickens?"

"But he likes them."

"Tell him one or two is enough, especially since he likes them big. We're going to be a bit cramped before we are done I'm afraid."

There was a minute of silence as they watched the end of the sunset. "Mommy?"

"Yes?"

"That bird you were talking to..."

"What about it?"

"I think I've heard its voice sometimes."

Hosanna turned from looking at the sky and put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "It's time we had a talk. Go get your sister."

"And Jacques?"

Hosanna smiled, "And Jacques."

Hosanna sat opposite the three children in the cockpit. "I guess you probably know that most people don't live on sailboats and have visits from talking birds." She paused and nodded to Jacques, "and most people don't have stars above them."

"There's another one," Faith shouted pointing up.

Hosanna turned and saw another especially bright star, not in the west where Venus was, but to the North West. “Yes, we’ll go follow it in a minute, but let me finish. You will find that there are going to be a lot of things that are different. And pretty soon there will be crowds of people. And talking birds. It’s going to be...” she ran out of words.

“Fun,” said Hope.

“Yeah,” the others chimed in.

“You’d better know what you’re doing,” Hosanna muttered under her breath.

Chapter 3

North and West took them across the Gulf of Mexico and through an inlet near Brownsville Texas. It was early morning as they approached shore and, as soon as the sun had risen, there was a flock of small planes and helicopters circling them. Hosanna remembered why she had tried to resign her messiah-hood. She wished the sabbatical could have been longer. Two Coast Guard boats came alongside transferring three uniformed persons and a civilian to the schooner's deck before standing off.

“Agent Reed, did they send you to help cut through the red tape?”

“Hello Hosanna. Red tape is the least of it I am afraid. Remember how you told me that God has a sense of humor? I think you used armadillos as an example.”

She nodded, waiting for him to go on.

“Well the star that you are following, it leads to a trailer park,” he gestured towards shore.

“Ok,” Hosanna began.

“Not ok. In that trailer-park there are thirty-seven children between the ages of eighteen months and fourteen years of age. Not to mention four women in late stages of pregnancy. In each case their parents are claiming that their child is the one you seek. About half have signed agents, some others have made a local preacher their advisor. His name is Roy Wallis, but he is known locally as Reverend Fangs. He preaches what he

calls a venomous sermon and his sect is known for using rattlesnakes in their services to demonstrate their trust in Jesus.”

“And?”

“And, based on satellite photographs and other studies done with classified assets, we believe that one of the children in his charge is actually the child you seek.” Phillip paused.

“Maybe I’m just here to pick up fresh fruit.” Hosanna said. She smiled and continued, “but then again maybe not. Reverend Fang?”

Phillip spoke, his voice deep, trying to imitate the man, “God’s word is venom to the Devil. Accept the strike,” he made a very fast motion with his hand toward her arm, “it is the only way to kill Satan inside you.”

“No shit,” Hosanna shook her head, “God’s work is manifold and mysterious.”

“He’s one of those who haven’t forgotten your last visit. At the time he was hoping for Armageddon, but now he maintains you were sent by the devil. So guess what? When the news reported that you might be headed here he had his parishioners go out into the country and gather up all the snakes they could find. They’ve done this before and know where to look. And this being Texas, they got a lot, bags full, and let them all loose in the trailer park.”

He shook his head. “So far there have been two fatalities attributed to the snakes. Only one by a bite. The other was when one of the residents got a little over eager with his shotgun, he got the snake, but tore up his neighbor’s truck. Now around here that’s a hanging offense and one thing led to another . . . The details are a bit murky. Besides

that several people are being treated in the hospital for bites. The local emergency room has flown in all the snakebite anti-venom it can get.”

Hosanna smiled, “I didn’t expect a marching band welcoming me home.”

The smile left his face, “Seriously, we are worried about snipers.” As he said it a news helicopter buzzed low, the wash from its blades causing the sails to flap wildly.

“And you are here to tell me that you can not guarantee my safety.”

He nodded, “That’s a part of it. More importantly, *they* want to know what is going on.”

“I wish I knew. This time it seems as though the focus is going to be on the children. Maybe I’m just going to be a glorified baby sitter.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Phillip said.

Chapter 4

The Coast Guard Lieutenant came forward. "Excuse me, but how do you disengage the auto-pilot?"

Hosanna looked the woman over. She was very tanned having obviously spent a lot of time outdoors. She appeared to know what she was doing. "There is no auto pilot. *Exodus* is Alden designed, so balanced she sails herself most of the time."

"But the channel turns to port!" The officer pointed to a buoy.

"We'll probably get a wind shift." Hosanna looked at the water off to her right and pointed to a set of small waves that were coming at them. "If you want to be official you might yell, 'coming about,' or something."

"Speaking of official," The officer paused and looked at the buoy and the waves, before asking, "Could you get us the ship's papers?"

"Down below, in the Galley, there is a picture of a Hummingbird, looks like it was drawn by a child. Faith liked the paper. Turn it over. It should be what you need."

"Also Passports."

Hosanna turned to Phillip and said, "Could you tell this woman I am less than understanding when it comes to bureaucracy? I'll have the kids make passports if she really wants them, but..."

"I don't want passports the children make."

Hosanna did not give her time to amplify the thought, "Yes you do. And you will tell them what a good job they did. It's important to give praise."

Phillip interrupted, "Lieutenant, I believe the paperwork can be dispensed with,"

The woman stiffened slightly, "Sir, I believe our missions differ."

Phillip shrugged. "Trust me on this one."

Hosanna smiled, "You want papers?" She held her hands out as though she was carrying a tray. "Say the magic word."

The Lieutenant looked at Hosanna as though she was a bit nuts. Hosanna continued, saying, "Surely your mother taught you the magic word."

Phillip was smiling. "Lieutenant, it starts with the letter P."

"Sir, I know that!" She took a quick look around to make sure her crew could not hear before saying, "Please?"

A large wooden box appeared in Hosanna's hands. It was made of varnished mahogany with polished brass hinges and fasteners. Carved into the top were the words, "Be Careful What You Ask For." She handed it to the woman who was caught off guard by its weight and had to take a step forward to regain her balance.

Hosanna turned back to Phillip saying, "Do you have a recommendation for a place to anchor?"

"The Coast Guard Base provides the best security, but I remember you are a bit leery of governmental facilities."

She nodded. "Security is not a problem." A flick of her finger produced a swarm of bees flying just off the boat's side. Above them a flock of geese forced the copter to break off from making another pass.

* * *

The Reverend Roy Wallis watched the television coverage of Hosanna's arrival. He was pleased they had again aired the interview he gave the night before. There had

been a lot of waiting and he had seen it several times. "My faith will not waver. The serpents will foil the Devil's plans. She is not the only one who talks with the Lord. And I have on High Authority that it is not the LORD to whom she speaks.

"I have been assured that this young child will grow up and will take over my ministry." He was not specific about which child since it was a bit of a problem that the child most squarely under the star was female. And the daughter of a woman who added new dimensions to the word backslide. She was cooperating only because one member of his church was in a position to put significant pressure on her. The Reverend was still working on how he might be able to pass a far more promising young boy off as the star-child. That family wanted nothing other than to be of service to the church, and the mother presented a far better image working at Wal-Mart rather than tending bar in a dive ironically named the Devil's Den.

That was a place the reverend had never been in. It was said that the mother's attire consisted of a flimsy halter top and shorts that had been modified to expose as much as the health department would allow. She certainly was not the modern Mary the situation seemed to call for, even though his denomination was more concerned with The Father.

The television commentators blathered continuously about the "miracles" Hosanna had produced when she had last visited. At the time he had been certain that she was heralding Armageddon and had felt a vague disappointment when she vanished and things slowly returned to normal.

Now it seemed as though she was coming straight to him, and he would be waiting. In his mind's eye he saw the scene. Standing outside the house where the child

lived he would wear his finest purple robes. A large diamondback, as fat as his calf, held in his hands. A group of his acolytes had found a huge specimen, and proudly brought it to him. The Reverend saw himself waiting until the heathen Hosanna was close, then as though applying a benediction he would reach out and drape the snake on her shoulder. God willing, it would strike, hopefully in her neck where the venom would do the most and fastest harm. Her death, carried live on television, would propel him to the world pulpit he had so long understood was his destiny, but which had eluded him until now. He would rally the faithful...

The phone rang, interrupting his reverie. It was the cell phone that linked him to one of the faithful stationed down at the waterfront. "She is rowing to shore. The children are with her."

* * *

Looking for a different angle Tom McAddams, a reporter for KSLF news, counted seventy-three television news trucks, fifty-seven marked vehicles from six law enforcement agencies, and five distinct groups of protesters. Three ice-cream trucks, one of which was an undercover unit for a seventh law enforcement agency, added to the gridlock which brought all movement on the trailer park's potholed streets to a halt. After failing to dissuade Hosanna, Philip used a FBI vehicle to get her as close as possible.

There were very few people on the street and the TV newscasters broadcast standing on the tops of their vehicles. This was due to the only slightly exaggerated reports of hundreds of rattlesnakes loose in the compound. Many of the serpents had made their way to better neighborhoods, but there were enough in evidence so most

camera crews were able to 'adopt' one on film, providing footage which was broadcast when there was a lull. News directors saw it as a wonderful device which assisted in keeping the tension at a pitch to ensure high ratings. One crew was especially pleased that they were able to film an encounter between a large diamondback and a toy poodle with more brava than brains. "Warning: graphic footage," the announcers trumpeted as they gleefully replayed the scene where brave little Muffin died valiantly defending his home. Within an hour a network bought the footage and Muffin was credited with having saved at least a dozen people from death or dismemberment. Snake experts were airlifted to TV studios so they could give detailed descriptions of how venom affected the body. Three breeders claimed Muffin's bloodlines and offered a replacement to the bereaved family. A funeral was being planned. Viewers were asked to call in and vote for one of three coffins.

* * *

Taking the children by the hand, Hosanna helped them step down from the large vehicle and then set off down the edge of the road. Three helicopters swooped low, and a few of the braver journalists exited their vans.

"Ok guys and gals," Hosanna muttered to the snakes, "This is your chance to clean up the bad rap you got in the Garden of Eden." It took a few seconds, but presently the snakes uncoiled and slithered forth, emerging from under bushes and vehicles aligning themselves to provide a path for Hosanna to follow. If a reporter approached, one would rear up, threatening with fangs and rattle until the news-hound backed off.

The path led two blocks into the heart of the trailer park then turned up a little cull-de-sac to the mobile home, its tiny gravel yard decorated with battered plastic flamingos some of which listed as though drunk. This was where the child lived.

The reverend dressed in his purple robe, watching the procession on TV, waited until the cameras had the trailer in their shots. Then, after carefully grasping the snake whose mouth had been secured with a noose he would remove at the last moment, he opened the door and moved out onto the small landing that stood at the top of two slightly wobbly steps.

Reverend Fang had his lines ready, and was planning to wait until she was close, but the phalanx of snakes rose as if to strike. The serpent in his hands surprised him with its strength, wrenching itself from his grip and flipping off the noose. News7copter came in low and raised a cloud of dust. The snake coiled its tail around Roy's ankle rising up, mouth open, its fangs poised to strike the Reverend's groin.

Though the sounds of the helicopter, the whooping sirens of the police cars, and the clamor of the crowd that was following Hosanna made it impossible, he clearly heard her say, "Thanks, but that won't be necessary."

The snake swayed slightly, fainted once and then with a slow fluid motion settled to the ground. It kept its tail wrapped around the preacher's ankle and its eyes focused on his face.

The reverend took in deep breaths as he grasped for words. Nothing was the same. What had been so clear just minutes ago was now muddled. Would the devil have saved his life like that? Yet who else would be escorted by rattlesnakes? He heard the door

open behind him, a perfume scent that he called, 'harlot nights,' preceded the girl's mother. "God," he asked, "Let her not be wearing the leather vest that reveals so much."

Hosanna's voice cut through the clamor, perhaps coming from inside their heads. "Why don't you invite us in? The dust is not good for the children."

The woman waved them in and opened the door further, pushing the reverend off to the side of the platform. He tried to follow after Hosanna and the children had passed, but the snake held tight to his ankle. Dismayed, he watched the aluminum door close – shutting off his chance of a global ministry. Even more disturbing, he had felt something as they passed, a feeling of being close to God. It was more powerful than anything he could conjure up, more real. It had taken an act of will, and a strong desire to get no closer to the serpent, not to fall to his knees.

Deprived of the main characters, the television cameras turned to him. The Reverend knew this was a chance to have his say, but he remained silent. Perhaps it was the pressure of the rattler's tail around his ankle, maybe it was the sense that he had been brushed by God's true messenger, but the words did not come. He felt a pull and allowed the snake to lead him off the steps and across the yard. He followed the snake lined path that Hosanna had used to pass through the mob. Eventually the press turned their cameras from him and focused on the door of the trailer.

Chapter 5

Martha pushed her chair away from the table where the computer whirred softly. She had missed the act of writing. It had saved her life when she was confined by giving her a refuge from the insanity that would have sucked her will to live. She never had any clear idea where her stories, or, more precisely, her characters, were going. It was as though she passed through a door into another world where things had a life of their own. She looked at her watch and saw that she'd already spent three hours at this. For most other things that would be enough, but not for this – at least for today. The next paragraph tugged at her, wanting to escape through her fingertips.

* * *

Wanda waved her hand indicating the chaos that had overcome the snug living room. “Please – find a place to sit, you’ll have to excuse the mess, things got crazy about six days ago when that star...” She stopped and looked at the kids. “You’ll find Estelle down at the end there. She’s been waiting, and not a little scared.” The three kids took off and she turned back to Hosanna. “That man,” she began to explain, “he said that he could get the County to take her away. He had someone from Children’s Protection call me, one of the bosses.” She paused, taking a deep breath before she went on. “I had some trouble a while ago – almost lost her, and that was with only a caseworker. Some people don’t think too much of what I am.”

Hosanna’s smile grew. “There is nothing wrong with you. Not now. Nobody is going to take your child away.”

“But you, why are you here? On the TV...”

“You are coming too. Unless you can’t bear to leave all this.”

“Me? But I’m not...I mean I work in a biker bar, I don’t know who Estelle’s father is, I...”

Hosanna interrupted, “You are just fine. I’m not taking her from you - you are coming with us. I’m going to need a hand with the kids, and, if nothing else, it will give the reporters a whole ‘nother tree to gnaw on. Besides, I suspect I know who the father is.”

“No! Not about the father, I mean, but reporters.” Wanda stopped and chewed on her bottom lip for a few seconds before going on. “I had a problem, with things like, drinking and drugs and men. I did some real stupid things when I was drunk.” She brought her hand up over her face for a moment as though to block the images, “*REALLY* stupid. There are pictures. Maybe even movies of me. You see at the bar, Saturdays are “wild night”. The wilder you get, the less drinks cost. When a woman takes off her top they are free. That was before I started working there. I don’t remember a lot of it, but they have a picture of me. It’s glued to the wall in the men’s room. It’s pretty bad, I was on the pool table, not alone...” she trailed off not wanting to describe it. “That picture or as much as they can show is going to be on the news.”

“So?” Hosanna gestured towards her own body. “Would it make you feel better to get a photographer in here and have him take a picture of me. I’ve got the same basic equipment you do. Same as everybody else. This shame of our bodies has got nothing to do with God. Religion often tries to tell people that. God doesn’t. After all, that’s the way she made you.”

Hosanna reached out and touched Wanda's shoulder. "Besides, you're not doing those things any more. Amazing how much easier it is to keep your clothes on when you're not drinking."

Wanda laughed, "I noticed that. But I still work there, and if I want to get tips I've got to let things hang out."

"I think we can consider your resignation effective immediately. Besides, this is about them," Hosanna pointed towards the hall, "Not you or me."

* * *

Martha remembered once back on ward 17k when one of the aides had left a magazine behind. In that place, so starved for stimulation, she read anything she could get her hands on. This one had been quite an education, and the inspiration for a month's worth of fantasies. "Biker Babes", it had been called. It was filled with photos of scantily clad women posing on motorcycles or in seedy looking bars. Not quite porno, but some distance farther from literary. It had provided her with an environment utterly different, but, at the same time, much the same. Martha had dreamed of being a Wanda especially as a way to pay Max back for having stolen so much, including her sexuality. Just on that basis alone there was no way Martha could write the story so that Hosanna left Wanda behind.

* * *

Hosanna smiled, "If it would help, we could stop by the bar on the way out, maybe visit a plague of some sort on them."

Wanda's eyes widened a bit. "No, we probably should just go, though there is one guy..."

Their emergence spurred the pack of reporters into a feeding frenzy so wild that several pushed their luck with the cordon of rattlesnakes and were bitten. For the most part these victims were ignored, though a couple did on-air segments describing the effects the venom was having on them. These interviews were, for the most part, discarded since the news directors' instincts were to stay focused on Hosanna. The truth was that there was little to report. Once Phillip's vehicle got clear of the traffic they proceeded straight to the waterfront and rowed the tender to the schooner.

The press followed in a baying herd of vans. Police scanners were ignored, including a series of reports involving a water-buffalo loose in a seedy bar on the outskirts of town.

Chapter 6

“You’re writing again?” Jeanne asked. “Didn’t you once say, ‘sometimes I think the literary world is crazier than the loony bin?’”.

“I did. And it is.” Martha chuckled, “like the editor who told me about the voices he heard, the ones who helped him make corrections.” She shrugged. “I don’t miss the insanity, I can assure you of that. It’s just that I have a story that has to come out. Maybe I won’t send it anywhere. Maybe we’ll keep it a secret.”

Jeanne nodded, “You remember why we had to move; how that woman kept breaking into the garage?”

“It was time to move on. To put that house and everything that happened in it behind me.” Martha took a deep breath before continuing, “But you remember Hosanna’s story isn’t finished.”

A smile spread across Jeanne’s face, “I remember how the publisher threatened to lock you back in the attic, they wanted it so bad.”

*

*

*

After climbing up onto the deck Wanda said, “I’ve never been on a boat before. Not even a row boat. Not a lot of water where I came from, and my mother was afraid of things. Just about everything. So, even when we went to the lake, we couldn’t even get in a rowboat.” She looked around for a moment then asked, “Where are we going?”

Hosanna gestured towards the small fleet of boats that hung back between them and shore. "Away from them. The bees have to go in at sunset, and I don't feel like conjuring up something else."

"How do you make it go?"

"I put up the sails, then the wind blows and we sail. God does most of the work."

Wanda looked down at the deck. "Is it going to be a problem that I haven't been to church since", she paused for a second, "since a long time?"

"It's not about church. You did spend a while worshiping things that weren't exactly what God had in mind, but that's over, and now you are a part of Her new plan."

"Her new plan? Me? Her?"

"Why not? Tell you the truth I was surprised that She decided to use me again after I screwed up so royally last time." Hosanna reached out and put her hand on Wanda's shoulder. "We'll make a good team. Of course we've got to have faith that there is a plan this time. Before, I was just kind of winging it. And, if you are wondering about Estelle, and where she came from, well, only thing I can think of is that the holy ghost or whatever went on something of a bender."

They passed through the inlet just as darkness was falling. The flotilla carrying the press fell back as a set of short steep waves developed behind *Exodus*. A dark cloud enveloped the helicopters, and they too turned back.

Two evenings later as the sun was setting, Estelle called out, "It's a star."

“It’s too low. I don’t think so.” Hosanna reached for the binoculars. “No, it’s another boat.”

As they drew nearer it became clear that the other boat was not moving. A slight shift in the wind brought them alongside what turned out to be an open boat filled with a crowd of frantic people. More people than she could imagine the boat would float.

“Who are they, mommy,” Faith asked?

Hosanna looked around at the empty ocean where land was hundreds of miles beyond any horizon, “Not an accident. We’ll ask the bird the next time we see him.”

The people in the boat had been there long enough to be sunburned, dehydrated and weak. Wanda helped them up a short ladder onto the schooner’s deck. When she thought the boat was empty she took one last look around and saw something under the rear seat. Reaching under, she felt an arm. It was small, a child. His skin was hot, burning with fever, she thought. She called for help and Hosanna came to help her pull the boy out and lift him up onto the schooner

After setting him down on the cabin top, Hosanna put her hand on his forehead. “He is the one.” She was starting to say something else when she heard a couple of the children yelling in protest.

She stood and moved aft on the narrow deck. As she neared the cockpit she saw a man gripping the wheel. Hope and Jacques were standing in front of him and were being held by another man. These men were not emaciated like the others. They were, she realized, the smugglers. They wanted her boat. “Wonder what Jesus would have done if someone had tried to mug him,” she mused as she took another step.

The first man was having trouble, the wheel was not turning even though he was putting some weight into it. After a moment he noticed her and said something to the other, who tightened his grip on the two kids.

“Big mistake,” Hosanna said. “Huge.” A long thick tentacle emerged from the water off the port side. Reaching for the man holding the children it coiled its tip around his neck, and plucked him off the deck. Jacques and Hope ran to Hosanna. The man at the helm took a step back raising his hands and smiling as though he had meant no harm. The giant squid dropped its hostage into the little boat from a height. There was a scream and a crash. The tentacle snaked back, reaching for the ringleader. He fell to his knees crying out “Madre d’ Deo”.

As the suckers gripped him Hosanna said, “Pray if you want. But God as I know her isn’t likely to be all that impressed.” With a flick of her head she indicated that the trash should be put out and he too was cast into the boat.

The scene had made the others alert. They pointed and yelled at the two men who were now trying to stand in the little boat. They kept falling because another tentacle had emerged and was rocking the boat as it ripped pieces of wood from the hull.

The wind freshened and Exodus moved away. Darkness moved in behind them.

No one knew the boy’s name. His mother had been sick and died three days into the trip. The two men had stolen the money she had hidden in her clothes before dumping her body overboard. The boy had crawled under the seat where he was all but forgotten.

Later that night Wanda came to Hosanna who was on deck, in part looking for new stars, "That thing that came out of the water, how did you do that?"

"Divine retribution, it's an interesting concept. Sometimes I get an idea and can make it happen, but more often the perfect thing just seems to... I don't know, poof and there it is. Sometimes I think it's my doing, sometimes God or an angel something like that." She turned to Wanda, "Pretty neat huh? Sometimes it makes up for all the other shit that happens." She paused for a moment then continued, "Got to say that I sometimes get a real kick out of it. You remember how when we were leaving your house you told me about a guy at the bar?"

"Yeah. Frankie." Wanda almost spat out the name, "What about him?"

Hosanna smiled, "Too bad we didn't have time to stop by, though I don't think it would have been appropriate for the children to see."

"What?"

"A water buffalo walks into this bar."

"This sounds like a joke."

"Everybody laughed but Frankie. Turns out it was a gay water buffalo and Frankie was his type – if you know what I mean. It's a big animal you know, pinned him against the pool table. They're calling him buffalo bitch now and he doesn't like it much. He'd punch someone, but the body cast slows him down some. They took photos and stuck them up in the men's room. Covered up the ones already there, you've lost your place of prominence I'm afraid."

It took Wanda a long moment to close her mouth before she could open it again and say, "Perfect. Kind of sorry I missed it." She paused, "No I'm not. I saw enough strange shit that it's ok. Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"You know, you're enough to make me start believing in God again."

Chapter 7

Reverend Wallis sought sanctuary in the home of Al and Judi Horst. They were the kind of solid believers every minister counts on to be the foundation of his parish. They believed. They did not bother themselves with issues. They mercifully did not ask him what had happened, a question he was a long way from being able to answer.

As they knelt on the living room floor which, fortunately, was thickly carpeted, he wondered if the devil could be so clever that his faith was shrugged aside so easily. And what if that incredibly remote possibility – that near impossibility – that Hosanna was what she claimed, was somehow true? Some had denied Jesus in His time. If it were God's will, then God's will was far more mysterious than he could have imagined.

The previous time Hosanna had come Roy had taken some great comfort and even preached a gleeful sermon on how people had seen through this imposter – and how as a Christian he could not condone a lynch mob – but that the God of the Old Testament might not be so constrained.

He still wanted to believe that, but when Hosanna had passed he had felt something and there had been so sense of evil. And why would Satan have spared him? The serpent was clearly stopped by her. The Reverend liked to think of himself as such a significant foe that the Devil would have used the chance to be rid of him.

* * *

“What are we going to do with them?” Wanda said, her gesture indicating the refugees who sat on the cabin top, “We don't have enough food.”

“There's plenty of food, but they are a distraction and their destination is different from ours.”

“Should we radio someone?”

“No, the Coast Guard would take them back home. They want to go to the U.S. ; I guess I should arrange it.”

“How? Will we take them ashore?”

“Not necessary, and they’d do better if I give them a bit of a start.”

“What do you mean.”

“Well arriving with torn clothes, no money or papers, and hungry will get them caught and thrown into jail. Then sent home.”

Hosanna turned and looked the group over. They were tired and afraid, but one of the women held her self up straight. Hosanna went to her and in Spanish, said, “In America you will need skills and a way to make a living.” She thought for a moment, “You shall sing. Beautiful songs.” Passing her hand over the woman clothes, which were only two steps from rags, she transformed them into performance outfits, bright colors and textured cloth. In another moment the others were similarly adorned.

Two-thousand-four-hundred-thirty-seven miles to the north-west, Gus Fisher was listening to a six year warble a rendition of Anne that had to be among the ten worst he’d ever heard. But because he’d charged her mother for the audition, he had to listen to it all. He resigned himself to not getting the favors the mother had hinted at if he could help and said softly, “God, why can’t I get some real talent?”

An instant later he stood blinking in the brilliant sunshine, trying to keep his footing as the schooner rolled with a wave. A woman beckoned him, “Gus, come here, I want you to meet your new group, *Many Miracles*. They’ve got a tour scheduled, starts in

Atlanta tonight, goes on to Louisville and Chicago.” She handed him a thick envelope.

“All the details are here. Treat them right and you’ll never have to audition a six year old again.”

“What do they do?”

“They sing, very well. In Chicago someone from Sony is going to hear them, and that will be that.”

“Who are you?”

“*Many Miracles*, remember that name.” She pointed off to the west from where the sound of a plane could be heard. Within ten minutes the seas had calmed and a large seaplane landed and taxied up along side.

“Have faith,” Hosanna said as they climbed aboard the plane.

* * *

“I didn’t want to talk about this while they all were here,” Wanda’s voice was tight. “Did you have any trouble back there when we sailed away from those guys. I mean they were going to die? They knew it, you could see it on their faces.”

Hosanna sighed, “I don’t think Jesus would have handled it the same way. He probably would have forgiven them or converted them or something, though I am not at all sure what he was converting people to. In any case, that’s not my role. Wasn’t the first time, isn’t now, and this time it’s going to be the kids who are the main characters. Besides, those men had killed several people on a previous trip when it became clear that there wasn’t enough food and water. And, the squid was having so much fun, I don’t think it would have given them up.” She looked off across the moonlit waves, “That’s the least of our problems.”

“Do I want to know?”

“No point in secrets. First, as you may have noticed, there aren't any new and unusual stars. So that means we've got all the kids that She wanted us to get. Next stop is New York.”

“New York? Wow.”

“Yeah, when I was alone it was pretty easy. Had a car that I slept in a number of times, a Visa card that somehow always went through when I wanted a room other nights. Up until the end I could go un-noticed. But this time it is going to be different. One of these days land is going to appear up there in front of us. And I'll bet that before we get into the harbor we're going to have the Coast Guard all over us. I'll produce all the papers they ask for, and then we have to land. That's when the problems will start. She,” Hosanna pointed up, “said that they were going to do a Television show.”

“And you're upset that the kids are going to be the center of it.”

Hosanna turned quickly, her expression not pleasant. Wanda went a little pale. “I'm sorry, I don't know where that came from.”

After slowly letting her breath out Hosanna shook her head. “No, you're right. I've got to admit there is some of that. And I've got to come to grips with it.” She looked ahead, “Before I get to New York. Where I went wrong the first time was when I let it become about Me and how they weren't listening to Me. As much as I bitched and moaned, it wasn't so bad being ‘The Daughter of God’.”

Wanda let out a deep breath, “Whew. I guess, for a moment there...”

Chapter 8

The church, a large space which had been partitioned off from what previously was a dollar store, and sometime before that an A&P, was as full as Roy had ever seen it. The glass tanks holding the rattlers were arranged on either side of the pulpit. Today he would not be dipping his hands into the tanks. He would not be screaming for the Lord to help them pass the test and forgive sinful thoughts and deeds as they handled the serpents.

He let the silence build, then raising his arms he began to speak. “What do we know? We know that there is a God.”

There were a scattering of amens primarily from the blacks in the congregation. He wished he knew how to get everyone to do that without looking like a damned cheerleader.

“We know that God is here among us. We know that God works His wonders in ways we do not understand.”

That was about the only thing he was certain of. In the four days since Hosanna had come – and gone, things had gotten really crazy. The media cyclone had evaporated less than two hours after the boat left, leaving him with several prepared texts and news releases and no-one to give them to. He still owed Dave at Staples for the copies he had made.

“We know.” He stopped. “No that’s wrong. We really don’t know. That’s why so many of us are here today. Not knowing makes us afraid. Not knowing gives us doubts.” He raised his voice to the point just this side of bellowing, the most intense

level he could roar without hurting his throat. “It makes us think – and that is dangerous. When we use our minds we give the devil a chance to get his word in.”

He thumped his chest. “Instead we must retreat to our hearts and let the love of Jesus guide us. We must turn our lives over to our faith. We must . . .”

The words weren't there. He didn't know what to say next. The audience looked at him expectantly. They were used to his style of speaking so the pause did not surprise them.

But this time it was different, this was not a carefully calculated silence. Roy had run out of words. Looking out at his flock, he felt small. Despite the raised platform, and the lifts built into his boots it seemed as though he was looking up at them.

Just as they were starting to get restless, he started speaking again. This time his voice was lower. He spoke without thinking, only later understanding what he said. “I am going to leave you. I am embarking on a journey. The Lord will provide the directions. The Lord will tell me when I am there.” He started to turn away from the lectern, but paused. “It has been a privilege to minister to you. I can only ask your forgiveness.”

He looked into the audience, “It is up to you to decide, but I nominate Sister Cheryl to carry on my ministry.” He walked up the side aisle between the rows of folding chairs. Removing his purple robe he folded it then passed it to the astounded woman.

It was forty-seven steps to the door in the back where his office was. The silence was such that he heard his heel hit the linoleum tiles on each of those steps. The collection plates had been set on his desk. He filled his pockets with the cash, then

pausing only to take the framed diploma that he had obtained over the internet, he opened the back door that led to the loading dock where he had parked his truck.

It was a Ford F250 modified slightly to accommodate the snake boxes in the back. He did not bother to remove the magnetic signs on the doors that proclaimed "The Rattlesnake Ministry – Believe or Die." The keys were parked on the visor. He circled the parking lot of the forlorn strip mall then turned right onto 280.

From inside a pocket his cell phone rang. He started to answer it, but realized the Lord would not call him on this line. He tossed it out the window and watched in the mirror as it hit the pavement shattering and tumbling.

* * *

"I'm going to have trouble with this one," Martha said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some of the characters are children. I want them to be real. And, as you know, my own experience with children is rather limited."

"You had some scenes in the first book when Hosanna was growing up."

"But she was older then. These children are young. It's going to be hard to get into their heads."

"Tell me about them."

"Well, the first two are Hosanna's. The twins, Faith and Hope. I have to make them different. Faith will be the one who always asks why. I think the words, "how come," are going to be her trade mark.

“Hope, on the other hand, is more trusting, but she has a very strong sense of wanting to have things her way. She is a bit more facile with her powers and will use them, even when she is not supposed to. She gets into trouble now and then.

“Jacques, the boy from Haiti, is very impatient. He is very sensitive to the things that are wrong with the world. He feels it when people are hungry. In some ways he is like Hosanna was in the first book, wanting to solve all the world's problems at once, whether people like it or not.

“Estelle, Wanda's daughter is very quiet. She has a lot of strength and she has even more power or abilities than Hope or the others. She is sometimes angry at her mother's weaknesses.”

Martha paused for a few seconds looking around the room. “I don't know, about the boy who was the refugee. He is very scared, but I think that he is very angry. He wants to find a way to get his mother back. He thinks she is in Heaven, and is sure that Hosanna can help him get her back. He is willing to kill himself if it would mean being with her.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, it's a lot, maybe too much. That last part could be a book all by itself. But the problem is that I've got to make it convincing.”

* * *

The kids had their beds in the cabin up near the bow of the boat. It was a triangular space where the two sides of the hull came to a point. It also was the part of the boat that moved the most when they went over waves, and they loved being bounced around.

Though there were only a couple of small port holes in the cabin, it was always gently illuminated by the aura of their spirits. It was this light that helped Miguel feel that he was safe, though it was a long slow process.

“Show me that again. How do you do it,” Jacques asked?

Estelle smiled and held her hands out in front of her with the palms facing each other, about six inches apart. At first there was nothing then there was a blue light that, as it grew, showed there was a flower inside it as though in a glass globe. The flower changed from a daisy to a rose and after a minute faded from red to pink and then white before becoming transparent. For a second it was replaced by a butterfly, but she lost control and the whole image grew dark.

Hope said, “Look at this.” She held her hands tightly clenched then quickly raised them opening her fingers as a hundred small stars flew up and stuck to the low ceiling. “When I was little I was afraid of the dark until I learned how to do that.”

“Does Mommy know,” Faith asked?

“She doesn’t like it when we do magic things. You know that. Do you remember when you made the rain go away?”

Miguel, the boy from the boat, began to cry. “My mother...” He couldn’t finish.

Hope reached out and touched his shoulder. A woman’s voice, speaking Spanish softly, filled the cabin.

Miguel sat up looking around wildly. “Mama, where are you?”

The voice continued, but did not answer the question. “Where is she? Let me see her.”

Faith looked at Hope and said, “You really should not do *that*!”

Hope shook her head, the voice continued for a moment. The words seemed to comfort Miguel some and he calmed down some.

“Take me to her.”

“Someday we will learn how. But we can't do that. Not now. Just remember what she told you how she's happy that you are safe with us.”

*

*

*

Wanda pointed to the kids who were sitting on the deck near the bow. Every so often a wave would splash on the side of the hull and shower them with spray. “Are they Ok up there? It's getting a little rough.”

Hosanna looked at them. “That part is fine. I think the danger is in what they are doing together.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was little I used to do things. Little things, sort of like magic I guess. But I had to figure them out for myself, and I was being supervised, at least some of the time.”

“What kind of things?”

“I don't know, making voices, little animals, some times I played tricks. One time in a store I made a mouse pop out when the cash register opened. Then there was the period – it happens in every kid's life when you think poopie is very funny.”

“I know about that,” said Wanda.

Hosanna watched the kids for a moment before continuing, “When I retired, or whatever it was, I gave up some of my abilities or whatever you want to call them.”

“You seemed to have them back the other day.”

“No it’s different. Back then I would have known what they were intending to do. Anyway, I’ve lost it, I’m trying, but I can’t hear what they’re doing.”

“But they are all the way up there.”

Hosanna shook her head. “That didn’t matter back then. I could just know things, but now it’s as though I’m being blocked. Maybe they are doing it. Maybe I just can’t do it so well anymore. I don’t know.”

“It bothers you,” Wanda said it as a statement not a question.

Hosanna nodded. “But not as much as what those kids could be coming up with.”

Chapter 9

One of his favorite sermons had been called, 'Enjoying Our Blessings.' In it Roy had used as an example the feeling he got riding in his truck, tooling down the highway with a full tank of gas, nowhere in particular to go and no one chasing after him.

Now driving North, he tried to get a hold of that feeling, but it wasn't as strong and sure as he remembered it to be. It was as though something was pulling him. And pushing too, he guessed. Whatever it was, he was driving a few miles faster than he liked to, taking the truck just to the point where when it bounced on the joints in the road so that he had to twitch the wheel to keep it straight. He also had pulled out so fast that he hadn't taken the cd's that made the miles pass so easily.

Roy tried to figure it out. Was he running away – or was he running to something? In the past he'd done both. This time felt different, and there weren't any bullet holes in the back of his truck – that meant he wasn't running from. Roy smiled remembering the time that had actually happened. He had been working in New Mexico. Preaching was still a part time thing. In his day job at a Denny's he'd met Ruth Ann. She needed comforting, and he ministered to her. One thing led to another and he was named in a divorce proceeding. He had tried to stick it out. A masterful confession was worked into a sermon on how we are all prone to sin, especially sins of the flesh when tempted by the likes of Ruth Ann.

It hadn't worked. Eddie, her husband, Tom and Joe, her brothers, and her parents, Dawn and Hank – had all been in attendance. As was Ruth Ann. She took exception to being labeled a nubile temptation.

That time Roy didn't have even the moment necessary to scoop up the collection. The ensuing scene had been inspiration for the sermon he gave a couple of months later and a thousand miles away, about the evils of having guns in church. It also cost him a thousand dollars when he traded in the truck. Though for a while he had taken a certain pride in the visible proof of God's protection. At least three of the shots should have done him harm, but each was deflected by a providential piece of metal. The jack stopped one that would have left him a cripple for life.

He kept the jack when he sold the truck.

So if he wasn't running away, and he didn't know where he was going, what was he doing? The on-ramps seemed to be drawing him north and east.

* * *

* * *

"Where are we going? When are we going to get there? What happens then?"

Hope asked, the questions spilling out faster than they could be answered, even if Hosanna had the answers.

She saw the rest of the children were staring intently at her, waiting for the response. She wasn't sure how she felt about Hope becoming a leader among them. "First. The bird said something about New York. I would guess that's probably where we will end up."

"When?"

Hosanna paused and, putting a whine in her voice, said, "Are we there yet mommy?" The kids laughed. She turned, hoping to avoid answering the what happens then part of the query.

Hope did not fall for it. “When we get there,” she prompted.

“The bird said something about television.”

“What’s television?”

“You don’t know about TV?” Estelle’s voice was high and loud. “Even Jacques and Miguel know about it.”

Living on the boat had made a TV free life easy. That era was over Hosanna thought.

Estelle launched into a description of TV that allowed Hosanna to escape for the moment.

“It’s interesting how you call it “the bird,” rather than God.”

Hosanna turned to Wanda, “You do sneak up with interesting questions.”

“Which you often avoid answering.”

Hosanna nodded conceding the point. “I guess the bird is a bit easier to handle than Lord Almighty, Ruler of Heaven and Earth, but the truth is that I’m not always sure that it isn’t closer to the former than the latter. In my previous visit, when I was at Princeton, I didn’t get the sense that they really had a handle on it either. There were those who could recite what this group or that group believed. But one of them told me that when someone starts quoting the Bible – or some other religious text that is supposedly divinely inspired, what they were doing was really insuring themselves a job for life. This woman said that if you looked close enough, and were not afraid to quote out of context, you could probably justify just about anything using the Bible.” She paused and waved her arm indicating the ocean and the sky. “I can’t explain any of this.

I can't even tell you how H₂ and O make water. But I have had some experience with a bird. For now that's what I'm going with."

Wanda took a moment before replying. "I will say that when you do give an answer it tends to be complete. And it makes some sense to me which I am not sure shouldn't worry me some."

* * *

That night there was a glow on the horizon. "Is it another star?"

Hosanna shook her head. "I don't think so. My guess is we will be there in the morning."

Chapter 9

There was a mist on the gently rolling sea. Dawn brought a feeling of fuzziness rather than clarity. A light wind pushed them slowly towards a thin dark line that was just visible on the horizon. Hosanna had not slept much, she was worried about the reception her return would cause. Wanda had told her that the phrase “to Hosanna,” had come to mean fuck things up so royally that the only way to fix them was to tear it down and start over.

* * *

At least two days a week Margaret O'Brien stopped at St. Patrick's on her way to work. Many days she prayed for the strength not to kill the younger generation of hotshots who were all gunning for her position as director of the news segment for the Good Morning Show. Other days she prayed that she would not waver from what she thought was right and allow the news segment to succumb to one fad or another.

She lit a taper and moved it towards a candle. This one was for her mother who had taught her to trust her heart. As the flame touched the wick, that candle and several immediately around it began to burn. The flames were not yellow like the other candles, but instead flicked through the spectrum, going from red to blue and back. Margaret took a step back and bumped into someone. She jumped, doubly startled as she had been sure she was alone in this part of the cathedral. She dropped the taper.

“I'm sorry, but.” She pointed to the candles then turned to face the woman who had moved up beside her.

“Yes, I know. That is the least of it.”

“What do you mean?” Margaret asked, suddenly New York wary.

“It’s a sign. I was told to wait for the sign and escort the person it happened to.”

Margaret looked more closely at the woman. They were in a dimly lit section of the nave, but there was something about her. “Wait, you, who are you?”

The woman shook her head, “That’s not really important. You are the one who is being called. Come with me.” She took a couple of steps towards the front of the church.

Margaret did not follow.

The woman stopped. “There is not much time Margaret. Your faith will be rewarded.”

Those were the exact words Margaret had been remembering her mother saying. She took a step towards the woman. Nodding, the woman began to walk again, “Good.” She led Margaret up towards the altar, then turned pushed aside a curtain which concealed a small wooden door. Down a flight of stone stairs there was a second door that led onto the street. A taxi sat waiting. Margaret got in wondering if she was being taken hostage, but was too confused to carefully consider it.

Even though it was the beginning of rush hour, there was no traffic. Every light turned green as they approached. Margaret noticed the woman was eagerly staring out the window. “Who are you?”

“An impossibility. Like the candles.”

Margaret pointed to the empty street. “Lots of impossibilities this morning.”

“They are just starting. To properly answer the question, I am or was Catherine of Sienna. The statue behind the candles, was supposed to be of me. I wasn’t so pretty.”

Margaret slowly reached for the door handle thinking she would jump out when they stopped at a light.

"I knew the answer would disturb you. I am as baffled as you."

"Where are we going?"

"To meet them."

"Who?"

"You will know when you see them."

The mist had developed into a thick fog. Hosanna could not see more than a few feet beyond the bowsprit. Faith and Jacques had joined her on deck. "We are almost there," the boy announced.

"I'm glad somebody has an itinerary."

They passed close to a buoy and then a structure and other masts emerged from the fog. Another schooner was tied up at a dock. Hosanna watched as they slid along side and stopped. A man appeared at the rail of the other boat and tossed her a line.

As Jacques led them up the gangplank towards the higher pier Hosanna marveled at the fact that there was no mob. There were no helicopters, no news trucks, no blinding lights. What had she been doing wrong?

After passing through a metal gate they stepped off onto a large wooden area festooned with banners that proclaimed "Summer at the Seaport."

It was deserted except for a couple of fishermen at the far end, and two figures who were walking quickly towards them.

Margaret had known the second they got out of the cab and she had seen the masts. For a week the media had been in a speculative frenzy. She had succumbed and produced segments that touched on the possibilities including one with a schooner captain who told her that Exodus could turn up anywhere.

She had to hold herself to keep from running towards the figures she saw on the dock. Why me? She wondered. But in a second knew that she was indeed the perfect person. She would take them to the studio. There was a message and she would help them deliver it. She felt a cool wet streak on either side of her face and knew it was from tears.

The expanse on the pier was a treat after the confines of the boat. The kids scampered in a loose circle round Wanda and Hosanna. Jacques produced a few chickens, Estelle wrapped the fog around a beam of early morning sun and made a slithering rainbow.

Hosanna looked up, "I really hope you know what you are doing."

There was something about the woman on the left. Hosanna took her hand and held it for a moment. A sense of peace flowed up her arm. The other woman spoke, "I am Margaret and it seems as though I have been sent to meet you."

Hosanna looked at her, "I am sure of it."

Margaret kept fighting the urge to fall to her knees as she was introduced to the children. A surge passed up her arm with each handshake until she felt so light that she was afraid she might float away. The last one, Miguel kept a hold of her hand. As they walked to the street, they passed a few people who seemed uninterested. The taxi waited, though clearly they would need another. One of the girls, Faith, Margaret thought it might be, seemed to read her mind. "We'll all fit somehow."

The inside of the cab grew as each person climbed in, until they were all seated. Each of the kids had a window too.

At the fifteenth, "What's that?" Hosanna let the others cope with the culture shock and the joyful enthusiasm and tried to keep hold of the bit of peace she had gotten from the woman who was now sitting between Wanda and her. Catherine had initially balked getting in the cab. "My part is over," she said.

"I think I'm going to need all the help I can get," Hosanna said, insisting.

Margaret took her cell phone out, opened it, but stopped before calling. "What would I tell them?"

Chapter 10

The security team in the lobby was accustomed to unusual arrivals, but they stumbled trying to get the kids to sign in and wear visitor badges when Estelle turned her badge into a butterfly that clung to her shirt. Hosanna was reminded of the difficulties when she had tried a similar trick with money.

Margaret was trying to get them to a conference room attached to her office, but Jacques had stopped and pointed down a different corridor. "There."

That was where the studio was. She shook her head. "Not yet."

They ignored her.

Burt Foster was showing his trademark grin at the humorous anecdote Gloria was relating, when the little speaker in his ear told him there were unexpected visitors to the set. He did not like unscripted events. He practiced every emotion and watched it on a monitor. He had not practiced surprise in a while, but he went for it. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've just been told that there are some special visitors joining us this morning." He wanted the camera to switch off of him so he could scowl and give his "how dare you" look to the stage manager.

The door behind the camera opened and a child, then others came through.

Hosanna watched from the back of the studio as the kids walked across the set to the raised desks where the morning hosts sat. The man was red faced and was waving his hands. Miguel gave Faith a little boost as she climbed up to set on the desk next to the woman.

“Hi.”

It took the woman a second. She was determined not to make an ass out of herself the way her slow-brained partner was, “Hi to you too. My name is Gloria, who are you?”

“I’m Faith.” She moved her hand indicating the others, “We’re the kids, at least that’s what we’ve decided to call ourselves.”

The man said, “The kids, now that’s original.”

Faith looked at Gloria and rolled her eyes.

Gloria cracked a smile, “I think we may have a station break.”

Hope came behind the desk and stood beside her.

“I don’t think so. Not yet.” She pointed to Estelle. “I think we need more butterflies.”

An alert cameraman turned and focused on the girl as a stream of brilliant butterflies appeared from inside her cupped hands.

“You’re, you are the kids...” Gloria got it, but had lost most of her ability to articulate.

“That’s what I said.” Faith shook her head. “Sometimes you have to explain things again and again to grownups.”

Jacques started to climb up onto Burt’s desk. Burt hadn’t gotten it. He had clawed his way to this desk and he wasn’t going to give it up easily. “Hey kid what do you think you are doing? Get down.”

Jacques did not stop. Burt reached out to grab. Above him appeared an angel straight out of a renaissance painting with white robes, feathers and a golden sword radiating flames.

As Burt's hand reached Jacques' arm, the sword swung and there was a brilliant light. As it dimmed, Jacques was alone at the desk.

Hope said to Gloria, "He is a silly man."

Estelle had stopped making butterflies and sat in the chair that was used for interviews. "We have things to tell you. Things that are more interesting than what happened yesterday somewhere else."

Gloria found her voice, "Please tell us."

Estelle nodded. "Ok I will. Today the sun will shine."

Gloria said, "I would hope so."

Hope nudged Gloria, "She's not done yet."

"Oh sorry," murmured Gloria taking a quick look around for angels with flaming swords.

"And people who go out to stand in the sunlight will find that they can love a little more than they can right now." She put a serious expression on her face. "It's up to you, if you want to be a sourpuss stay inside. If you want to be happy - go outside and play." She nodded and slipped off of the chair which was high enough that her feet hadn't quite touched the floor.

She had taken two steps towards the door when Gloria asked, "Is that all?"

Faith turned to her, "Is that all?" She shook her head, "You don't get it. We just told you, and everybody, how to be happy. And you said, "Is that all?""

She hopped off the desk and moved towards the others. "We'll be back tomorrow. Until then why don't you tell some good news?"

* * *

When he got to Ohio Roy decided it was time to take the signs off the side of the truck. In the past it had proved beneficial to advertise his religion, but it seemed as though this trip was going to be different. When he was stowing the signs he discovered that one of the snake boxes was occupied by a specimen captured too late to be of use in the attempt to foil Hosanna. Though small, the snake was 100% rattler. Roy thought about setting it free in the rest area, but decided that it might come in useful. If nothing else it would be a good theft deterrent when he got to the city.

Somewhere along the way he'd gotten the notion that he was the one who was going to be the student. It was an idea he'd tried to ditch most of the way across Tennessee. He had never been what would be called an apt pupil. His teachers had called him many things with 'easily distracted' usually the most positive comment on his report cards.

Chapter 11

In Davenport Iowa, Rhonda Samuels was watching television when the children appeared. She always watched the morning news, even though it usually was all bad, because somehow that made her feel better about her life. Nothing like a tornado to give you the strength to go back and work for them bastards for another day.

Then the children had come, she had watched in awe as Burt was carried away in a flash of light, not a bad thing she thought, he was something of a jerk and his teeth were far too white and straight.

She crushed a Tarrytown out and scowled at the ashtray that needed emptying. It had taken a while before the network had gotten its act back together. They had rolled out a professional, given him a script that spoke of *amazing events, delivering a simple message*, and wondering, *What could be next?*

Rhonda still had some time before it was time to leave for her shift. Glancing out the window she saw the sun was indeed shining. She thought, what the hell, it couldn't hurt. Grasping her coffee cup, cigarettes and lighter in one hand, she turned the knob of her kitchen door. The screw that held the knob to the door was loose and it took a bit of doing, so as not to spill the coffee, but after a couple of softly muttered, "sons of bitches" the door opened and she stepped out onto the back porch that overlooked the small plot her landlady called the garden.

It wasn't no garden. It was lucky if a dandylion would grow in the dirt. The sun was coming over the row of houses behind her and it did feel good. Rhonda transferred the cigarettes to her other hand and took a sip of coffee. It tasted good. She looked down

at the cup suspiciously. Inside she didn't remember it tasting much of anything, let alone like the cup coffee that she had always dreamed of sipping as she sat at a café in Paris. She'd never made it to Paris, but right now that didn't matter so much as it had.

She put the coffee down on the porch railing and tilted her face back so the sun could fall more fully on her. Like the child had said, "If you want to be happy, go outside." She, Rhonda Samuels, who seven times had been sent to smile training by her supervisor, a record at that particular Wal-Mart, was standing outside - on the edge of being happy for the first time since that bitch had stolen her date at the prom more years ago than she wanted to think about.

She wasn't sure she wanted it. Rhonda had built her life around being angry. A sharp bitter wit she skillfully used to burst other people's bubbles was the device that got her through most days. She liked to say that *anyone who is happy isn't paying close enough attention to their life*. Vaguely she thought about going back inside, but the sun seemed stronger, reaching deeper inside to that cold dark vacuum that had been sucking all of her life. It occurred to her that maybe it didn't have to be this way, and as she thought that, her scything hatred of her drunken mother began to wane. Rhonda had never been able to drink because the memory of her mother's condition always made her a sobbing heap by the second glass.

She spread her arms embracing the warmth.

Chapter 12

Jane, Margaret O'Brian's secretary had, in a busy forty five minutes, earned the large raise she would be given when the dust settled. First, she called a real estate agent to secure a furnished five bedroom apartment for an indefinite period. She then had procured a car and driver, arranged that a conference room be remodeled to serve as an "office/staging area" for the kids, had set the legal department working on agreements for the children and their parents as well as looking into Burt's contract to see what sort of payout would be required by his job related event. Nobody was sure what to call it. There was no body, so perhaps it was simply a disappearance with some saying that he would turn up in a bar. Still the violence of his exit was such that most believed that he had been vaporized. The tape was run repeatedly and was examined and debated on air by a panel comprised of physicists, ministers (mostly those who preached fire and brimstone), a coroner, and a homicide prosecutor. That show had the highest ratings of any of the networks offerings in what was to become a benchmark day.

Taking the kids to the zoo had seemed like a good idea at the time though Hosanna did not have fond memories of the last time she visited one.

It was crowded as though a number of people who might otherwise have been at work had taken the advice offered on the morning news and were spending the day outside. She wondered if she could suggest to the kids that next time they tell everyone to take the day off. It would be like a general strike and . . . The giraffe turned and stuck his impossibly long tongue out at her. "Ok, I get it."

Hope became enthralled with a rather moth eaten bison that, to all appearances, had not moved for the last two months. "He's wonderful, he knows many things, but has learned that he doesn't have to show off how smart he is."

Hosanna raised her eyebrow. "I don't know. The only reason I know he's alive is that he's standing."

Miguel spoke, his words soft and slow. "Hope's right. He is very wise. He says that we should listen, like he has learned to. And that the answers will come."

"But what are the questions," Wanda asked half joking?

The kids all turned towards her. "You don't know," asked Faith.

The smile slipped off of Wanda's face. "No. I guess I don't."

"How could you be so silly."

She shook her head. "Silly? What did I do?"

"Not you. People. All of them. That's the basic question and the answers are about not being so silly."

"Or stupid." Jacques added.

"Same thing," Faith said, "silly is a slightly nicer word."

"So what's the next answer," Hosanna asked?

The children all looked at her, then glanced at each other. Finally Estelle answered, "It has to do with minding your own business."

Chapter 13

Cheryl turned to her husband and said, "James, if you don't try to contact her I will." She let the threat sink in for a few seconds then went on. "It has gotten out of hand. I'm sure she can do something."

"What? Do you really think Hosanna is going to be interested in our little problem." James hoped that would end the discussion. He should have known better.

"S. Problems. Lots of them. You said in one of your sermons that some of the things Hosanna did were not well thought out. The trolls are one of them; especially since she gave them the reproductive properties of gerbils with a short gestation period, multiple births and the fact that they are sexually mature at six months. I tried to count the other day and I came up with 478 little ones. I know I missed a few. Do you remember Gulliver's Travels, what the little people did to him?"

The reverend put down the church bulletin he had been proofing. "But it is our own private miracle. I'm writing a paper on it, maybe I'll never be able to publish it, but it is incredibly important. It breaks new ground in theology."

"It breaks new ground in the garden too. When they don't have anything to do they dig up plants and move them. It has gotten so that I don't know where anything is anymore. Maybe she can make them less fertile."

He sighed and put down the paper. "How do you suggest I contact her? Every kook on the planet is writing, phoning, faxing, emailing her. How could I get through?"

Cheryl had thought that one out. "Call the network. Tell them that you know Hosanna from her previous time here."

"And what if they want to interview me?"

“Maybe you can take some of the trolls with you. You can explain how you can hear the statues talk.”

“And when the Bishop has me locked up in the hospital for befuddled priests?

She grinned, “I’ll send you some more of the trolls to keep you company.”

* * *

Martha smiled as she pushed her chair back from the computer and smiled. The trolls would be a little bit of amusement that might let her get a serious issue in, if only in a tangential way.

* * *

Roy had never been to Washington before, and the one way streets that forced him to go back and forth and in circles, were enough to make him understand why everyone here was so crazy. He’d come here with the notion of speaking to one of his Senators, but when he got a look at the parking situation, he decided to keep driving. He doubted that hundred dollar contribution he’d made last election would have been foremost in the man’s mind, and it wasn’t as though he had a specific favor to ask.

Once he was back on the highway, Roy put his foot down so as to give him some breathing room. The blue lights and the siren caused him to curse and then utter a quick prayer for deliverance as he steered the truck over towards the shoulder.

He watched the state trooper get out of her car, and immediately began to feel better. His smile always was more convincing to women than to men. He made sure the documents identifying him as a man of the cloth were next to his license. The height of the truck forced her to look up at him.

“You were speeding, sir. I’ll need to see license, registration, and insurance papers.”

He tried to gauge her accent. There was not a lot of south in it, but it did not have the nasal clipped tones of north either. Roy debated his salutation. Honey was out as was darlin or sweetness. The uniform looked good on her, though he guessed just about anything would. He decided to go with daughter, “I am a man of the cloth. I am on a mission for the Lord, my daughter. If I got caught up in its urgency I am truly sorry.”

Her extended hand did not waver. “Your documents, sir.”

With a sigh he handed them down. She was wearing mirrored sunglasses. Her mouth gave away no expression.

When she returned from her car, she said, “Please exit your vehicle.”

It was not a question. Roy slowly opened the door and stepped down. “What’s the problem?”

“Turn and face the vehicle. Place your hands on the side.” When he had complied she asked, “Are you Roy Wallis?”

“I am. What is this about?”

“Are you aware there is a warrant for your arrest?”

“Arrest? Me? I am a man of the cloth. I have committed no crimes.” He started to turn towards her.

“Do not move. Do not take your hands from the side of the truck.”

“Last night you stayed in Dellwood Virginia.”

How could she know this, he wondered? “Yes.”

“There was some trouble at the Roadside Rest Motel.”

“Oh. That.” Roy breathed easier. “The clerk in the motel placed me next to a room in which there were mighty sins being committed. The walls were thin and two men were committing unnatural acts. I, being a man of the cloth, tried to save them, but they resisted even my attempts at baptism. When the clerk refused to eject them, I left.”

“After using your truck to push their car through the wall into their room.”

“I beg to differ.” He moved.

The trooper shouted, “Don’t move!” and banged on the side of the truck with her pistol.

Roy had forgotten about the rattlesnake. The angry buzz startled him as much as it did the trooper who jerked her hand, firing a shot which grazed the back of Roy’s right calf.

Though the wound was four inches long, it was such a graze that only a few drops of blood pooled. “The Lord was with us,” he told the shaken trooper who had never fired her gun in the line of duty before, and who was certain that this discharge would not stand up to the departmental guidelines authorizing shootings.

She was also very angry. This was a bullshit stop which, even without the shot and the rattlesnake, would have required several hours of paperwork. Now, she was going to be assigned to a desk while the review board took its own sweet time investigating, she was going to be known as the preacher poacher or some other dumb ass name. With her luck it would be an endangered species and she’d have to drag the Federal Wildlife people into it.

There was one other solution.

“Ok sir, you can proceed.”

Roy had seen miracles happen before. He knew the importance of not questioning them. He gingerly stepped back into his truck, and after assuring himself this was not a setup, he turned on his blinker and merged with traffic. He wondered if he should have asked her for her number.

* * *

Good Morning usually operated in a state of barely controlled chaos, subject as it were to the whims of breaking news, temperamental staff, and a timeslot that precluded any rehearsals. Margaret had assumed that things would be off the scale, and had made sure to lay in temps to answer the phones, and had offered overtime to other staffers so as to be ready for the second day. Having done that, she slept fitfully on a couch in her office.

Morning brought a crowd that filled the street for as far up the block as she could see from her office window. There was another unmarked entrance to the studio from the street behind them, she called transportation and told them that the car that brought the kids should use it.

A PA referred to her clipboard. “First, one of the fax machines was so busy it started smoking. That eased up when the main phone lines jammed. Verizon says there are so many calls that circuits are tied up for much of the West Side. This has the unpublished numbers not working either – or at least some of the time. Even so you have more calls than you can return in the next year. I’ve noted ten, from a Nobel laureate, the

senate majority leader, the President's national security advisor, people like that and, just for giggles there is one from a priest who claims that Hosanna knows him. She went to his church, before things got out of hand the last time. He claims to need to speak to her." The woman rolled her eyes, "We're keeping all the messages, just in case we decide to do a reality show called Wacko World."

Margaret took a sheet of paper from the woman who began to read from the next page. "We've got a panel off in studio C. Got most of the people you suggested. Henry is in there with them, trying to keep things peaceful, but we've got ego overload, the philosophy professor and the Bible thumper are the two I'm worried about, but Henry's got a bet going that we're going to need the tranquilizer gun for the psychic.

"OH, and one other thing. On the way in one of the children was really upset. The driver didn't get it all, or got it wrong, but he thinks she wanted to bring a Buffalo onto the show.

She started to leave and stopped, "AND Burt's back."

"Burt? But?"

"I don't know. I heard that security found him inside a dumpster, you know, down where they shred all the scripts? But it may be a rumor. He's not talking, but he never talks in the morning before the show, except to sometimes yell at someone to go get him some special coffee or something."

Margaret considered a joke about Arch Angels not being what they used to be, but sharing it with a PA was not appropriate.

“Good Morning.” Gloria tossed her head so that her trademark hair would bounce and give her the slightly tousled look she cultivated to set her apart from all the other announcers. “I don’t think that we need tell you that today is a rather special day here.” She set her face in its most serious intellectual look and continued, “Whatever you believe regarding the children who were here yesterday, you will have a chance to affirm it today because they will be here momentarily. We do not know what they are going to say, but feel privileged that we can be the ones to give them a chance to deliver their message to the world.”

The cameras shifted angles and focused on the children as they made their way up onto the set. They spread out in much the same way they had yesterday. Faith spoke first, “Yesterday we told you that the sun would make you feel good. Today we are going to tell you how to be happy.”

Hope, who was sitting on the other desk swinging her legs slightly so that her heels banged against the front, causing the sound man to wince, said, “Yeah. Too many people are unhappy and that makes them do mean things.”

Jacques walked over to Burt and said, “You are unhappy because you want what you don’t have. And what you have is not enough for you.”

Burt did not react well. “You don’t know...”

“Yes we do,” said Estelle, “You make four hundred fifty seven thousand dollars a year. You have two cars, three women who you are telling that you love them, money invested in stocks and in a restaurant. And you are working to see if you can get a job on the evening news. You even started a rumor about Tom Evans. It was a lie and is going to get you in trouble.”

Before Burt could figure out how to react, Faith said, "You have a sister who is not as pretty as you. She works harder than you do and she's smarter. It takes her a month to make what you get in a day. Last month she had a hard time paying her bills. But she is happy. She does not tell lies. She knows that she has enough. Even though a lot of people like you don't think so. She's got one other thing."

Before he could think Burt asked, "What's that?"

"She's got love. And not the kind of love you are telling Susan and Monica and Beverly..."

Hosanna watched on the monitor. She wanted to cheer, but there were too many people around. They wouldn't understand. But it was beautiful. She wondered how much of this they had planned. She had heard them talking last night in one of the bedrooms, but they had stopped when she went in to tell them to get ready for bed.

Gloria, the other anchor, spoke, "You are saying we should learn to appreciate what we have? That is an important lesson. One that we all should think about."

Jacques walked over to her. She regretted saying anything and was filled with a fear that they would say something about her. At least she wasn't screwing around, but there were other things. The little boy reached out and took her hand. "Don't be so afraid. You have enough, and you *are* enough or can be if you let yourself. Tomorrow we'll talk about fear and how it can make us do silly stupid things." He looked her in the eyes and she felt as though he was looking all the way inside her. But for once she was not ashamed.

Hope slid off the desk. “That’s enough for today. It may be simple, but it’s not so easy – at least for most of you. I wonder why that is?” She held out her hands. The others crossed the set to her. They all joined hands and said, “See you tomorrow.”

Chapter 14

“Please hold for Margaret O’Brien from *Good Morning*.”

James had been sure that there would be no call. He had decided that when he realized that there was no way that he could put his request into anything close to a coherent sentence.

“Hello, Reverend I am the producer of Good Morning. I believe you called.”

“Yes I did. I’m trying to get in touch with Hosanna.”

This was refreshing, Margaret thought. Everyone wanted a piece of the kids.

“What is it concerning?”

“I believe she will know. When she was here she set some things in motion.”

Margaret’s news instincts kicked in, this was not somebody trying to sell her a story, instead there was something, maybe something important. She also sensed he wasn’t going to tell it to her. At least not now. “I’ll see that she gets the message, perhaps you can come down and be on the show. We have a panel . . .”

He laughed, “No thanks. I’ve learned my lesson; all I want is just a few words with Hosanna.”

Margaret drew a star next to his name on the piece of paper. There was something there. In her experience everybody wanted to be on her show. Unless they were in trouble. The last person to turn down an invitation so absolutely was a man who had been indicted three days later.

She thanked him and hung up turning her attention to a meeting Burt had requested as soon as they got off the air. She was not looking forward to it. The children had his number alright. He was ambitious to a point where it made him nasty,

underhanded, conniving and dangerous. She suspected he had started a couple of rumors about her when he had been angling to get on the show and Margaret had been resistant.

Burt's face was still red. "Why did you tell those brats my salary?"

Margaret wondered if his blood pressure was high enough to launch a rocket. She shook her head, "I'm glad we are having this meeting. I'm sure you are aware that we've had a lot of calls about you. Especially the part about the three women."

"That's not. . . That's not why I'm here. I have a salary confidentiality clause in my contract that has been violated."

Margaret shook her head. "You also have a morals clause in that same contract."

Burt started to say something, but held it back at the last second. There was less lying now even though tongues didn't become forked, but the memory was still fresh.

"I think it would be a good idea for you to go on assignment for a while, until things cool down," Margaret began. "We can't afford another incident like happened today."

"Nothing happened today. It will be forgotten. It's over."

"Our projected ratings this morning were an astounding 73. I am willing to bet that Beverly, Monica and Susan all saw the show. I don't think it is over. In any case, I have an assignment that is taking shape. It involves a follow-up on Hosanna's previous visit and I think you are just the man to do it. And it would be good to tell people that you are unavailable when they call asking for comments."

The aggression had gone from him like pus from a popped pimple. Burt nodded.

"Go home and pack for a few days. I'll send the van in the morning."

He nodded and started for the door. "Wait," she asked, "one more thing. Yesterday. What happened?"

He shook his head, "I'm saving it for my memoirs."

Today Hosanna decided that the children could use some culture and thought the Metropolitan Museum would be a good place to start. A police detail had been assigned to protect them and to keep the press at bay. The Lieutenant, who had previous dealings with other dignitaries, made a few calls and arranged a private tour.

In one room there was a picture depicting God as a stern old man. "Who's that," asked Faith?

"That's what the artist thought God looked like," Hosanna answered.

"Wrong!"

She looked down at Estelle who was pointing her finger at the painting and quickly said, "I don't think they want you to fix it for them. We'll do our own versions when we get back to the apartment."

They were able to leave through a back door and cut through the park as they headed back to the apartment. They stopped at a battered playground which sported some wood and pipe structures that seemed to have been designed to look like a spaceship and a castle. After climbing and playing on them for a few minutes Hosanna saw the children were talking to themselves. "Wanda, what do you think they are up to?"

"I'm afraid to think. I'm willing to bet it will be interesting."

Hosanna nodded, "Have you ever noticed how the word interesting is often used to mean bad, though a limited sort of bad, not evil."

"Yeah, and you know things that at the time seem bad often end up being called interesting." Wanda smiled, "I can use that term for a lot of my life. And I've got to tell you the way they looked into that jerk makes me a little nervous. I mean there are some things that I'm not proud of. And, some things I don't remember too well."

"Tell me about it. My tantrums, well I'm working to forget them. I guess that's why I've been relegated to babysitter." She looked up, "Oh-oh, time for an intervention."

The rocket structure had been transformed from a cone of bare pipes to a sleek spaceship that looked as though it had been a prop in a Buck Rogers movie. There was an elliptical door that was closing as she stood. Jacques, who was sitting behind the large curved windshield waved and then put on a helmet. Three other mothers were walking towards the ship where their children were waving from behind the portholes that ran back the length of the ship. A wisp of smoke started to curl from the pods at the ends of the swept back wings.

Hosanna flicked her finger and a man dressed in a crisp blue uniform with gold shoulder boards appeared in front of the space ship. He made some motions with his hands and then spoke into a small microphone. After a few seconds the smoke stopped coming out of the pods. The door slid open and one of the mothers ducked slightly and went inside. After a moment she emerged with a baffled expression on her face. "You got to see this," she shouted.

The police escort which had, to this point, been rather unobtrusive, materialized and formed circle around the ship. The Lieutenant came over to where they were sitting

and said, "Things like this can grow a crowd pretty quickly." The other mothers emerged from the space ship with their reluctant children in tow. After a minute the five children the media was calling the "God Kids" came through the door. Once they were on the ground Jacques turned and pointed his finger at the door. It slid closed and then sealed with a clunk.

"Why didn't you make it back the way it was?"

"It was dumb, besides it will be here when we come back. Maybe next time Admiral Wilson will let us take a ride in it."

Chapter15

Burt watched a feed of the show as the production van sped up the interstate. He hadn't liked the way Gloria announced that he was on assignment, and it was especially disturbing the way Tony Young had settled into his seat. It reminded Burt of the way he had eased his own way into this and other jobs. His game plan was to keep moving up so fast that he didn't have to fear those who were coming after him. They were simply replacements for the real thing.

But not now. He was heading out of the city with what was clearly a B team camera crew on a vague assignment to interview some priest. He knew he couldn't turn it down, and besides, the old bat was probably right – leaving town until it blew over was definitely better than being ambushed by the Post when he went out with Monica – the only one of the three who was still talking to him.

An Episcopal priest James somebody or other in a small town in Rhode Island. Burt had the research team do a lookup, and they'd found nothing out of the ordinary. It was a small parish, no scandal, no nothing, and, he was afraid, no story. If there was no story then he was in trouble, because, as he saw it, the way out of this was to come back to the city with a story that would get him on the network evening news. Therefore there was one thing to do – find a story. Whatever it took. Everyone had something to hide, it just took having the will to turn over enough rocks.

It was a quaint church in a cute town. The peaceful street scene would be a nice counter point to whatever he dredged up. Burt ordered the camera team to get some

footage of it while he changed into his interview suit. It was Armani, sleek and stylish without ostentation. It would show this hick priest that he was outclassed.

The man who opened the door of the rectory was wearing dirty jeans and a tee shirt that bore a variety of stains. He was trying to burp a baby who added another wet spot as Burt introduced himself.

James got right to the point, "I don't know why you are here. I told the woman I did not want to be on the show. I have nothing to say about the things that are going on in New York this morning. Although I may well use some of them in my sermon on Sunday. You are welcome to come and hear it, though I will insist on you're leaving the cameras outside."

Burt was not so easily dissuaded. He asked, "You had contact with Hosanna when she was here the last time?"

"I've got a baby that needs changing. I've told you that I don't want to be on TV. Why don't you go back to the city? That seems to be where the story is. What happened here was not newsworthy then and certainly is not now. Please excuse me." With that James shut the door in Burt's face.

It had been years since he'd been shut out like that, it was like waving a red flag at him. There had to be a story and he was going to get the story. The man said that something had happened. Burt was going to get it. He retreated to the van trying to figure out his next move.

The power suit hadn't worked. He changed into more casual clothes. Maybe the camera team had been a bit overwhelming for this hick priest. "Wait a minute! He has a baby, we've got a story!"

The director shook her head. “Don’t think so. Episcopal priests are allowed to marry. Nice try though.”

Burt took a palm-sized mini cam and went to do a solo reconnaissance of the church. A driveway ran beside the low building where there were signs announcing Sunday School and the church offices. Behind the small parking lot was a garden that extended behind the Rectory, the church and this building. It was the perfect spot to lay in wait for the man. Burt called the director on her cell and told her to move the van a few blocks away and to wait for him to contact her.

There was a bench set off in a corner of the garden. It had a good view of the back of the rectory. He sat and settled in to wait.

The garden was full of large plants. Burt didn’t know what they were, didn’t care, his only use for flowers was as a way to get a woman to bed. Some of them were total suckers for a fist full of dead plants. He liked the garden though because it offered him good cover to watch and wait.

Burt was tired. They’d left very early. He’d had a little too much Cognac last night. He hadn’t slept on the trip up because he was afraid he’d snore and that the camera crew would tape it for use when they got back to the city. He’d seen it done to other talent and while it was funny as hell when it was someone else, he wasn’t going to fall for it. As he dozed Burt heard some voices, soft and far away.

The troll Cheryl had named Joe Hill was so excited that he trembled as he spoke. “This is it. You all know who he is. It’s perfect. He’s asleep and we’ll tie him up and take him behind the compost pile. We’ll make a tape and sent it to the network. Then the world will learn of our plight. We’ll be slaves no more.”

“There’s one problem,” said Kathy

Of course there is a problem, he thought, and you are afraid to face it. “We will not worry about problems.”

“We can’t be photographed. Remember?”

“Moving. But he can be. And he’ll be tied up like a pork roast. He’ll get our message across.”

He looked around at the few trolls standing close. The rest were off tending to the garden like good slaves. “Who did you trust to get the whiskey?” He pointed a finger at his chest. “Who delivered, not once, but three times in the last month? Who of you were brave enough to help drink it? He pointed his finger at several individuals. He’s asleep, he can’t see you, it’s perfect.”

*

*

*

Strange dreams. Hushed voices and then all at once Burt was awake. It was dark as though he was wrapped in a blanket. He knew it couldn’t be. He had been sitting in a garden. He tried to move his arms and legs, but whatever it was, held him tightly. He struggled and fell to the ground. It was hard and hurt, and there was something small that was wiggling under him. A kitten, he wondered, as he felt small paws poking at him trying to get out from under. There were bands of tightness running around him. Burt shook his head trying to clear his vision, trying to make sense of something impossible.

With a great effort Burt struggled to sit up. As he got his head off the ground it was hit hard. He felt pain and the gray light got dark around the edges as he slumped back down. He felt himself sliding as though he was on a sheet being dragged over the ground.

After three hours, Carol, the news-team director, was tired of waiting for the Hotshot Talking Head to call her. If the money wasn't so good she would have looked for another job, but especially with the per diem for being on assignment, she could sit back and wait for the phone to ring. They had moved the van to a small park and had taken some folding chairs out under the trees. It was a beautiful day, and being paid to sit in a park had to be one of life's best pleasures. Of course, she thought, she'd rather be paid for making a documentary about the villages of Italy and the little known art work that resided in the small local churches. It was a proposal she had floating around the network that she did not expect to see approved.

She checked her cell phone to make sure she had a signal and that the battery was charged. As she was putting it back in its holder it chirped. The caller id told her it was him. "Yeah?"

There was nothing then a voice, small almost squeaky, said, "We have him. If you want him back, you have to do what we say."

She shook her head and looked at the display again. It was his phone, the one listed in her phonebook as Asshole#37. The industry called these guys, 'talent', she liked her appellation better. The 37 was chronological not a ranking, otherwise he would have been six or seven.

This had to be a joke. Maybe if he was doing a story on drug dealers in the Bronx, but not here in a little town that was 'the way it used to be America.'

"Did you hear me," the voice asked?

"I heard you. I was considering the options." She looked at the crew that was lounging around. "I'll ask, but I don't think we'd pay much more than thirty-seven cents to get him back. We might go to forty, but that would be pushing it."

There was silence for a second. She heard whispers. Finally the voice replied, "We weren't asking you for money, we have a list of grievances, and reparations is one of them, but not from you. We will have our demands waiting. Send one person back behind the church. On a large rock will be a tape. See that it gets on the air. We will be watching." With that the call went dead.

Carol looked down at the phone for a moment. She pushed the recent calls key and saw that there had been a call. It had lasted 47 seconds. She left the screen up, the crew would not believe her if she just told it. Hell, she didn't believe it. Some of the talent had a sense of humor and a few liked to play practical jokes. But not asshole #37. He had to be told when to smile. "Hey guys, there is something strange going on." Slowly the members of crew roused themselves and ambled over towards her.

Chapter 16

James glanced out the window and saw that the news-van had returned. He looked out the back window and saw a woman walking in the garden. As he watched she reached down and picked up something small from on top of a rock. She took a quick look around, then turned and walked back to the driveway and out of sight behind the church office. He noticed that some of the plants were pushed over, and wondered if his older children had been playing where they repeatedly had been told not to. Cheryl would have a fit when she got back from shopping. Then he realized she had the older ones with her. He shrugged, maybe a neighborhood dog. Better that than having to discipline the kids.

So long as he held the baby in one arm she seemed happy. He resumed his one handed typing. He wasn't sure what it would be, maybe next Sunday's sermon. The inspiration had come from watching Good Morning and the mysterious, spooky children who had spoken about fear.

One of the girls had started saying, "Everybody is afraid of something." She had paused for a few seconds and James had truly been afraid. Things that he had known, and others that he had not, reached up and clutched at his insides. He was paralyzed for a second as images of people laughing at him and others turning their backs to him filled his vision. For a split second he was the little boy who had been exploring the forbidden part of the basement, and the door had slammed closed leaving him in the damp clammy dark where the dangerous things his father had warned him about were waiting to cut his feet off.

The little girl had continued, "Most of these things are not real. But we act as though they are. It makes some people greedy, other people angry, and a lot of people are afraid to do things because they think they won't do it right. So they don't even try."

After it was over James realized that he was not alone in experiencing the waves of fear as Estelle had spoken. As one and then another person was interviewed a pattern developed, with each telling about how they were gripped. The announcer reported that the pause had been twenty seconds long, but everyone said it felt like it was much longer. One woman was crying. A man excused himself saying he needed to find a church.

"These are extraordinary times," he wrote, "and we are afraid of things that we do not understand."

* * *

The picture flashed onto the monitor in the back of the van. It was a little cement or stone garden figure wearing painted overalls and a little hat. "We are the little ones. We have been silent too long." It was the same voice Carol had heard on the phone. She slowed the tape and zoomed in on the figure's mouth. It was not moving. Of course it wasn't moving, she thought as she hit the play button.

"It was Hosanna who, in a moment of evil humor, made us. She made it so that we can not be seen to move by any except our slave masters. These evil people are supposedly a man of God and his devoted wife. They must be stopped.

"We can not be photographed moving, but watch this. The camera moved away from the figure for a second and then swung back. In the interim the figure's arm had moved and was not raised. Again the camera panned away returning to the figure who

seemed to have taken a step. “We are real. We breathe, we eat, we love and we feel the crushing weight of slavery.” The camera turned to show the garden. “To you this may be beautiful, but to us it is a sentence of hard labor. It focused on a group of the figures standing together, “But that is over. We are many and we will be heard. No longer will we be owned.”

The screen went dark then lit again. It showed Burt sitting leaning against a wall. He seemed to be wrapped with string and though he struggled he could only wiggle a little. He was not gagged and spoke, “God damn it, get me out of here. I don’t know what it is, but whatever they want give it to them. This hurts, I’ve been hit, and they say they’ll do things to me. Uplink this tape to the network, get it played, and when they, who-ever they are freed, they say they will let me go.” He paused and looked off at the side, “This is not a joke, you know me, I couldn’t dream this up.” The screen went dark as the tape ended.

Carol looked at the rest of the crew. They were half smiling, but also had expressions of disbelief. “Ok we’ve watched it three times now. It’s true, he could not dream this up. The only time he gets half-way creative is when he is hitting on a woman.”

One of the guys nodded and said, “Yeah, but if we send it to the network they are going to get us a group rate at a detox center.”

The sound man said, “Let’s ditch the tape, and head back to the city. Let them have him. I’m not going to fall for some sort of a weird practical joke. And if someone actually has him, good luck to them.”

Carol shook her head. "This is so strange it might just be a little bit true. You know how on the show this morning the kids talked about fear. Well one of mine is that I'm going to walk right on by an enormous story and when I get home see someone else's footage on the screen." She ejected the tape from the player and handed it to a technician. "Make a copy on DVD I'm going to show this to someone."

The baby had just fallen asleep when the doorbell rang. James thought about forgiveness as he walked up the hall.

The woman had a disk in her hand. "You don't have to let me in if you don't want to, but you've got to see this. It concerns you."

She had a slightly strange air about her, but most of the people who came to his door had something that had brought them there. "In here," James said as he led her into the living room.

"That's Joe Hill," he said as soon as he heard the voice. "Sweet Jesus."

"It's true," Carol asked?

"Yes, Hosanna was here, and sort of as a joke I guess, though with her it's hard to say, anyway she made this couple of trolls or gnomes whatever."

"I take it they were fruitful and."

"There are a lot of them now. I tried to call Hosanna about this, but. . ." The scene had shifted to Burt. "I'll bet he's in the basement under the office." James stood. "We'll get him out."

Carol did not stand. “This may be a sin Reverend, but I’d as soon leave him there for a while.”

James turned to look at her, “He does seem like something of a jerk. Do you have any other ideas?”

Carol took a second to answer, “How about if I made a call to the network? Maybe I could get through to Hosanna. I couldn’t call before until I knew it wasn’t a hoax.”

“You know not all the little ones are like that. Many of them like working in the garden. Maybe I could go talk to them, they could...”

Carol saw the possibilities. “A counter revolution?” She paused for a second, “You know, if we could get Hosanna to come here. . .

Chapter 17

“Yesterday we told you about fear. Today we’re going to tell you to love.”

Miguel walked towards Gloria, “But we need to remember that if you fear you can not love.” He stopped and looked directly into her eyes. “It’s like stairs. You can’t climb the top one first.”

Hope said, “I love my mom. I love my friends. I love the world. But I’m only a kid. I haven’t learned how to make things difficult yet.”

Jacques walked to the center of the set. “It’s that simple. Turn off your TVs now if you keep listening they’ll talk about this and make it hard to understand.” The others joined him and together they walked off the set.

Margaret picked up the remote, looked at Hosanna, and pushed the power button. The large flat-screen TV on the other side of her office blinked out. “A part of me hopes that everyone does that, but I guarantee it will make someone upstairs very nervous.”

Hosanna said, “They were born nervous.”

Margaret nodded, this woman who had once made the whole world nervous, who nobody had understood, made a lot of sense. She had a vision of things and people that was amazing. “By the way, we got a couple of calls from Rhode Island. A priest there really wants to talk to you.”

It took Hosanna a moment to remember. “One of the strings I left untied I guess.”

“We sent a camera crew up with Burt.”

“Oh? So that’s where he is. The rumor is that his girlfriends got together and have him locked away somewhere. What they are doing with him is subject to some debate.”

Margaret smiled. “Actually, he is locked away. Can I show you something?”

Hosanna started laughing the moment the little voice began to rant. “I really stretched the rules when I did that. More fun than creating a platypus. Though if she’d seen fit to give them a bigger brain - but, that’s another conversation. Do you want him back?”

Margaret laughed. “To tell the truth, that has been a matter of discussion.”

Hosanna said, “Got to clean up my messes I guess. I think I’ll take the kids up there, be good to show them unexpected consequences.”

“They’ll probably say you are making things complicated.”

Nodding, Hosanna said, “Yeah, might be. I seemed to have a talent for it”

Phillip had secured a helicopter and then ground transportation for them once they got to Rhode Island. He repeated to Hosanna that he had been asked to convey invitations from the President.

“I hope he has been watching,” she’d replied.

Carol got along well with Cheryl, who had a more complete story to tell regarding the little ones. “James was totally engrossed in the theological implications of it. Somewhere he’s got a bunch of papers written of half done on everything from what it

means for God to have a sense of humor – to discussions as to whether the little ones have souls. I'm not sure he ever stopped and found out who they are. He considers them to be a miracle that Hosanna gave to him so he is quite possessive and doesn't want to hear the bad things, but please don't say that."

"What sort of bad things?"

"Alcoholism for a start. Hosanna had said they were nasty drunks and they are that. We have locks and chains on our liquor cabinet, and I'm pretty sure they are breaking into houses up and down the street to get booze. They are small so it does not take much. Then there is sex. They don't get married, I mean how could they? Hosanna who believed in things being equal made the women at least as," she paused, "horny I guess you could say, as the men." She looked around to see that they were alone, "They have multiple orgasms that have made me feel inadequate."

"You've seen it?"

"All the time. The first thing they did was start growing moss. If I go out there on a nice day there are likely to be several couples sometimes alone sometimes together you know, going at it."

"But they can't be photographed." Carol had thoughts of internet fortune flash across her mind.

"Not really. Sometimes, like in that video, but only as a statue."

* * *

The kids loved the little ones. "But why did you make them so angry and unhappy", asked Hope?

Hosanna shrugged. "I was young and foolish? I thought it would be amusing? It makes them more interesting? Anyway some people are happiest when they are unhappy."

"Not true," said Estelle. "That's just grown-up make it complicated talk."

The rebel band had barricaded themselves in the thrift store / food pantry where they had Burt trussed in a janitor's closet.

It wasn't clear to Burt if he was still a prisoner. On the second day when he was being guarded by three female little ones they had shown an interest in him that went beyond ideological. Though tiny, their naked bodies were smooth and warm. And they made up by inventiveness for what they could not accomplish anatomically. They kept his hands and feet bound while they found ways to pleasure themselves with his body. Burt, by the end of the evening, had offered to become the cause's spokesman, and had promised them all a life of grand leisure if only they would return to the city with him when the siege was over. A tape had been made of his conversion. When it was delivered to Carol, she had watched it once and then become quite afraid and feeling a little guilty for not urging a prompt rescue attempt.

"So what do I do," asked Hosanna?

The people with her in the living room of the rectory shook their heads and stared at the floor. The kids somehow realized this was not a question that was meant to be answered.

She spoke again, "I suppose I could make them all go poof. Or I could turn them into humans, though their personalities would have to be radically changed. And I'm not sure that it would be a step up the evolutionary ladder." Hosanna paused, "I don't like those options. But they do have some valid points. I will release them from what they so sourly call slavery. I will make them visible to everyone. Maybe they can exist to be a bad example – of how not to lead your life."

"Except, a lot of people already live like that or worse," said Wanda. "Compared to the guys who used to come into the Devils Den, they're not so bad."

"That's it."

"What?" asked Cheryl who was already feeling strangely nostalgic.

"We'll set up a chain of bars and the little ones will run them. They will be sort of magical places where nobody can get pregnant or a disease."

James cleared his throat, "Um, excuse me, I can think of some possible problems."

Hosanna looked at him, and for a minute he was afraid. But then she smiled, "Now that you mention it, so can I. Anyone got a plan B?"

Chapter 18

Martha reread the last sentence and wondered if she had a plan of any sort. As usually happened the story had taken off. She wasn't giving as much attention and differentiation to the kids as she had thought she would. Maybe it was time for them to really assert themselves.

* * *

No one spoke for a minute. Hosanna glanced upwards and asked God, "any suggestions?"

The response was audible to everyone in the room, "*It's a fine mess you've gotten us into this time, Ollie.*"

James' seminary training kicked in and he knelt so hard that a glass bowl on the mantle rattled. A moment later one of the kids began to giggle, and the others joined in. For the adults it took a little longer for the awe to wear off, but presently they laughed.

Faith spoke first. "The little people deserve a place where they will be left alone. The island where the bird spoke to us is right for that."

Hosanna agreed, "Yes, there is nobody there now. But how will we keep the cruise ships away?"

Faith thought for a second, "Remember the giant octopus that took care of the pirates?"

"That will do for a while, I would guess," Hosanna said.

Faith and Estelle walked to the door. "We'll go and take care of it," Estelle said.

Hosanna watched them go, she felt sad and a little proud. It was also a touch embarrassing to have children fixing your messes. She again regretted her excess of self

that had gotten her into the deeper trouble. She turned to James as he was starting to get to his feet. "You know, the last time I was here I was still sort of under control. You said some things to me that I needed to hear." Hosanna shook her head, "Unfortunately, I didn't listen for long."

She moved to the window and stood looking out at the garden, "I ended up taking myself too seriously. I acted as though I was the second coming. I thought I was clever enough to persuade man to change his ways. In a word, Arrogance." She paused watching Hope speaking to a group of little ones who were gathered around. The TV crew was filming it. Turning back she continued, "Maybe children can avoid that."

James had a question he had to ask. "Who are they? Are they . . . you know, children of . . ."

"Not that I know of. At least not Faith and Hope. They were not an immaculate conception. I think I would have noticed a visit from the Holy Ghost. Then again I'm not all that sure about Fish Boy."

"Fish Boy?"

"The father. I was still a bit rocky when I hooked up with him. He was just what I needed, but in the end he loved the sea more than me. He had an air tank that would last all day and he'd be down there. Then he started telling me about how he didn't need the tank any more." Hosanna turned to Wanda, "How about you? Was Estelle an immaculate conception?"

Wanda nodded, "Maybe, sort of. That's the part of my life I don't remember much of, and that may be a good thing. But even if I was drunk and doing stupid things I

was still being very careful. I was on the pill, made them use condoms, and a doctor had told me that I probably couldn't get pregnant, but I was being real safe. . .”

“Maybe that's why you rated a star in the heavens.”

Chapter 19

Hope had just finished telling the little ones about the island when she saw two boys climb over a fence from a neighboring yard. They were older, she guessed about twelve, and they had an air of unpleasantness about them.

The bigger one was wearing a Tee shirt that proclaimed, "It's my attitude – you don't have to like it," said. "Hey, what's this? Look at all these little statues." He reached down and picked up a woman. "Hey Joey, catch." He tossed the woman to his friend.

Hope said, "Don't do that."

The boy reached down and picked up another. "What are you going to do about it?"

From inside the house Hosanna noticed the incident. "Oh oh."

Hope smiled and spread her hands, "I don't know, there are so many things." She pointed to the ground next to the boy. A giant, ten feet tall, with an oafish look, wearing a huge Tee shirt that proclaimed, "What goes around . . ." appeared. It reached down and picked the brat up. Tossing him up in the air the giant said, "Fun."

As he caught the boy, the giant turned showing the back of his shirt which read, "comes around."

The other kid carefully placed the little one on the ground and started to edge away. The giant took a step and swept him up with his other hand. In two more steps the giant stood towering over the fence. With a flick of his wrists he tossed the bully and

his friend over the fence. There was a splash as they landed in wading pool. The giant nodded to Hope and then disappeared.

The little ones cheered, and Hosanna turned away from the window. “Those kids are going to be ok.”

A few minutes later Burt emerged from the basement. He stood, blinking in the sunlight trying to think of something profound to say to the cameras that were clustered around like a school of fish waiting for a morsel. His clothes were rumpled, he had replaced his torn pants with a pair from the thrift shop. They were bright yellow and a little too short. Burt was not used to going on air without makeup and having his hair worked on. And there were no prompters to read. He didn't know where to begin. He had so much to say. The speeches he had thought of during his captivity and which would have been a major assist to his career, were now shelved. He was going to the island with the little ones he so loved.

Phillip came to the door and gestured for Hosanna. As she approached he said, “You know all this,” he gestured towards the window, “is being televised.” It wasn't a question. “People,” he continued, “know where you are. We have reports from the state police of a lot of traffic headed this way. A lot of it – from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and farther. There are already a couple of thousand people gathered in the street. And more are coming.”

When she did not respond he went on, "If you leave now we can get you around the crowd easily. The police will detain the news trucks so that they won't broadcast where you are going."

"I don't think so. We should ask the kids, but I suspect they'll say it's a good day for a picnic."

"A picnic?" He looked around. "Do you have any idea how many porta sans a million people will need? And we're not sure that the crowds will be that glad to see you."

"They're here to see the kids. I'm old news."

He shook his head. "It could be dangerous."

"We've had this conversation before. Did you see Hope's friend?"

Phillip grinned. "That was something."

"Maybe we can have him visit your bosses if they give you any trouble."

"Why start now? But thanks, I'll keep that in mind." He turned to go, but stopped. "I'm not sure I said it before, Welcome Home."

Hosanna smiled. "Thanks."

Chapter 20

Jo Anne Stein looked across the coffee table at her client, Robert, sitting on the slightly overstuffed couch. Only two minutes old, the session was already breaking new ground. Upon entering he had initiated and maintained eye contact with her. He sat upright, not slouched. He was smiling. In four years of therapy she had not seen him ever smile, not really, not like this. She knew what was coming. He was the third one today.

“I’ve been watching the children on Good Morning.”

Jo Anne nodded but did not speak. He wasn’t going to need the prompting that usually was required to get him to open up.

“It’s remarkable. It’s so simple. I know it’s all stuff we’ve tried to deal with here, but something about how they said it broke through all the walls I’ve put between myself and living a life.”

He paused and looked around, “This is a pleasant room. The fresh flowers are a nice touch. Coming here used to be the highpoint of my week.” He looked at his watch, “I’ve got to get going, so I’ll get to the point. I realized I don’t need this any more. I’ve got a date with Amy, the one I used to talk about but could never call. Well I called...” He stood, “Thanks. I gave you a check last session, so I think we’re square.”

Jo Anne was startled; she had expected his good bye to take the entire session, after all, this was the man who once took three weeks to pick out an email account name. Robert was one of the ones that she referred to as her blue-chip patients when she got together with other psychologists on the Vineyard. They never cancelled, when one issue got resolved there was always another waiting, and they always paid. At least he hadn’t

said, "I've got better things to do with my money than pay somebody else's rent on Central Park West," like the last patient had.

As the door closed she took out her leather bound appointment book and began trying to erase Robert's name from the seven pm slot. It had been written in ink, and she would need use whiteout to avoid tearing the paper.

Marge, the first patient to terminate, as it was called, had caught Jo Anne totally off-guard. She was a patient who went through half a box of Kleenex each session, and who made at least three emergency calls between sessions (billed at a pro-rated rate depending on length of the call and the degree of inconvenience it caused Jo Anne).

Dr Stein had started talking about the need to, "wind down and tie up loose ends."

"You haven't been watching them have you," the patient asked?

Shaking her head she'd replied, "No." Not bothering to say that she found Morning TV beneath her.

The woman had grinned, "Maybe you should. You could get a life beyond listening to nut-cases like me whine on and on."

Jo Anne looked at the names in her book and wondered how many of them would quit. Just today she'd lost about fifteen-hundred dollars a month. So far. Tom was scheduled for eight and he'd called to cancel. The message hadn't said anything about next week. The way this was going she wouldn't be able to afford the house on Martha's Vineyard, or the remodeling she was having done on the rest of her apartment. She looked at the phone and thought about calling Gail, another therapist in the building.

They served as safety valves for each other after particularly difficult sessions with obnoxious patients who just didn't get it.

Just as she had decided to wait on making the call, there was a knock on the door. Her office was what had once been the maid's quarters in the large elegant apartment; it had its own entrance into the hall. Maybe it was Robert who had gotten to the street and realized the enormity of his act.

Opening the door she found Gail.

"How many," she asked?

It took Jo Anne a second, "Three, maybe four."

From behind her back Gail produced a bottle of wine. "Ha. Got you beat. Five." She stepped into the office. "When the last one hit the bricks I went out and got this bottle. As I come back I see your seven o'clock leaving. He was smiling, made a joke with Joe, something about not having to open the door for so many lunatics, and I knew that it wasn't just me."

Jo Anne, shook her head. "No, and the thing is the ones who quit are . . ."

"The long term ones we used to joke about how if they ever got their shit together we'd have to go out and get jobs. You got a corkscrew?"

* * *

Margaret O'Brien looked at the piles her desk and knew that she wasn't going to make a dent in any of it even if she worked twelve hours a day through the weekend. It was so crazy they had put a presidential advisor on hold, and he'd stayed there for twenty minutes until they got back to him. She knew that she had lost the big picture somewhere

among the phone messages and memos. She turned to her secretary, "Do you remember that segment we did on arsonists? See if any of them are out of prison and. . ." As she watched the woman started to write it down. "No! I think that was supposed to be a joke. Put that pad down, we're going out to dinner. As fancy a place as we can find, the network is going to be very good to us tonight."

The restaurant seemed to have an especially festive air. When the waiter said it would be his pleasure to serve them that evening, Margaret had the feeling that he actually meant it. After he left, Margaret said, "You know, it's been so crazy the last four days that I'm not sure I understand all that has happened."

"I don't either," Jane replied. She leaned forward and dropped her voice a little, "But I do know that some amazing things are happening. Remember how I was upset about four months ago and told you that my daughter was sick?"

Margaret nodded, "yes."

Jane continued, "Well she was sick, but not in the usual way. She got into drugs, and took to stealing. It just about tore up Marty and me. We had to put her out of the house even though we knew she was going to go live with...", She stopped and took a deep breath, "But then this afternoon I get a call from Marty on my cell. He says she's checked herself into a treatment place. I got to tell you I'd just about given up hoping."

"That's wonderful."

The woman nodded, "Yes it is, but I think it's only a small part of something much bigger. You know we've never talked about religion, but I am a believer. And this whole crazy thing is not an accident. I don't know what it is. And I'll tell you that I

know that those children are somehow blessed. I felt it the first time I saw them. All those people we have had on the show talking about who and what they might be are missing the point. What they are is proof that God is mighty close to us these days.”

* * *

Jo Anne shook her head, “I’ve had enough priests and ministers as clients to have a pretty jaded opinion of religion.”

Gail nodded, “One time I had this fire and brimstone preacher who used to frequent a dominatrix to purge him of his sins. He really resisted admitting he was going out of his way to “sin” so that he would have an excuse to go back to her.” After a brief smile and a gentle shake of the head, she continued. “But that’s not what I meant. Not religion, belief or faith. The thing about these kids, and Hosanna too for that matter, is that they don’t say God says do this or that. And they make no claims about how they are so holy. They don’t tell you how to pray, or who to pray to. And they don’t ask for money.”

“I noticed that. It is a refreshing change. About half the priests I get ask for a discount.”

“Doctors too. I hate it when that happens. A professional discount, I like that. I tell them I’m a professional and they are too so they should understand why it is impossible. But that’s off the topic. What I’m trying to say is that maybe there is something to this one.”

“There can be something to just about anything, if it fulfills some need inside you. Your preacher obviously got something out of being humiliated or whatever,” Jo Anne

raised her hand in the universal stop signal, “And spare me the details, I’ve had a few like that, on both sides actually. That’s psych 101. What are you trying to tell me?”

Gail grinned. “One of my patients works for the network. He gave me tickets to Monday’s Good Morning.”

Chapter 21

When the children were reassembled in the living room Hosanna said, “Remember how I told you there would be crowds? Well, it looks like a lot of people are coming here.”

The kids looked at each other and Hosanna wondered if they had come up with some way of communicating without words. Estelle spoke first, “It’s a nice day. Maybe we could put on a play or something.”

Miguel asked, “A play? What about?”

Faith wondered, “How silly people are?”

“Yes,” Estelle said. “And how it’s a lot easier if they would listen to their hearts instead of what their brains tell them.”

“Where would we do this? They’d trample the garden if we do it here.” Hope turned from the window. “Is there some place?”

Cheryl, the reverend’s wife, answered, “There is a park just up the street. But are you sure? It’s going to be a lot of people.”

Hosanna added, “Not much time to write a play. And what about costumes?”

“In the basement, where he got the yellow pants. There is lots of stuff there. And we can make what we need.”

In the park where the gently sloping hills provided a large natural amphitheater there was a slightly dilapidated bandstand made of wood and concrete blocks painted a dark green. Burt’s camera crew, who had returned to the park for want of a better place to hide, was perfectly positioned. The crowd filled in around them cheerful, but

subdued, when they spoke to each other most of the people admitted that they were just following an impulse, and were not sure why they were there.

The five kids climbed up on to the stage. Estelle spoke, "We decided to do a little play. We hope you like it." There was no microphone, but her voice reached the back of the crowd. "It's about a bunch of kids. One of them says," She turned to Miguel.

"I'm sad and angry."

"Why?" Asked Faith.

"I don't know," Miguel answered. "When I see other people I see what I don't have. I always want to be someone or something else."

Jacques said, "Sometimes I feel that way too. When I see things I can't have." His voice rose, "And I want them so bad."

Hope, who had moved off to the side of the stage, reached into a bag and put a red tablecloth they had appropriated from the thrift store over her shoulders. She took a couple of steps and called, "Hey you."

The kids turned to each other, "Who's that?"

"I am the fairy of happiness, and I need your help." She raised a stick covered with aluminum foil. "Hurry, we don't have much time."

After a few quick looks among themselves, the four shrugged their shoulders and moved towards her. "What is it," Estelle asked?

"It's not easy trying to make people happy. And today the bad dragons are making lots of people unhappy."

"Bad dragons?" Miguel shook his head theatrically.

“Yes. There is one who makes you want too much. Another who makes you afraid. And look.” She pointed over their heads out above the audience, “There is one of them. It’s the gimme dragon.”

The kids turned, and did their best to put expressions of fear and surprise on their faces. It wasn’t hard, because they didn’t know what Hope was doing, and because above the crowd there suddenly was a very large red dragon with purple wings. Smoke was coming out of its mouth. It was circling over the crowd dropping low then, with a powerful beat of its wings, rising.

The crowd seemed to recoil, there were a few screams. Phillip thought about starting the hurriedly devised evacuation plan.

“Look there’s another,” Faith pointed off to the right.

This one was dark green with red wings. It made a hideous noise.

“Quick, we don’t have much time.” Hope spoke loudly. She reached in the bag and pulled out four more foil-covered sticks.

“What can we do?” Asked Estelle who looked as though she might actually be afraid.

“There is only one thing to do. Only one thing that can fight them, and we must do it together, because alone we are not strong enough.”

They stepped to the front of the stage and raised their wands. “When I say three we must send love against them. One, Two Three.”

Thin golden threads came from the ends of their sticks and reached towards the dragons who were swooping lower and closer. But the threads did not reach, and the dragons gave out great bellowing laughs.

“We’re not strong enough.”

There were some real screams from the crowd. Hosanna, who was watching from just off to the side of the stage, started to think of what to do, but the humming bird landed on her shoulder and said. “Quite a show don’t you think?”

Flames erupted from one and then the other dragon, but the golden threads stopped them from reaching the crowd.

“I know,” said Estelle, “We have to understand that we’ve got everything we need to beat them. We have to be brave. We have to be clever.” She pointed her wand at the ground in front of the stage, and there were five winged white horses, brilliant in the sunlight. They had golden saddles and bags. She stepped off the stage onto the horse, grasped the reins and was aloft before the others could move.

The dragons turned towards her and she barely avoided a blast of flame.

“Come on,” Faith yelled, “We must help her!”

In a couple of seconds the five horses were soaring. From the saddle bags they pulled silver nets. The first two were shredded by the red dragon who closed in on Jacques. He turned in his saddle. From the end of his stick there emerged a film that turned into bubble that grew large enough to envelope the beast. It roared and the bubble filled with smoke. Hope and Miguel circled it wrapping it with the golden thread from their wands.

Faith had brought her horse up under the belly of the green dragon. Close, so close that the feathers on its wings tickled the monster. Its fire was extinguished as a thousand bubbles came out of its mouth. As each one popped there was the sound of a

laugh. Frantic to escape, it beat its wings and rose above them and then headed to the north away from the crowd.

Hope led all the threads from the other dragon back to her wand. Slowly she waved it in a circle over her head. It picked up speed with each rotation, then, when she judged it was going fast enough, she cut the threads and it soared off over the heads of the crowd.

After landing their horses, the climbed back onto the stage. Miguel turned and faced the others, "So what did you learn?"

Faith took a step forward. "I learned that laughter is a very powerful weapon against fear."

Jacques was next, "You need the help of your friends."

Estelle nodded, "You have to believe that you can do it."

They all looked at Hope who stepped forward to join them. She held up her cape. There was a scorched hole in one side of it. "It's not easy being the happiness fairy."

They all clasped hands and bowed to the crowd.

The gentle breeze cleared the acrid smoke, the afternoon sun warmed, the crowd stood stunned. Hosanna took a step forward and started clapping.

Faith raised her hand, "Thanks, mom. But there is one last thing we want to say. The dragons will be back." She pointed out into the audience, "but each of you has a magical force that can beat them." She moved her hand to point to her chest. "It's in here."

As they walked through the crowd it parted to let them pass. A couple of people, and then more, fell to their knees, clasping their hands together in prayer.

Estelle stopped and looked at them. "Don't you get it? We're just a bunch of kids showing off."

* * *

Roy laid a ten dollar bill on the counter as he told the clerk that he was a light sleeper and did not wish to be disturbed. She gave him in a room on the back wing of the second floor. The room was an end unit with a linen closet on the other side.

He had prayed for guidance, "Lord you brought me here, but I don't know which way to turn next."

The TV was on, he found himself watching as the children were producing some sort of a play. The girl on the end, he knew that child. It was, what was her name? he wondered, the one. Later the reporter announced that the children were returning to New York.

Roy knew why he was there. He began pulling on his pants, ignoring the bullet hole and blood stains.

* * *

Chapter 22

“Just a bunch of kids showing off?” The announcer, shook his head, “What is your take on this Professor, or is it Reverend?”

“Technically it could be either,” said Dr. Hutch, “But after seeing this I’m wary of using any title that would brand me as an expert. As to what this is – I really can’t say, beyond the usual words of incredible, amazing and awe-inspiring. I also have a tendency to want to believe them.”

I understand that you met Hosanna before she rose to - whatever she rose to. Prominence, perhaps?

“The best single word I’ve been able to come up with is consequence and that is imperfect. And yes I did meet and, to a degree, got to know her. I suspect you are leading up to a question about her parents.”

The interviewer nodded.

Hutch continued, “There has been a lot of conjecture about her origins I guess you could call it. As I heard it - she claimed some sort of direct link to God, but then said it was nothing the rest of us didn’t have – except that she had powers, exceptional powers. And these powers seem to be shared by the children, hers and the others too.”

“Did she call God her Father?”

“Yes, but to make it less clear, she also referred to God as She. Hosanna did refer to Jesus as her half-brother.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes. But you have to understand that I now believe in a lot of things. When I was ordained there was a creed that stated our beliefs. I still believe that, but I am also sure that it is just the opening paragraph in a much larger work.”

“Are they divine?”

Hutch smiled, “It’s questions like that which keep us theologians in business. If you listen to what they are saying, you could make the point that we are all divine. And that once divine there really is not any rank. On the other hand, this morning I took a stick, covered it with aluminum foil and tried to conjure up a winged horse. It did not work. But perhaps that was because I did not really believe that I could.”

Another of the moderators, a woman, said. “Ok, let’s assume that God is sending these messengers, disciples, children, whatever. Why?

“According to the children, because we are unhappy. Unnecessarily unhappy. Jesus came with a message. As Hosanna has said, at the time it was not a successful trip at least from his point of view. Hosanna came with a message, similar in some ways, and her time here was not any more successful than His, except, perhaps, that she survived. At least so far.”

He paused, “Now the children seem to be a departure, a refinement if you will. Again the message is much the same, but they are working at being a lot less threatening as one would perhaps expect. Jesus and Hosanna were young and angry. Hosanna did have her playful moments, but it seemed to me that her role was crushingly heavy. We seem to be off to a better start this time.”

“But?”

“But, if you think about it, we’re talking about a really huge task. Again, we have to try and avoid getting into theological and philosophical quagmires, but giving man free will was a bold and risky move for God. Short of taking that back and instituting predestination, or repeating Noah’s flood, it’s going to take a lot of selling.”

“Selling?”

Hatch nodded, “Exactly. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor.” Let’s say the poverty level for a single person is fourteen-thousand dollars – would you give all of your salary above that to charity?” He paused for a brief moment, “I have to admit that I don’t. And maybe that means to some degree that Jesus did not close the sale with me.”

Neither of the hosts jumped in with a question, so after a couple of seconds he continued, “Now where Jesus was content to give parables to show people the error of their ways, Hosanna put some direct experience into her sales pitch. My favorite was, I’ll make it so you can’t lie. That was fun for a while. But pretty soon there were mobs in the streets, Senate inquiries about a link to terrorism, and Hosanna did what a good salesman does when he sees there is no chance of making the sale. He closes the door behind him.”

“Would you like to meet her again? And the children.”

“Of course. For many reasons: I liked her, I am a scholar. I am a believer. But I suspect she has her hands full right about now and does not have the time to get into arcane discussions about God and the nature of man.”

Professor Hutch clicked off the television. Even though he had not had a chance to plug the fund drive for the Modern Religious Experience wing they were

looking to put on the library, he was moderately pleased with his performance. A few seconds later the phone rang. “Hey, do you remember the demons I had you fight.”

“Oh my God.”

“According to you that’s a matter of debate or perhaps an arcane discussion.”

He swallowed, “Hi. I . . . I don’t know what to say. I love your children, you must be a wonderful mother.”

Hosanna laughed, “It helps to be able to produce miracles on demand. Though it seems like they were paying attention. Things may get harder now they are on equal footing. If they try to use those horses to get out of bedtime one more time... But I’m calling because I saw you, and wanted to say hi, and I’m trying to find Dr. Eldridge, and I should be able to.”

“I - I’m afraid Bill is no longer with us.”

“Oh.” She paused, “I guess I should have realized that.”

Hutch filled the silence which followed saying, “It probably was, no it definitely was, his time and he left in fine style. And undoubtedly happy.”

“Tell me.”

“He wrote a book of course. It was quite a work, appealing to both the scholarly and the popular markets. It was a huge success, both critically and financially. He was in New York, where two days before he’d been awarded the Pulitzer. That night he’d given a lecture at General Theological and he’d gone back to his suite at the Plaza. He was working with one of his graduate students on her dissertation, or so the story goes. The version I cherish is he was telling her about the episode he chronicled in his Gospel, you know, Judy. It is possible he was actually demonstrating some aspects of it.

According to her he sat up and said. 'Enough. I have finally learned what it was that I was looking for. I am happy. God is good. Life has been perfect.' And then he died."

Hatch paused. "I attended his funeral, there was a smile on his face."

"Thank you for telling me that. He certainly did regain his faith."

"There were things I didn't say on the show today. You did many good things. You are continuing to do them, perhaps through your children, but also by your self. I will say I am jealous of the little ones you bestowed on the minister. It's exactly what this place needs. A host of pesky little folks to kick us learned folk on the ankles and bring us back to reality."

"I'll keep that in mind if they get into trouble on the island, but then again feel free to offer them scholarships."

* * *

"Where are we going?" Hope asked?

"Back to the city, for a while," Hosanna answered. "You can do some more of those television shows if you want. But we can also rest a little. This trip wasn't quite the vacation I had imagined."

* * *

The crowd jammed the street outside the studio. The NYPD had given up trying to keep it open and were concentrating on keeping the various groups of protesters, proselytizers, and prayer vigilantes separate. They used television vans as barricades when they ran out of the steel fencing. Roy took one look and knew this was not where

his mission would be served. He had enough experience to know he would do no good if he was swallowed up in the crowd.

He was stopped, waiting for the lighted sign to tell him to walk. Most of the people around him were not observing this convention, but it made sense to him and the soreness of his calf reminded him that he'd used up a significant chunk of good luck this week.

"Confusing, isn't it?" At first he did not think the words were directed at him but they finished his thought, "It was much easier back when the answers you knew seemed to fit."

He turned and saw a tall thin black woman standing beside him. Her head was turned towards him. She smiled, "You'd better hold onto your hat."

This confirmed his preachings that New York was filled with nutcases. He turned away, just as a bus passed with a swoosh, its side less than six inches from his face. The wind of its passage reached under the brim of his Stetson and lifted it from his head.

With remarkable dexterity the woman reached up and snagged it, saving it a fall to a foul gutter.

She handed the hat back to him. The light had changed, but he stood there. "Thanks. Much obliged."

She nodded, and pointing across the street she said, "That's a dead end. Come. I'll set you on the right path."

She was pretty in an elegant angular sort of way. Taller than he was, even in his boots, she was possessed of an assurance that filled the sense of not knowing which had flung him on this journey. "Ok." He followed as she gestured.

This woman led him two blocks to a park set in a gap between two skyscrapers. There was a small waterfall and some trees set alongside a granite enclosed pool. Roy worked pretty hard to keep from gawking. There was an empty bench and he sat beside her.

For thirty seconds she said nothing. Roy thought of and discarded three things to say. Something told him that this was the time to keep his mouth shut, that somehow this did feel like it was the right path, whatever that meant.

“You are a very lucky man. You have been given a chance to be a part of all this.”

He lifted his hat from his head and placed it in his lap. “You’re going to have to excuse me, mam, but I’m just a simple country preacher. I’m kind of out of my element here.”

“We all are. That’s what it’s all about. Everything we think we know, may well be wrong. We have to go back and start at the beginning. That’s why the children are the ones doing the talking this time. They’ll keep it simple.

“Who are you?”

“That’s a good question. I once thought I knew. Just like you knew who you were two weeks ago. You had it all mapped out, and then Hosanna showed up, and you had an entirely different course. You were about to progress from preaching in a storefront to a mighty ministry. You were going to be able to put Reverend Fangs behind you. And,” the woman grinned, “I don’t blame you for wanting to. It was hokey even in East Sagebrush Texas.”

“How do you know ...”

“Let me tell you a quick story. When I first met Hosanna, some years ago, I called myself Princess Alexandra. I had a television show on late at night and thought I was headed for stardom. A lot like you, just a slightly different audience. The message was pretty much the same. That was people are pretty silly – especially if members of the opposite sex or alcohol are involved. You called them sinners, I called them fools.”

“You know Hosanna?”

She nodded, “For a while we were real close. Then we drifted apart. Tell the truth I haven’t spoken with her since she got back. She’s been pretty busy.”

“Hate to tell you this, but she’s got a new sidekick. I know her, a hussy named Wanda.”

Alexandra held up her hand, “Whoa Pardner! Don’t go saying anything you’ll end up regretting. Wanda hasn’t done anything you or I haven’t done. And you owe her a major amends for what you tried to do to her.”

Roy opened his mouth to object, but he remembered a few years ago when his tongue had become forked when he told a lie. This woman was telling the truth, and his lie, even if nothing happened to his tongue, wasn’t going to change that.

“How...” He had several questions that started with that word. He didn’t know which one to ask first.

This exotic woman had been looking at him very intently, she ticked the questions off on her fingers.

“How do you know this?”

“How much trouble am I in?”

“How do I fix what I did?”

“How did I get myself into this?”

“How can you know all this?”

She stopped for a second, as though she was listening to something. “One thousand four-hundred fifty-three, or there-about’s.”

Roy didn’t even know where to begin. A minute ago she had said something about keeping things simple and now he was as lost as a blind flea on a mangy buffalo.

“A thousand and four hundred-fifty-three times you have used the phrase ‘God works in mysterious ways,’ or words to that effect. One of your favorites.

He got it. The sun bounced off the glass tower behind her and reflected down casting her in a blinding spotlight. She spread her hands and enveloped herself in a brilliant cloak.

“You do not deserve the grace you are being granted. You hid your ambition under your piety. You used God’s word for your personal gain. You considered forgiveness and redemption a revolving door.”

Alexandra took his hand and drew him into the sunlight. He no longer needed any words.

Chapter 23

The bottle of wine went quickly. They moved from the office into Jo Anne's apartment and debated for a moment before deciding to stay with red. The second one was about half way gone when Gail said, "This is very scary."

"Losing patients? Not to worry, being a shrink in New York is like being a chipmunk in an oak forest. Nuts are falling out of the sky." Jo Anne had stolen that line from somebody at a party, but it was so good she just had to keep using it

"What if these brats are able to turn them around? Your seven o'clock, what's his name. . ."

"Robert."

"Yeah Ro-bert. Well. Let me tell you, he graduated into Bob. You know how you get so you can tell the nuts a mile off, well up close this guy was wrapped tight, but not too tight if you know what I mean." Gail filled her glass before continuing. "No what I mean is suppose these kids know something we don't. I mean the truth is that people come to us because we know things about them that they don't. And they pay us very well to listen to their problems. So what happens if they don't have any problems?"

Jo Anne shook her head forcefully. "They have got to have problems. Their parents didn't know what they were doing or didn't care. They live in a world that thrives in making people believe that they aren't good enough, that they have got to have more. Be thinner, more beautiful then maybe then you can be happy."

"But some people are happy, and hard as it is to believe some of them never go to shrinks."

“So?”

“Suppose there were more of them.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“My one-thirty, really nice woman, been coming for a couple of years twice a week. She says. ‘If I had heard those children when I was younger I would not have made the mistakes I whine about every time I come here.’ That’s when she handed me the tape. ‘Take a look at this.’ She said as she headed out the door. Well, I had most of a session left so I popped it in the VCR, and she was right. I realized that I got into this business because I thought it would keep me from going crazy, that it would put me in control, and that I would make big bucks doing it.”

“You were right. It did keep you from going crazy, at least till now. One thing Shrink School taught us was how to stay in control. And you did make good money, hundred fifty bucks and more an hour for sitting in a comfortable chair saying, “uh huh,” and, “how does that make you feel.” Of course to get that rate you have to have an address where the rent is three thousand a month.” Jo Anne stopped and looked deeply into her wine glass.

“What?”

“Nothing, not yet, but maybe I’ve got an idea.”

Cindy Flusser was a client who was not in any danger of getting better, even with a divine intervention. She had trouble listening to anyone else, took her-self so seriously that she could not remember a time when she had been wrong (at least without a lengthy explanation as to why ‘wrong’ was an over simplification or misnomer for what really

happened). She was obsessed in proving herself to the world, though at the moment that consisted of her supervisors at the city agency where she worked and should have been commissioner.

In the next session, as Cindy wound down from her usual tirade about her mother, Jo Anne mentioned something about the children and how having a mother like Hosanna would be difficult. This set Cindy off again. "My mother thought she was God's gift to us. I know exactly how they feel. If it were my case I'd have her in court before you could say fruitcake."

"So why don't you?" Jo Anne watched as the seed germinated and began to sprout.

The woman said, "Because," and then stopped. After a moment she nodded, "That sure would shake a few of the mummies around in their offices. It's clear that she is exerting no parental control on them. Her history includes delusions. I'll check out the other one too." Cindy stood. "I got to get back to the office before someone else comes up with this. I'll bet I have a meeting with the commissioner before you can say promotion. I know it's early but we have to cut the session short today, ok?"

* * *

Phillip had appropriated a small conference room on the fourth floor of the network headquarters to use as a command center. Alerted by a call from the front desk he watched as two agents tried to contain a young, thin, and very determined woman. The monitors did not show good detail, but he thought he saw her flash a badge. He was sure of the folded paper that had to be some sort of court order or subpoena. He heard

her the minute the elevator doors opened, “Keep your hands off of me or I’ll have the judge explain some things to you.”

When the door opened she stormed in, “You in charge here?”

Phillip allowed that he might be in charge of something. He decided to not make a crack about getting her on a reality show.

She handed him a folded piece of paper. “This is a court order ordering me access to the children and the two mothers. I understand two of the children are not in the country legally and will probably refer that to someone I know at immigration.”

He took the court order and opened it. “You will, of course, need a security clearance. I believe I can expedite that, but you will have to go to our offices at the Federal building. You do know where that is?”

The woman went so livid Philip was afraid he was going to watch her have a stroke. She stamped her foot. “Do you see that signature? It is a Judge and he can have you held in contempt for obstructing me.”

Phillip looked at the paper again. “This is a municipal court is it not? There may be a jurisdictional issue here. My id says Federal Bureau of Investigation. I have been assigned to protect them from nutcases who walk off the street with bogus id. Until you undergo the clearance process I don’t know you from Omar or some other terrorist.” He was beginning to enjoy this. The immigration status of the two boys might be a bother, but up to now no one had mentioned it and he was sure Hosanna could provide proof of citizenship if it was called for.

Snatching the paper from his hand she said, “I can, in extraordinary circumstances, make arrests for endangering the welfare of a child. Do you want me to

haul you out of here in handcuffs?" Behind her one of the younger agents began to laugh quietly. Phillip nodded to him, and the two of them moved up behind her, each taking an elbow.

Spinning from their grip Cindy reached into her pocketbook and pulled out a canister of mace. Her fingers covered the words. "Urban Equalizer," as she squeezed the trigger and sprayed the two agents. As they dropped to the floor clutching their faces, she turned and aimed it towards Phillip who had started to rise out of his chair. "Hands on the desk."

Quickly he debated complying, and moved his hands towards the table, but only to pick up the blotter which he used as a shield when he launched himself across the table towards her. It deflected most of the spray, and enough of it back at her to make her drop the can and claw at her eyes. He was not gentle in his takedown. After two punches Phillip placed his knee on her back as he cuffed her. By this time one of the younger agents had recovered enough to draw his gun.

The mace lingered in the air; making it painful to remain in the room. Phillip dragged Cindy to the door and hauled her out into the hall where they caused a bit of a commotion in a group of people who were waiting for the elevator.

As head cleared and the adrenaline rush subsided a little, Phillip wondered how best to handle this.

Chapter 24

Joe Knessey had his therapy appointments at 10:30 in the morning because it was the brief period when his morning shakes had subsided, and before he seriously started his day's drinking. Over the years he'd learned that therapy was not all that successful when he was half in the bag. Since drinking was considered an occupational hazard in a newspaper editor, he'd managed to get away with it for far longer than most people would have. His erratic behavior sometimes had gotten him into trouble at work, and his biggest fear was that they were plotting ways to get rid of him. "I've got to come up with something big. Or that blonde bitch who's always ending up having lunch with Kelley is going to get my job."

Jo Anne had been waiting for this moment. It usually came about twenty minutes into what were very predictable sessions. "You didn't hear this from me, patient confidentiality and all that, but I understand that the Child Abuse Bureau is investigating Hosanna, and that other woman."

He straightened out of the slump he usually assumed on the couch. "Really? Tell me more."

Jo Anne paused, biting her bottom lip as though she was worried about discussing it. "As I said, it is delicate, but they are interested in several aspects of the case. Hosanna is quite obviously disturbed, her relationship with that woman who worked in a biker bar, while a matter between consenting adults, is disturbing when you consider that she is guardian for two other children. The other woman has a prior case where she came from. You will have to get confirmation of the investigation somewhere else."

“Of course.” Joe leaned forward, he knew just where to start. There was a bar in the little street behind the family court building. Over the years he’d developed a relationship with some court officers, a couple of social worker, and a court reporter who was sleeping with a judge. It had been at least a month since he’d bought them lunch and carelessly left some bills on the table when he’d stumbled to the bathroom. It had paid off before, and he knew that if anyone could break this story it could be him. He was the one who had busted the ‘cheatin mayor,’ and gotten the exclusive on the gravy surrounding the Bishop’s child support blues. ‘Messiah Mom and Wanton Sidekick Investigated.’ That would be his lead. He had heard that a photographer from Texas was trying to peddle photos of Wanda that had been taken in the Bar.

He stood, “Thanks doc, you know how to make a guy feel better, but I got to leave now if I’m going to hook up with my contacts.”

* * *

The SAC, head of the New York office, while not directly Phillip’s superior, was the one on whose desk this mess was dumped on.

She was alone with Phillip while the other two agents took showers and changed out of their vomit soaked clothes. “Why me?” She looked up at the ceiling. She picked up the paper. “The signature on this subpoena happens to be genuine. And while the judge in question is considered to be in the running for the political hack hall of fame, his signature makes this a legally enforceable document.”

She stood and walked to the window. “So let me make sure I have this right. This woman Cindy Flusser identifies herself as a municipal employee, shows you this

document, and, during a debate over jurisdiction that turned physical, she manages to get the drop on two highly trained members of your special task force, and floors them with a shot of mace. You then subdue her, arrest her for assault on a federal officer and, like a cat with a dead mouse it is proud of, you drop it on my desk. Is that about right?"

Phillip longed for the days when he had been in FBI Siberia guarding an uninhabited island. He could see why this woman had been able to rise to head this major office. "Pretty close, but you left out the part where the TV news crews filmed us as we escorted her from the network building."

"I was getting to that. I wanted to be sure of the foundation. Escorted? Nice word. Carried struggling and screaming despite handcuffs on wrists and ankles might be a little more accurate. From the brief clip I saw it took both of your men, and one beefy security guard from the network. They carried her like a rug on their shoulders. The part when her skirt slipped up and Agent Rogers has his face just about buried in her ass, will make the running for the bad taste news segment of the month." Her face was just about as red as the panties Cindy had been wearing. The SAC smiled, it was not a nice smile, it was the grin of a coyote about to feast on fresh rabbit.

"If you were one of my agents, I'd have your gun and credentials on my desk. But that would be about all I could do to you. Ten minutes ago, while you were washing the mace induced puke off your shirt, I was on the phone with The Attorney General, it was a conference call with the Director – our director – who didn't say much more than, 'yes sir.'" She paused for a moment. "When you leave this office. You will be met by four agents – four of my agents. Your gun will be surrendered while you are transported by Bureau plane to Washington. They will escort you to a meeting with the Attorney

General which is scheduled in about an hour and a half. You will not have time to pack your belongings, some of my people will do that for you. You will not be cuffed in deference to your long career, but there will be some cameras as you are taken to the car. You are strongly advised to say nothing.”

They could have taken him to the basement parking garage and avoided the cameras, but Phillip knew the smell of damage control winds. He stared straight ahead as the phalanx of grim agents steered him through the lobby and passed through the barrage of lights and shouted questions.

Joe walked into the bar and immediately reminded Emily and Ray of just how indebted he could be to them if he was able to overhear them say something of interest.

The television coverage of Cynthia's arrest was still on the newsroom TVs as he sloshed back from lunch. He had the scoop. He, and only he, knew what it was all about. “FEDS TRY TO QUASH HOSANNA PROBE.” There were some details he'd had to guess at and attribute to un-named city officials, but that was nothing new.

Chapter 25

At Children's Protective Services the interviewers, a psychologist from Pakistan, two social workers, one from Alabama, the other from the Georgia that used to be part of Russia, and a court reporter from Korea took over from Cindy who had decided this assault was her ticket to a disability pension. Their accents had more flavors than a stew prepared by a panel of cooks.

Miguel, the first to be questioned, did not like them. "Who are you; what do you want?"

The social worker from Georgia, a fat man who sweated a lot, said, "Not you ask the questions. You tell us about Hosanna. Does she ever touché you?"

The psychologist said, "Touch." He picked up an anatomically correct doll and fondled the plastic penis. "Like this, here." His fingers lingered then moved to the ass, "or here? Maybe when you take a bath? Or when you go pee-pee."

Miguel did not understand all of what was going on, but he could sense the evil intent. They were a lot like the men who had put his mother and him on that boat. The ones who had taken his mother off to make her pay a little more. Then he had not known that he could do anything. But he had learned a lot in the last two weeks.

This was not a time for winged horses, white or other colors. He wanted to know what the others were doing so he thought-talked to them. Faith had just been asked the same question by a mean faced woman. Estelle reported that they wanted to know things about her mom and Hosanna. The all agreed that these were not good people.

When they had been taken to the offices away from Hosanna, she had spoken to their minds telling them not to do anything. Miguel struggled to obey. The man was a

slimy fish that lived on the diseased flesh of others. He so much wanted to show the others in the room this.

“I am right aren’t I? You don’t have to be embarrassed. I know that it sometimes feels good doesn’t it?” Miguel remembered the tentacle that had reached out of the sea and plucked the bad man from the boat. He wanted something very big and very strong to come into this room and take these people.

“No, don’t!” It was Hosanna. She was, Miguel realized, talking to him.

“Why not?” He spoke out loud, sometimes thought speaking was hard.

The man grinned and turned to the others, “I thought so. You heard the boy admit it.”

Faith was having trouble too. She could see they were asking one thing, but meaning another. She heard Hope speak to Miguel, they needed something bigger, “Mom! What do I do?”

Hosanna was sitting in the “waiting room” which was furnished with a row of orange plastic chairs which were screwed to the floor. There was no window, but there was a camera in the corner. The door, she knew without having to try it, was locked.

“So much for your perfect plan.”

Instantly avenging angels each wielding a glowing golden sword appeared in the rooms with the children.

“Leave the kids alone.” The voice was loud and deep and came from everywhere. It was heard through out the building and was picked up by the TV crews on the sidewalk outside. “Look inside yourselves for the sins you seek.”

In Miguel's room the angel pointed his sword at the Psychologist. Above his head there appeared an image of him playing with a naked little boy. The social worker from Alabama was a religious woman who fell to her knees and began speaking in tongues.

In the court room on the floor above, the judge who had signed the orders had an angelic visitor. It showed his private meetings with mothers desperate for custody. Scene after scene of how he'd made them strip and sing.

Hosanna stood and spread her arms. The walls of the room vanished and the children were drawn to her. "Come this is an evil place. We will leave the angels to cleanse it."

Chapter 26

Faith asked, "Is this what Wanda meant when she said something about the trouble you had last time?" She stepped aside as an angel chased a portly bureaucrat up the block.

Hosanna smiled, "Sort of. I guess it's time we had a talk about a lot of things." She started to say more but stopped.

A TV news-crew pushed towards them. Hosanna stopped and allowed them to approach. Behind her there was the sound of breaking glass as a zealous angel pushed a filing cabinet out a fifth story window. It cart-wheeled as it fell, spilling papers before smashing into the sidewalk. She held up her hand to forestall the reporters' questions. "There seems to be some housecleaning going on at the Children's Protective Agency. Do not think that child abuse is going to be tolerated while this is going on. Until the agency is sufficiently reorganized, the Angels will be investigating cases. They will deal severely with abuse AND with false allegations. As for us, we will be leaving for a while to reconsider."

"Reconsider what?"

Hosanna did not like stupid questions. "Perhaps issues such as - can I in good conscience be silent when I know that you deliberately filed fraudulent tax returns for the last four years. Specifically the income from your summer house, for which you gave a cash discount. And oh yes there is the matter of the summer intern . . ." The reporter backed away quickly.

They took Exodus to the south shore of the harbor and anchored behind Sandy Hook. The children and Wanda gathered in the cockpit. Hosanna was quiet for a while then she began to speak. "There was a show on television with a puppet frog named Kermit. He was very wise sometimes. He had a song about how it wasn't easy being green." She paused and looked out across the water towards the city. "I felt that way all my life because I was a lot greener than any frog." She put up her hand, "no questions yet. Not green, but different. Last time I was here, I was young and perhaps a little headstrong. Like you guys get when I call you a herd of rampaging warthogs." She smiled. "I kind of got carried away. It was pretty easy, because I was right. I was trying to show other people I was right, and they didn't like it."

"How did you know you were right." Asked Jacques?

"Good question. Like you, I was born under rather special circumstances?"

She saw a bit of confusion on their faces. Sometimes it was easy to forget they were six.

"Because, like you, I have God as a parent."

Estelle raised her hand and asked, "Doesn't everybody, and why do you call God her if she is our father?"

"It's a little complicated. That will have to wait for another day. What I'm trying to explain is that what happened back there happened because someone wanted to stop us. We are different. We make some people afraid. They sometimes try to do things."

"What kind of things?"

"Well Miguel, today they were trying to take you away from me."

"They couldn't do that. We wouldn't let them."

“Yes and we didn’t – I put a stop to it. Remember when you were going to have the giant octopus come and get the man? I had to make the angels come first. You aren’t ready for that kind of trick. It was ok at the picnic because nobody could have gotten hurt. Today was different.”

“So you think you sent the angels” The voice was loud and seemed to come from all around them.

A large osprey circled and landed on the boom that hung a couple of feet above them. Hosanna said, “I liked it better when you appeared as a hummingbird.”

“It was too easy to ignore. Besides, today is a day to show some wrath.” It raised its talons.

“Don’t do anything they’ll blame me for.”

The bird paused.

Hosanna continued, “We tried to keep the message simple. And many seemed to be listening. But there were a few who.”

“I know who they are.” The hawk turned its head and peered down at the children. *“Do you know what a dichotomy is?”*

Estelle raised her hand, “It’s a word grown-ups use when they don’t want us to know what they’re talking about.”

The majestic bird nodded towards Wanda. *“You’ve done well.”* It turned back to the kids, *“it means that I can be the God who made mountains and flowers and invented love. And I can be the God who smites the evil doers. I can be the God of floods and plagues. You too, have a dichotomy, because you are a part of me. Tomorrow you will*

return and confront those who have tried to do you harm. You will cause them to come to believe. You will show them the power and the glory."

The kids sat there, mouths open, eyes wide.

Hosanna said, "Now you know what is meant when some one says God is angry. Just be glad She's not angry at you."

They nodded, vigorously. After a moment Estelle asked, "How will we do it?"

"Do what," Wanda asked?

"Show them the power and the glory."

The bird flapped its wings once, "*You'll think of something. If all else fails the Angels are always close.*" Having said that it launched its-self and glided off across the bay.

* * *

On the TV in the emergency room waiting area Cindy watched the scene at her office. When they'd refused to admit her to the hospital, she'd told them she did not feel strong enough to go home. The nurse had pointed to the rows of chairs, "You can sit there unless we get really crowed with people who are really sick."

She was very glad she had not tried to go back to work. She would have been one of the people the angels were chasing. Cindy was afraid to go home. They knew where she lived.

They had brought in some of her co-workers. One of her supervisors had come in sobbing uncontrollably about how she had done so much wrong. How she had to repay the children for all the pain she had caused. It had taken three injections to quiet her.

* * *

In a squalid apartment on the other side of the city Rosalee raised her hand, “Well if screaming won’t make you mind, maybe. . .” She didn’t get to finish as two angels materialized. One, gentle and soothing went to the child. The other, who had been a truck driver and had endured abuse as a child, took the raised hand and twisted it into an origami like shape.

Rosalee’s face went pale, breath hissed between her clenched teeth as she inhaled, and moaned as she let it out. “From now on that’s how much it will hurt every time you strike her.” With another touch her hand was restored, but the twinges echoed up to her elbow for another minute as the other angel served the child dinner.

As they left the angels stocked the refrigerator, fixed the broken pipe in the sink, and said, “The child is a holy being. Treat her as such.”

In another apartment a seven year old was trying to prepare dinner for her younger brothers. It was a challenge, there was not much food, the stove was cranky and the pots had a burned residue inside them. The angel took one look, and transported the three of them to La Maison, a restaurant she had been fond of.

The maitre’d who prided himself on being unflappable took a step backwards as they materialized next to the lectern where the leather bound book lay. “Do you have a reservation?”

“I never needed one before, Henri. I’m sure you can find us a table.”

He nodded, “Of course.” He looked down at the shabbily dressed ruffians trying to decide if the dress code might apply.

Noting this, the angel said, "I can accommodate you," as the children's clothes were replaced with selections from Saks.

Henri plucked four menus from the wooden stand and, with a bow to the children, led them into the dining room.

* * *

Jo Anne had the time to watch TV since many of her clients had canceled. She laughed at the scene as they arrested Cindy and rejoiced as the FBI agent was sent packing. The network announced that the children probably would not be appearing tomorrow, and she opened a good bottle of wine to celebrate.

She closed her eyes and imagined the session when Robert came crawling back, insecure and afraid of life.

Sensing a presence she opened her eyes. The children were standing in a semi-circle facing her. Startled, she jerked her hand and spilled some wine.

It was impossible, an hallucination, but so real. She decided not to give them an opening by speaking first, so she waited.

They waited too. The way they were looking at her made Jo Anne uneasy. It was as though they saw inside her, as though they knew the things she kept hidden even from herself. Exactly the effect she tried to create with her clients.

Finally, one of the girls took a step towards her. She said, "You should be ashamed. You put your greed ahead of everyone and everything."

Jo Anne knew she was right. But there was no way she could admit it. Sarcasm had served her well through the years; she reached into that quiver, "Moi? Listen

kiddies, you don't know what you're talking about. Go run along and fight some dragons."

Another of the girls frowned. "You have dragons too. And you don't live here any more."

"Here? What are you talking about?" As she spoke Jo Anne saw the walls come closer together while growing rough and dingy. The furniture which had come from Bergdorf's became Salvation Army seconds. On the table there was a cascading pile of unopened bills, letters from credit cards announcing cancellation, letters from lawyers demanding payment of judgments awarded them. The bottle of Chateau Neuf de Pape became Ripple. It was three quarters empty. Not nearly enough.

"Yeah," one of the boys said, "Look at everything that greed got you." They turned. The other boy opened the door, and they left, not bothering to close it behind them. The door didn't lead to another room as it had in her apartment, but to a hallway from which came the sound of someone yelling. It was not happy yelling, the unseen person was enraged and scared at the same time. Jo Anne found herself identifying and after a moment had to bite her lip to keep from adding her voice in chorus.

A man appeared in the open doorway. He was short, fat, his greasy hair arranged in an attempt to cover a large bald section on the top of his head. "Hey deadbeat, you got two days till the marshal puts your shit out on the street."

It took Jo Anne a moment to realize that the scream she was hearing came from her.

Chapter 26

The next morning the children walked into the studio. They did not speak, they just stood there. For ten seconds, twenty and then thirty, as people on the set gestured wildly and spoke quietly into microphones the kids let the silence speak volumes. Finally Estelle said, "It is fear that makes people bad. It feeds greed. It feeds hate."

Miguel added, "But maybe it is fear of the wrong things. There comes a time when it is too late. Too late to change, too late to be sorry. Maybe that is what you should be afraid of. If I were you I would be afraid because God is angry."

Jacques pointed at a very heavy man was standing with a clipboard just off the set. One of the cameras focused on him. "You eat too much. In my country some people are hungry every day." He shifted his hand slightly to a very thin woman who was wearing a headset and was directing the cameramen. "You eat just as much, but you make it come back up so you can stay thin and not look like a pig."

The woman's face showed fear. She backed away. "You can not run," Jacques continued, "You must face yourself, as you really are." He pointed at her. For a second nothing happened, but then she began to expand. Her clothes grew tight, then buttons burst and seams ripped as she grew to equal the man in size. Her blouse fell off her shoulder exposing a large hanging breast. In the control room a director moved to switch the feed away from the camera showing her, but found the switch would not work. Rolls of fat cascaded over her belt before the pressure was so much that she had to release it.

Finally the director found a switch that worked and across the country screens went blue.

Hosanna watched them come off the set. They were more subdued than usual.

"Mom." Faith asked?

"What is it?"

"It felt good when we did that. And the woman yesterday."

"So much for a perfect plan." Hosanna looked up.

"What?"

"We need to talk to the bird again."

"God?"

Hosanna nodded and said, "Somehow a bird is easier to deal with. But yes. Last time I went off and did a lot of things that felt good and seemed to make sense at the time. It didn't work the way I hoped it would."

Wanda had come up behind them. "Could I make a suggestion?"

"I wish you would," Hosanna answered.

"Let's go away. Maybe change the way we look so no one will bother us, and go someplace where we have time to think about this. Just one thing don't change us like you her." She pointed back towards the door to the studio.

Jo Anne was watching Good Morning on a little television that worked if you put a coat hanger in the hole where the antenna had broken off. Those were the brats who had done this to her. She watched them much as a mouse watches the snake that has it cornered. She had only one day left, she knew she had to do something. The phone was cut off and when she went out the payphones all spit her quarters back at her.

But when the little boy had made the anorexic balloon, she laughed. It started as a chuckle, but grew until she had to hold onto the table to keep from falling on the floor. Then as she was gasping she began to sob. Jo Anne realized that they had done to that woman what they had done to her. It was, she realized, not a nightmare she would wake from. It was, she realized, exactly what other people would think that she deserved. The little boy had been right she knew, it had been too late for her. She slipped off the chair and knelt on the patched linoleum floor.

Jo Anne prayed that she would have the strength to kill herself before the eviction.

Martha looked through the pages as they slipped out of her printer and remembered how she had savored the torment she delivered upon Max. She remembered the rage at the injustices done her, at the misunderstanding, and finally, the pleasure of dispensing divine justice. Was this, she wondered, the way this story would go? Would the children be any better at handling it than Hosanna? Martha knew that a little of her self-imposed exile was because she had been scared by the addictive pull she felt from whatever powers she had possessed. She had been glad when the psychic ability had slipped away and she no longer learned intimate details as she checked out at the grocery store.

* * *

Wanda sat on the couch. "We've got to take a time out. I've been looking as some places we could go."

Miguel shook his head, "Not yet, I've got some things I want to do."

Hosanna put her hand on his shoulder. "You'll get your chance, but not now not while we are so worked up."

"But the men who took my mother's money are in the city. I can feel them close. They are here to hurt others. It won't take long. I will make them eat gold until they can't move. Then I will tell other thieves what is inside them."

Wanda, who had spent some time around pretty rough people, went a little pale. "Miguel, we know how you feel."

"No you don't. I must stop these monsters before they . . ."

"You're right, Miguel," Hosanna said. "We will do that before we go, but then we will stop, at least for now."

The men laughed and spit on the sidewalk. The tall one said, "Be glad there is nothing to squeeze out of you little one."

"Oh but you are wrong. I have gold for you."

The man's eyes looked around quickly then focused back on the boy. "Gold you say, for me?"

Miguel held out a coin about the size of a nickel. It glistened in the sun. The man tried to lift his arm, but it did not move. Miguel cupped his hands together and there was a pile of coins. "This is your God. Kneel!"

Though they tried to resist, they sank to their knees. Miguel placed a coin in each of their open mouths. "Take this, it is your God, perhaps it will save you." The smugglers tried to resist, but their tongues could not expel the coin. Clearly they tried to

resist, but could not move. At last they swallowed and other coins followed. "If you eat them all you will be released," he said. They had no choice. Hosanna stood beside him, Wanda waited around the corner with the other children.

The men's bellies, already large, sagged from the weight. As the last coins flew from Miguel's hands they toppled to the ground. The weight pinned them to the sidewalk. A crowd had gathered on the crowded street to watch.

Miguel smiled as he watched then wriggle, unable to stand or even crawl. "What would you have done if you had seen this happen, and you knew riches were an inch away?" He stepped back. "Maybe you can pray to your God of money and be saved. Maybe the knives will not cut. Maybe the thieves will walk away from the treasure."

He looked up at Hosanna. "I am finished. We can go now."

"Wait," gasped one of the men.

He did not respond, taking Hosanna's hand they moved through the crowd which made room for them.

Chapter 27

“So how did you get into this daughter of God thing?” Wanda asked as the van headed west.

“My high school guidance counselor gave me some tests. When she graded them they said that I was likely to turn my boss into a melon. That ruled out office work. I don’t do healings, so that nixed medicine. Worked a stint doing nails for a place in a strip mall, but somehow that got kind of old.”

“Why don’t you do healings?”

“You remember how when you were in school, everybody compared you to your sister?”

“Yeah, Jean was on the honor roll, president of this and that and never got caught doing anything wrong. Me on the other hand, it seemed like I got caught every time I thought about doing something.”

“Think about it. Now grant you my half-brother was a lot older than I was, but if anything that gave his reputation even more status. When I was a kid, like them,” She pointed to the back where they were sleeping, “I used to hear this voice, didn’t really know that it was God or who she was really. I just accepted it. Then as I got older I figured out what was going on and I didn’t like it much. I was a rebellious kid. And I sure as hell didn’t want to end up nailed to a tree. I got into trouble, but part of the deal was that I was going to be able to get out with my body parts attached the way they had come from the factory.”

“I get it. I was like that too. Even though I was good at basketball, I wouldn't go out for the team because my sister had been Captain the year they went to the State Tournament. I was rebellious too.”

“It kind of shows. Not to brag or put you down, but being rebellious when you've got God watching every move, it takes some real finesse.”

“Did you date? I mean that must have been hard.”

“Sometimes She left me alone. But one guy, he was getting a little over-eager and just as he was putting his hand where I didn't really want it to go, She made him gay. And I mean three dollar bill queer. All the stereotypes,” Hosanna snapped her fingers, “just like that. He started lisping, “Oh my Goodness, what am I doing?” He was out of my pants in about two seconds, and had the car started and headed for home before I could fasten the buttons on my blouse.”

“Did he stay that way?”

“Oh yes. He moved to San Francisco and became a full fledged queen.”

Wanda smiled, “I could have used a little of that kind of help now and then. Actually more than that. Something about me seemed to tell guys, “She doesn't mean it when she says stop.”

“What did you do?”

“Went along with it more often than I want to tell you about. But then one guy in a bar had been in one of those special parts of the army. He taught me how to break a guy's finger. That usually stopped them. The couple of times it just pissed them off I had to do the thing that broke their nose and put pressure on the back of the eyeballs.

Two guys I did that to moved out of town at my suggestion. The other one turned out to be a freak who liked it when a woman fought back hard.”

“Sounds like some kind of a guy.”

Wanda smiled, “This gets a little embarrassing. Could you make sure they are asleep back there?”

When Hosanna returned, Wanda continued, “Actually, I went out with him for a while. I was getting over a divorce and for a while there it felt good to be able to haul off and slug him.”

“I know what you mean. I like that feeling too.”

“You do?”

“Power is addictive. The power to hurt whether it’s breaking a finger, or to fill that smuggler’s belly with gold. It’s the thing I have the most trouble with. Miguel really likes it too. Going to have to watch him. It’s one the flaws in people, and I guess the people side of me sometimes takes over. I get carried away.”

“Like when you did the thing with skin color?”

“A little. Though that wasn’t hurting any individuals.”

“I actually really liked that one. I was working in this biker bar that had a bunch of real hard-core racists. I looked good being purple so I didn’t mind, and it really freaked them out because they couldn’t tell who was what. They started asking each other questions that they thought only a white man could answer. What year was Calvin Coolidge elected, what was Beethoven’s first name, shit like that. It was a real hoot. Cause they didn’t know either and a lot of fights got started.”

“Long about then I was in the woods working out my retirement package.”

“Short retirement.”

“Tell you the truth, I was ready for a change. I mean I love the ocean and Exodus is as sweet a boat as has ever been built, but you know I’m really looking forward to this trip and seeing mountains.”

“Even though things aren’t going so smooth.”

“This isn’t even close to rough. Though you know what had me going for a while?”

“What?”

“Well, let me see if I can say this without seeming like too big an idiot or a jerk or whatever. Last time I was in charge. Good or bad it was my doing. This time I saw immediately that the kids were the important ones. And then I began to worry that my capabilities had been diminished.”

“Capabilities?”

“Powers, but that makes me sound like something out of a comic book.”

Wanda nodded, “Ok, yeah I get it, but they weren’t?”

“No. When we were in that building and I wanted the angels – there they were. When I wanted flaming swords I got flames.”

“So you got your confidence back? Is that what was bugging you up in Rhode Island?”

“Partly. And a part of me wanted more credit for the little ones. I still think they were one of my more brilliant plays last time around.”

“They were pretty funny. But how can they be appreciated if nobody can see them?”

“You’re right, but originally it was an important part of the joke. It drove James crazy that he had this full fledged miracle going on under his feet and he couldn’t tell anyone about it.” Hosanna turned in her seat and looked out the side window. “Take the next exit. Just up here”

There was something in her tone that kept Wanda from asking any of the six questions that kept revolving in her head.

As they slowed on the exit ramp Hosanna continued her instructions. “Right at the light, take that road for a while.”

Finally Wanda had to ask, “Is God telling you something?”

“No. I tapped into something. Go faster, don’t worry about the lights, they’ll be green.”

Wanda put her foot down and the van accelerated along the six lanes that were bordered with an endless string of restaurants, gas stations, motels and stores. At three in the morning there were only a couple of other cars on the road. “What is it?”

Usually I shrug the things I sense off. I can’t handle nearly all of them, but in that motel over there, the Day’s Inn, there is this guy who is going to wish he never was born. “Turn here and go around to the back.”

Wanda took the turn a little too fast and the van swayed a bit. “Where?”

“Past the truck parked there,” she pointed, “and then right, there will be another lot. Pull into the space by the stairs.”

Wanda didn’t see the lot much less the space, but she turned and found it just as Hosanna had said.

“I want you to come with me. An angel will watch the kids.” She unfastened her belt and opened the door before Wanda could respond.

She got to the top of the stairs in time to see Hosanna point her finger at a door about half way down the open walkway. Hurrying, she got to it as Hosanna stepped through. There was a naked man standing over a naked woman who lay curled up on the carpet. Looking closer Wanda saw that there was some one else lying with the woman - a child. She was wearing pajamas, but they were ripped, the pants were pulled down.

The man's face was contorted with rage. “Get the fuck out of here.” He moved to the bedside table and pulled a gun from the open drawer.

Hosanna turned it into a large rat that sank its teeth into the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Then there were more rats on his shoulders biting his neck, running up his legs and tearing at his penis with long curved claws. He started to scream, but his mouth was filled with a mass of meal worms some of which started into his nostrils.

Wanda helped the child get to her feet and wrapped a blanket around her.

The man was rolling on the floor trying to get the rats off of himself. The woman started to move towards the bathroom. Hosanna said, “Stop. You let him do this for too long. You did not believe your child when she told you. You let fear and pride combine to deny the truth.”

Hosanna turned to Wanda, “Take the child to the van, we are one more.”

The woman opened her mouth, “You can't.”

“You didn’t. Didn’t say those very words to him when it mattered” Hosanna replied. She looked down at the man. “When the night is over he will be blind and helpless.” She moved close to the woman and looked her in the eye. “And he will be yours. To care for, or not. Or even to hurt some more. It will be your choice - and how you choose will determine if she someday returns to you. That will be her choice.”

“You. Can’t.” The woman closed her mouth because the arguments would not come.

“You know that I must.”

After settling the child into the back of the van, and finding their way back to the Interstate, Wanda asked, “What was that all about? I mean we’ve been driving for hours and have to have passed a hundred cases more or like this, a bunch of burglaries and maybe even some fools sticking up a 7-11”

Hosanna took a few seconds before replying, “You’re right. I don’t know; usually I tune it out. I told you how the power feels good, and maybe I had something to get off my chest. Also this kind of thing gets to me especially because I had a friend in fifth grade who was a lot like that little girl. I knew what was happening. No one else believed her because her father was a respected business man. I was just a kid and didn’t know how to do neat things with rats. It’s probably a good thing because I didn’t like my teacher that year. I did talk to God about it.

“She took care of it and it only confused me, because the girl moved away after her father died. It was good for her, but I didn’t have a lot of friends, and I missed her.”

Chapter

The girl slept for hours. When she woke Hosanna stopped the van in that parking lot behind a church. As she led them through the back door into the kitchen of the fellowship hall, she explained, "I like churches, don't always agree with what goes on in them, but they're a good place to talk with God. And we've got some talking to do."

A door opened half way up the hall and a woman leaned her head and shoulders out. "Can I help you?"

Hosanna smiled, "Just want to use your sanctuary for a bit."

It was then that the woman recognized them. "Oh!" She stepped out into the hallway – "It's just up here. I'll show you where the lights are."

It was a plain church, built, Hosanna guessed, forty years ago by a congregation that was pressed for funds. The stained glass windows were simply triangular pieces of colored glass arranged randomly. Though sheet rock had been put inside the cinderblocks it had warped when the roof leaked back in the eighties. The industrial carpet on the floor was worn in spots. As the minister flipped the switches one of the banks of lights flickered and went off.

"We need to perform some miracles. Might as well start there." Hosanna waved her hands a little like a conductor working an orchestra. The lights were replaced with a tiered wrought iron candelabra suspended on chains from the now vaulted clearstory. The walls once squat, now soared with graceful stone pillars curving into buttresses. A round rose window behind them admitted the morning sun. Behind the altar rose a carved wooden screen which matched the intricately carved wooden pews. Hosanna

ushered them into the first bench then moved to stand facing them. She pointed to the new child, "This is Jean. She didn't have a star, but she belongs with us now." Shifting her focus to the girl, Hosanna continued, "You have been hurt, and last night I took you from your father. Today I will replace him. You deserve better." She turned slightly and took a step back. A soft blue-white light streamed down from the impossible heights above them. At first it seemed to illuminate a mist, but that slowly took form.

The man who stepped from the beam was short, his beard was scraggly and his hair curly. He wore what looked like pajamas and was barefoot. Two steps took him to Jean. Squatting down so that his face was level with hers, he held his hand out. She reached up and took it.

He spoke in Aramaic, then switched to English, ... "You need a new father. I will be with you." He moved his hand to her head, "I grant you peace from your past."

Leaning forward on his toes he kissed her on the forehead and then stood. Turning to Hosanna he said, "It was brave coming back. Going to give them another shot at you?"

"Didn't have much choice, besides, I have the feeling that this time is better thought out. The children are the right device to get people to listen." She gestured indicating Jean, "Especially this one, she will have the power to soften the hardest of hearts."

The man nodded, "Yes, perhaps." He looked around, surveying the other kids, then the minister and finally Wanda. His gaze rose to the heights of the miniature cathedral. "Chartres?"

Hosanna nodded, "Mostly, fudged here and there a bit though. Added the pews."

“Nice. In here it seems so easy.” He waved his hand, “but out there It never works the way it should.”

“Tell me about it.”

He surveyed the kids again. “You’re going to need all the help you can get.”

He flicked his finger and a blue halo appeared over Wanda. Beside her, the minister sank to her knees.

“Rise. Hosanna’s got it right, it is not she or I who are to be worshiped.”

The woman tried to stand, but her legs were too shaky. “Don’t make me do another healing,” he said, with a streak of humor in his voice.

Turning to Hosanna he said, “I’ve been intrigued by your style. Times have changed, but I think I tended to take things a bit too seriously. Do you think that maybe I could ride along with you for a while?”

“I’d be glad for the help. First time around I wanted to do it all myself, but I learned that lesson.”

He nodded in agreement, “And Jean needs a dad.”

“Yeah, and you got shortchanged there last time, unless there is something to the DaVinci Code?”

He shook his head.

Wanda craned her head upwards, she was reaching up trying to touch the halo.

“Is this what I think it is?”

Even though Hosanna had tried to create a miniature version of Chartres, the new church spilled off of the corner lot and extended across the two streets and into the yards

of the houses previously opposite. It was beautiful. The minister finally found her voice, “But Methodists don’t have cathedrals.”

“They do now. Let me know if the zoning board gives you any problems.”

Hosanna took a couple of steps towards the van. “Unless you want me to change it back.”

The minister shook her head, “No. But what should I believe. If He’s back?”

“What’s the problem,” Hosanna asked? “Every Easter you say *He is risen*, this time you’ve actually seen Him. There is a man at Princeton. Hutch, give him a call. He’s gotten pretty good at explaining how the impossible is.”

“Is?”

“Yeah. Is.”

Jesus turned from his conversation with Jean. “I’m back. That’s a lot simpler than the Trinity, never quite got the hang of that one myself. It’s really quite simple. You believe, or you don’t. Your choice. Me, I believe.”

Chapter

Jesus goes to Sears for new robes, but gets hung up in hardware.

As they climbed into the van, with the man going into the back with Jean, Hosanna whispered to Wanda, "I think he likes you."

"What!" She reverted to whisper, "No way, besides I sort of swore off men last time I was in trouble. You know, hey God if I get out of this one alive, I'll..."

Hosanna snickered, "I told you God has a sense of humor, and He has a thing for fallen women."

"Who you calling fallen. I had a trampoline."

"First thing we got to do is get him some clothes."

"Yeah we stick out like the second coming. You know I have the feeling that I'm going to wake up and find someone spiked my lemonade with a mega dose of acid or something."

Hosanna moved into the right lane and turned on her blinker. Wanda said, "No!"

"What?"

"You can't!"

"Can't what?"

"Can't take Him to a mall. Twenty minutes into the second coming and you're going to take Him to the Galleria?"

"We got to get him clothes and shoes. You want to do mail order from LL Bean?"

“But – all those people. I mean everybody knows who we are from TV and they’re going to figure him out pretty quick, especially if I can’t lose this halo thing.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll make it so people pay us no mind.”

“What you going to do, bring Elvis back too and set him loose at the other end of the mall?”

Hosanna laughed. “We’ll save that one for when we really need it. No. Haven’t you noticed that people don’t pay any attention to us? It was a trick I learned a little late the last time I was here. We will have to dim the halo though.”

The door to Sears led into the tools section, and Jesus wandered off towards the woodworking section. Hosanna took his elbow, “Let’s get you dressed and shod, then we can come back.”

His hand moved to his sleeve and fingered the cloth. Just up the aisle there was portly man wearing a Hawaiian shirt, green and black with yellow birds. In a second Jesus was wearing an identical shirt, and burgundy pants.

Hosanna looked up at the ceiling. “Didn’t you bring him up with any fashion sense.”

She pointed towards another man, “I was thinking more along those lines.”

Jesus frowned. “Life is too short to wear polo shirts. Besides if I wear a logo, can you imagine the endorsement issues?” He smiled, “You have to remember I haven’t been completely out of touch. Now, can you give me a minute? I want to check out the laser guided chop saws.”

As he passed Wanda, he said, "And you should not be ashamed of the halo. It looks good on you."

Later, when they were back in the van, Wanda said to Jesus, "Remember how you told me the Halo looks good on me. That got me to thinking. I always had this thing about getting attention. Not sure why I did it, but it always was something I had to have. When I was a little kid I was loud. Then as I grew up and got these," she pointed to her breasts, "I didn't have to be loud, all I had to do was stick my chest out. And then later, take off some clothes. Interesting thing was they were all that men were interested in. They were just as happy if they didn't have to try and remember my name. And the funny thing is that was ok with me too. I guess I didn't think there was much to me beyond my good looks. It also somehow made it ok that all I wanted from them was some money. That was the way I measured things then.

"What I'm getting to is that I guess I don't want the attention this would bring me. Because I don't deserve it. I mean when I was in the taking my clothes off stage, I did a lot of things that will keep me from ever having one of these for real."

He shook his head, "You don't get it."

"What do you mean? You're the one who should have it."

Shaking his head he said, "Every day we start new. If we carry yesterday's baggage with us we may stay stuck in the same rut. But we don't have to. It's optional. That's what John was doing down at the river. His idea was that if you thought you were going to drown, when you came out you'd have a new way of seeing things. It worked for some of us. But you don't need a near-death experience to do it. All you have to do

is open your eyes and see things differently. You've done that. Your past is behind you, unless you choose to go back to it. And you don't want to do that."

"That's for sure. But this thing, how come everybody doesn't have one?"

"Maybe they do, you just can't see them. Or maybe it's because you were in the right place at the right time and caught the eye of this guy who happened to have an extra one in his pocket."

"You didn't have any pockets. And why don't you have one?"

"That's a good question. Maybe when we go to visit Hosanna's professor friends we'll let them have a crack at answering it."

Hosanna heard that and said, "So we're going on another trip are we? What about the television show? And how many agendas can we have going at once?"

"You want to see a miracle? Call the studio and tell them where you are – see how fast they can get a camera crew here. As for agendas, I was watching pretty closely the last time you were here, and you left some interesting doors open. I was itching to jump in a couple of times, but you-know-who kept reminding me that it wasn't my turn."

Hosanna moved her head indicating the kids in the back of the van, "And, might I remind you, it's still not our turn. We're here for childcare so far as I can tell."

* * *

James was engrossed trying to put the past couple of weeks into perspective and still make sense in the sermon he had to give tomorrow. Usually he liked to have it done on Thursday, but these had been extraordinary weeks. He was dimly aware that the door bell had rung, and when he heard his daughter gleefully screaming 'Hi,' he assumed it was one of her playgroup buddies.

The door to his study was thrown open, lessons about knocking thrown to the wind. “Daddy, Daddy, guess who’s here?”

James had twice written sermons espousing the enthusiasm his daughter demonstrated. He moved the mouse to save his changes, pushed the irritation at being interrupted back, and said, “Let me see, Maybe it’s fairy godmother and she’s going to turn you into a princess?”

“No. Better than that.”

“Better than a fairy godmother? Even one that could give you a pony?”

“A pony?” She thought for a minute, then shook her head, “No even better than that.”

James spread his hands, “I give up. Who could be better than that?”

A man’s voice answered. “I had a brother named James.”

He took a step into the room. He was wearing a very loud shirt. There was a woman behind him, she said to James’ kids, “Go and play with the others, tell them I said ponies might be fun. But don’t let them fly too high.”

James knew that voice. He’d seen the reports on the news of the cathedral which had miraculously replaced a cinderblock church a hundred miles away. The minister had been interviewed though not coherently. James knew that feeling. He tried to open his mind so that it could accept the impossible.

The woman said, “You have to give him time. He usually gets it, but it takes him a while. Better than most who don’t ever get it.”

Get it, he wondered? A brother named James? No. Couldn't be. Then he got it. He started to sink to his knees but she said. "We're not the ones to worship, discussed this once before."

Jesus reached out and took his hand and helped him to stand.

James started focusing again in the middle of a sentence that Hosanna was saying, "... here because my brother felt the urge to do a little preaching. Figured we might be able to wrangle a guest spot in tomorrow's service."

He was light headed. He grabbed for words, but they were really slippery. "Oh My God. Of course." The delighted screams of the children came in through the window. The sound of a pony knickering, without knowing why he blurted, "If they can have ponies can I have a cathedral too?"

Jesus smiled, "You already do."

They had decided that James would simply introduce Jesus as, "Someone who you may find interesting." But when the moment came Jesus felt a tug on his sleeve as the new kid, Jean, slid off the pew and walked to the aisle. JC looked at Hosanna who shrugged and smiled.

When Jean got to the pulpit she could not see over the lectern. She turned around and then sat on the step. "Secrets," she said. "Secrets can be a very bad thing. What was done to me was a secret. It was a bad thing. It hurt. A lot. Sometimes people think that secrets are okay, but I don't think so. Not when they can be so bad." She looked out at the congregation. "So, how many secrets do you have?"

With that she stood and walked back to the pew.

After a moment James stood and walked to the center of the nave and stood facing the listeners. “Somehow I don’t think that was intended as a rhetorical question. I will tell you a secret. I have always felt that I deserved better than this small congregation. I wanted a bigger church, a larger ministry, a chance to publish in scholarly journals. I thought that the little ones might be a way out. I spent a lot of time writing about them in preparation for the day I would leave here. The secret meant that to an extent I was lying to you about my commitment to this parish.

He scanned the audience, his eyes paused and rested on certain individuals before moving on. “I can’t say I feel any better for having told you that. What relief I may have is now tempered by some fear of your anger.” He gestured towards Jean, “She’s right. We do have secrets. I am privy to some of them. I suspect others. I will not reveal them, but if I get her drift, they really aren’t secrets, not to the One who counts.”

After spending a long moment looking at the audience, he asked, “Does anyone else what to say anything?”

There was a pause, some coughing, shuffling of feet, a couple of whispers. No one stood. Estelle stood on the pew and turned around facing the woman behind her. “I think you have something to say.”

The woman’s face went white. She sagged slightly, then caught herself. “No.”

Estelle shook her head, “Yes you do. But you can wait. Until it’s too late.” She turned slightly, looking at a man three rows back. After a moment he nodded and stood.

Note: More can be added to this scene.

New scenes

Co-op board gets upset at the crowds outside the building.

The apartment was located on Central Park West. Within days the police had erected barricades to keep the multitude in Central Park. From the window they could see crowds wherever there were breaks in the trees allowing a view of the ground. A phalanx of news trucks were parked along the side of the street.

The kids loved the elevators. They had been transformed from boring brass and wood to a variety of alternate vehicles. One was a space ship, another a basket suspended under a balloon. The most interesting though was when the doors opened passengers stepped into the palm of a gigantic hand that lifted you up cradled between a thumb and fingers bigger than oak trees. There were unscheduled stops too. Sometimes the doors would open at the top of the Matterhorn with the Alps spread beneath. Other times the expected lobby would be the bottom of the Grand Canyon with rafts going by..

At first the other tenants in the building had been aloof and reserved. Then as the secondary effects of the kid's residence became evident, with the police cordon, the constant attendance of the press, and the mostly unseen, but tangible presence of two hundred thousand people quietly waiting just across the street; the residents split into three groups. There were those who evacuated to houses in South Hampton, others who reveled in the excitement inviting friends to come and see, and those who started a movement to get the newcomers to move.

Fred Bridges especially disliked the changes to the elevators. After one memorable ride in a cage made of toothpicks, described to him by a strange woman sporting a halo, as a, “test of faith.” He called Tom Wilcox who was serving as the chair of the co-op board.

“Tom, Fred Bridges, here, you know 24-A. We’ve got to do something. Things have gotten out of hand. I would leave, but the house on the Vineyard is a little far for a comfortable commute. And besides why should I have to move?”

“I’ve been getting a lot of calls Fred. You are not the only one who is upset. The other day Mitsy Burgess got on the elevator, one of kids was on it, you know the dark one, and he tells her that she needs to give more. I mean this is Mitsy, she’s listed as a dress circle benefactor at the Met, has given at least one gala ball a year for as long as I can remember, and is the one person in the building who I might imagine belonging to Sierra Club or Greenpeace. She decides that she does not have to explain her philanthropic priorities to a child, so she ignores him. But when they get to the lobby the doors open and she’s in the central plaza of some squalid little town somewhere deep in the third world. Before you know it there were at least a hundred children, dressed in rags or worse, swarming around her. She had to reach into her purse and throw all her change and small bills into the air in order to make her way to the street.”

“My God, why didn’t the doorman do something?”

“He didn’t see anything. It was some sort of illusion. Just like when we called the inspectors to come so they would tell the children to restore the elevators. They came, thanks to John who is close to the Mayor, but when they looked at them the cars

were perfectly ok. Just the way they were supposed to be. But the minute they left, the hand was back.”

“I hate that one the most. Someone said they got the idea from watching King Kong”

“I think we need to have a talk with them.”

“We,” Tom asked? “Do I hear a volunteer to accompany me?”

* * *

Alexandra and Roy hook up with Hosanna Wanda JC and the kids. JC and Wanda take Roy to the woodshed.

The policeman was very nice, but unswerving, “Residents only beyond this point.” He pointed to his left, “You can use seventy-second street to go to the park if you wish, but this area has been sealed.”

Roy started to argue, but Alexandra put her hand on his arm. “Let me handle this Roy.” Her sight, she realized, was back. The cop’s name was Bob, he was headed for a divorce and was going to follow instruction not to admit anybody who didn’t know the code phrase given to residents and which was changed every day.

“Broccoli.”

The cop snapped into focus and stood a little straighter. He spoke into his walkie talkie, “Lieutenant, we’ve got a pair of civilians with the word.”

There was a hiss of static followed by the words, “Let them in.”

At the apartment house there were four men in suits, who ushered them off to the side of the lobby. "You're not on the list," one began.

Alexandra grinned, she had missed having her abilities, "Your phone is going to ring. It will be your wife telling you that your Uncle Rex is in town and wants to stay over because he's too cheap to pay for a hotel. Then call waiting is going to beep and we'll be added to the list."

He cocked his head, one thing he'd learned in the past week was that the stranger the shit the more likely it was to be true. His phone rang. He looked at the number, gave Alexandra a little nod and said, "Tell Uncle Rex that the guest bedroom is being fumigated. I'll talk later, I'm getting another call."

After a second he nodded to one of the men. "Take them up."

* * *

"Princess! You found me!" Hosanna stepped out into the hall and threw her arms around her friend. "It's been a bit crazy, but now you're here, I'm sure things will get back to normal. What ever that is..." She relaxed her embrace as she looked over Alexandra's shoulder and saw Roy. Addressing him she said, "You look different without the rattlesnake. It wasn't the right accessory for you."

She turned to the man in the suit. "Agent Henry, tell the police to be careful. They've just towed this man's truck and there is a venomous serpent in a compartment behind the seat. Roy will give you the keys. Tell them not to hurt it. I suspect the zoo can make a home for it."

Roy handed the man his keys.

Hosanna opened the door and led them into the apartment. The foyer had a floor made of polished granite. Hosanna stopped and held Alexandra's hand. "We've got some catching up to do. Roy why don't you go on into the living room? You'll find it beneficial." She pointed him in the right direction and pulled the princess down the hall.

Roy had the idea that beneficial was going to not be as easy as it sounded. He took five steps to an arch and entered a large elegant room. There was a wall of windows overlooking the park and the city beyond. The size of the room dwarfed the three couches which were set in a conversational group. A man rose as Roy took a couple of hesitant steps forward. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt adorned with red parrots and bright blue waves. He was short and dark, his beard was neatly trimmed. The woman sitting next to him turned to look at him and Roy saw it was the harlot from Texas, Wanda. She was somewhat more modestly dressed, but it was the blue halo that floated over her head that grabbed his attention.

The man spoke, "In my experience, Roy, it is best if one confesses his sins and makes amends right away. It saves a lot of unnecessary awkwardness."

Roy tore his eyes away from the woman, *who was this guy*, he wondered, then, with the force of a lifetime of prideful bluster delivered with a crowbar, it struck him. He fell to his knees and kept going till he was sprawled facedown on the floor. At once every lie he'd ever told sounded in his ears.

As his sins circled like a pack of wolves, the fear Roy had caused Wanda came close and wrapped itself around him.

He felt an utter cold reaching into him, and sensed he was but one heartbeat from death. As a flood of regrets lifted him and washed him through a narrow stone canyon

where his body was thrown from one rock to the next until he let go of Roy and found in its place his soul filled with joy.

He lay babbling on the carpet as Wanda and Jesus resumed their talk.

Sometime later when he regained a sense of self, time and place he slowly got to his knees. Wanda got up from the couch and walked over to him. "Look up at me."

Roy complied. She raised her hand.

He waited for her blessing. But instead she struck, her palm slapping his cheek and ear hard, jerking his head and sending white streaks across his vision.

Wanda reached up and felt for her halo. "Is it still there?"

Jesus chuckled, "fraid so. And I don't think another shot is going to work either."

As his head cleared Roy realized he was coming in on the middle of something much bigger than he was.

"Forgive me."

Wanda shrugged. "Why not? But if you ever get another weasel thought I will find you."

"And when she's through with you, there are others standing in line." Jesus sent the image of a boy into his head. It was a young man Roy had once chosen to revile to his congregation to make an example of. Roy had almost forgotten, the boy and his family, he now remembered, had slunk off leaving town.

"How can I?" He began.

Jesus answered, "That's a good question. 'Sin no more', comes to mind."

“It’s a start,” Wanda agreed. “She turned to Jesus, “So why didn’t I lose the halo? I hit him pretty hard.”

Still kneeling, Roy shuffled back out of range in case she decided to try again.

Jesus took her hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed it. “It becomes you. Besides, I’m not sure it’s my doing any more. Things are not as simple as they once were.”

* * *

Alexandra let go from another hug and said, “So God Girl, tell me all.”

Hosanna smiled. “I don’t have a clue. The good news is this time I’m just a supporting character.”

Alexandra nodded, “And it doesn’t bother you as much as it used to?”

“You got it. It’s the kids, and I think that God’s got it right this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well JC and I were talking last night and we decided that our messages were too complicated. People didn’t want to hear what we were saying. We threatened people.”

“And the kids don’t. I’ve been watching the news. How about that thing with no secrets the other day? There’s been some strange fallout. Three senators have resigned and there is a rumor about the vice president. That’s the kind of aftershocks you were known for.”

“Yeah He said that too.”

“He? JC? I almost missed that one, you’re telling me? No!” Alexandra shook her head.

Hosanna shrugged. "You're the Princess, but remember, I'm Queen of the strange. He sort of showed up one day. Had an idea that this might be a chance to give a follow-up sermon, but that hasn't happened yet. He's good with the kids though and he's kind of sweet on Wanda. But enough about me, what about you?"

"Remember when you restored my sight at least so I could tell the outcomes of football games?"

"Yeah, I figured you could get a job on TV like you wanted."

"Remember how you were also the Emperress of unintended consequences? Trouble was I was too good. I knew who was going to win. I knew who was going to get injured. And after just a few games, this guy comes around and says I'm hurting the gambling. He tells me I've got to call a few wrong so his people can make some money."

"I ignored him and he sent this guy around to see me a week later. Big guy, and it didn't take second sight to see what my future was going to be."

"Did he? I can. . ."

"No, leave it be. He did me a favor. I wasn't cut out to be famous, or rich or any of that. No matter how much I thought I ought to be. Got to be careful what you wish for."

* * *

As Hosanna led the princess into the living room she heard Wanda say, "So why don't you give him my halo? He's repented in ways I never did."

"That's not true. When you turned your life around, you were making all the amends you needed to."

Roy was still kneeling on the rug. There was something different about him. Alexandra could see that his aura had shifted. It was moving closer to pure having shed the slimy half tones that had run through it like fudge through ice cream.

Alexandra spoke to Wanda. "You need to get to a meeting girl. How long has it been?"

Wanda turned. "About three weeks. You're right. But." She pointed up at her halo.

"No coincidences. Maybe somebody at the meeting is going to need help with a higher power."

Jesus said, "A meeting, what is this?"

Alexandra shook her head. "Not for you. They got this thing about no creed. Besides you don't qualify."

JC and Hosanna become worried that the kids are getting carried away.

Note:where is this?

*

*

*

It was the very last place Jo Anne ever expected to be. Dimly lit, dirty and filled with people she would not have considered suitable for treatment, Hell's Belles was the only place she'd been able to find where her credit card didn't get rejected. As of two-forty-five she was officially homeless. Her cell phone was deader than King Tut, the few pay phones still working all ate her quarters, besides, there was no one to call. The one

smart thing Jo Anne had done was pack the few presentable clothes she still had in a large leather shoulder bag. When the marshal came she'd started packing more things into a laundry cart, but realized that would mark her as homeless. Besides, the stuff she still had was not really worth saving.

There were many strange things about this place. Leading the list was the sense that the people here knew her. Behind the leather trimmed bar the servers wore leotards and tattoos. Most were pierced with rings and bars showing through the tight fabric. They poured a generous drink served in large glasses.

The patrons were a mixed lot; male and otherwise with an average disposition to the South of Clinically Depressed, except for the few on a manic jag. The wonderful thing was she was sure that most of them were having a day at least as bad as hers.

"This is your first time here."

It wasn't a question, but Jo Anne nodded. Even in the dim light she could see the woman was startlingly beautiful. Long and lean yet possessing graceful curves she was enough to make Jo Anne wonder just how deep her own heterosexuality ran.

"Well you fit right in. You'll find this is more than a bar." She paused and added a splash more to Joanne's drink. "It's a harbor of refuge and a family that none of us had out there."

"Harbor of refuge? Funny you should say that, the waves have been pretty big."

The woman stretched up and back, somehow a feline movement, "You're well above the high water mark here. Nothing can touch you here."

There was an emphasis on the word nothing that caught the psychotherapists attention. "I used to provide a safe place."

The woman's long fingers settled on her hand, "Now it's our turn. Finish your drink, then go into the back, Charles wants to meet you."

The feeling was electric though she could not tell if it was from the touch or the words.

The door was set behind a red velvet curtain. It opened into another larger room where people were sitting on couches and a few were clustered around a man sitting at a white grand piano. Jo Anne took a couple of hesitant steps into the room when a man at a table in the corner waved to her. He was tall, trim and tanned. The male equivalent of the woman behind the bar.

A waiter appeared with her drink and set it on the table. With each of the ten steps it took her to cross the room Jo Anne felt her troubles recede. By the time she sat she was almost back to the person she had been just a few days before.

"I've been waiting for you."

"They used to say it was a ladies prerogative . . ."

"Could have saved you some days of trauma, but never mind." He raised his drink, "To being exactly where you are supposed to be."

She raised her glass, tapped it against his gently and took a sip.

Nothing had ever seemed this right before, she waited for him to speak.

"Your error was in your impatience. Sometimes you have to take the long view of things, and to remember that some things will never let you down."

Intrigued, she asked, "Such as?"

“Pride and greed for starters. Always bet on those two. Lust is their bastard child with attributes of both.”

“What about fear and rage.”

He looked at her, he smiled, his voice was good natured, but there was a sharpness in his expression, “You shall have no fear, and anger is always a tactical blunder. Consider the freedom of no longer making mistakes.”

Jo Anne felt herself being drawn to him. In the past she would have resisted, put up barriers, discussed intimacy issues, but tonight, with nowhere else to go, she just nodded.

The apartment was reached by an elevator concealed in what looked like an expanse of wall. The man, the woman from the bar, and Jo Anne rode in silence. She sensed an intimacy between the two, but it was professional before lover, though she sensed that was there too. The possibility of sharing this man was not troubling. She had a place waiting for her in a warm bed and that was a vast improvement on her condition not two hours before.

The door slid open directly into the apartment. It was sparsely furnished with an elegance she had only seen in architectural magazines. There were no personal items and it was then she realized she had left her bag down below. Before she could comment on it she further understood that there was no need for personal items.

The man walked off to the left towards a gleaming kitchen. The woman took her elbow and guided her down a hall to the right. “Tonight you will sample the benefits package. Tomorrow you will understand your role.”

* * *

Every network had a panel of experts who digested, analyzed and otherwise interpreted the latest pronouncement, by the kids. Jo Anne had been on a couple of TV shows before, once in a memorable lapse of Judgment on Montel where she discussed the traumas of step parenting. The studio she was taken to was much more efficient yet had touches of elegance and class the big networks did not even try for. “We have no point, except to tell the truth as we see it. We will not be blinded by holy visions, halos and delusional characters calling themselves Napoleon, Joan of Arc, or even Jesus Christ. The name of the show kind of says it all, “Get Real Will You?”

The director went on to explain further. “Let the experts in the other fields expound there. Leave the biblical references to the Doctor of divinity; you are the expert on delusional thinking. Highlight the grandiosity, the flawed faith systems and the lingering effects of an illegitimate birth and you will have done your part.”

The doctor of divinity was very smooth. He was wearing a well cut suit which made him look competent and earnest but stopped just short of overly prosperous. He was clearly in charge of the assault. “What has this world come to?” He repeated it, louder and with a more incredulous tone, “what has this world come to?”

He paused and looked directly at the camera. “Some of you are filling your cellars with food and goods, preparing for the winter that will soon come listening for the trumpets that will signal the start of Armageddon. You are locked and loaded. Others are wandering around looking up expecting the rapture to take you at any minute.

“Every day we see children telling us what to believe. They are part of an entourage so bizarre I have at times thought about stocking up my own cellar. We have the sequel to Hosanna whatever she was, but not so far as I am concerned a direct descendant of God. We have a little guy claiming to be Jesus come back to catch the show. We have the twenty-first century vision of Mary, complete with a neon halo that looks like it is left over from an early star-wars movie.”

“Maybe we should retire to our cellars, but not because the second coming is at hand, but because the hucksters and con men have finally gotten control of the media – excepting this Christian Network of course.

“You know the saying about a chain and its weakest link?

“Well its true, and I am here to show you a couple of links and ask you is this chain strong enough to hold a feather, and when you have seen what I am about to show you – you will know that the entire show is a sham.

He pointed to a screen to his left. “We’ll start with scenes you have probably seen.” There they all were, Hosanna, and the children with Wanda, and the little man who called himself Jesus. It showed them talking as they walked down a street, then the camera zoomed in on Wanda until her face filled the screen.

“Do not let that halo fool you, I’ve seen better on children on Halloween. We are supposed to believe this woman is Mary?”

The screen went dark for an instant and then lit up again. The scene was different, but the face that filled it was Wanda, the shot was taken from the same angle there was no question. In this film there was no halo and as the camera panned back

there were no clothes either. This much flesh had never been shown on the CBN but this was an extraordinary opportunity to put Satan in his place.

“I do not apologize for showing you this, lewdity, this depravity,” he said as an obviously drunken naked Wanda stumbled and wrapped her arms around a biker wearing leathers that read “Satan’s Slaves MC”

The biker’s hand groped her then the screen went dark. The studio cameras focused on the doctor of divinity as he said, “There is more to this scene. I will only tell you that it is worse than you can possibly imagine. I will tell you that having watched it I have serious doubts that the daughter was fathered by the one we call God, Not Unless,” his voice rose to a bellow, God has decided to come to Earth dressed as a biker and has a tattoo on his rear that says “This is where you can kiss me.”

His voice dropped back to normal, as though he was teaching Sunday School. “I was telling you about a chain and its weakest link. Well this is no link it’s a bit of twine and it’s just come untied.”

He turned to Jo Anne, “Doctor, would you say that the woman you just saw on the screen has the where-with-all to be a fit mother?”

Jo Anne gulped. It had been quite a scene. “She certainly could repent and be rehabilitated, but given the delusions she appears to be harboring, I would have to say no – she would be a danger to her child.”

“And what of the woman who caters to her delusions?”

Jo Anne was acutely aware that her audience was huge and would be larger with every replay of this segment. This was clearly the path that would take her back to the nice apartment on the upper west side, the house on the vineyard and even beyond. “I

have been a psychologist for twenty seven years. I've seen a lot of sick people doing a lot of sick things to other people, but I have to say this is one of the most twisted and bizarre relationships I have come across. I would even hazard a guess that this Wanton Wanda was picked by Hosanna because of what she was. I know this network does not speak often of sex between members of the same sex, but I am sure that such a scene as we have just seen is going on as we speak."

The man, knowing he was off camera gave her a big smile, then assumed a sober face as he finished the segment saying, "We drove this woman Hosanna away once before, it time we did so again.

"The bible provides for stoning as proper response to acts like this. We are more civilized today. I'm not sure it is progress, but it is. So instead of casting stones, we will mail them. I want each and every one of you to go outside right now. Gather a stone, a pebble if that is all you can find, then come inside and wrap it for mailing tomorrow, the address will appear on the screen as soon as I am done."

He nodded, "I am done, and I pray, so is she."

* * *

The press went in four directions at once. One news team blocked the sidewalk and thrust microphones at Jesus. "Do you claim to be Jesus Christ?"

"I claim very little. The title of Christ is not one I ever used. Others placed that mantle on me, they were men. My name is Jesus, of Nazareth, if that matters."

The microphone shifted slightly. "Wanda, do you have any comment on the footage of you that was shown last night?"

Her initial instinct was to pull back, but, before she could act on it, she felt a power flowing through her. It rose from the ground, radiated from the halo and gave her strength. “Where should I begin,” she mused?

The reporter was getting ready to shout another question, but Jesus held up a finger, “Let her speak.”

She nodded at him, “Thanks. First I guess it would be safe to say the world is a safer place since I stopped drinking. At least for me.”

The reporter started to say something, but she interrupted. “You’ve got to learn to listen. “Second, my taste in men seems to be better.” She gave Jesus a little nod then said, “Now to get to the heart of it - I confess I’ve done some stupid things, but who of us hasn’t?” She used her thumb to point to Jesus, “He once said something about casting the first stone. Things haven’t changed much since then. I’ll bet that you have done something you’d rather not see broadcast on television. I’d be willing to bet that everybody has. That’s why God invented Grace.”

She stared at the reporter for a second. “You know I’m right. You know that your success has been built upon finding the weaknesses of others. But that does not excuse my behavior. It was bad. I’m going to repeat it and I want you to listen to each word. It Was Bad. Did you hear the middle word? Was? Past tense.

“A much better question is, what am I now?” She spread her hands, “I’m what you see, a woman out for a walk with her friend.”

The reporter could keep quiet no longer, “A woman wearing a halo. Last night they said it was a fake.”

Wanda bent forward. “I wish. Go ahead see if you can pull it off.”

After a second the reporter reached out, as his hand reached for it, the blue glow intensified. His hand stopped inches away from the circle. "I can't."

Jesus said, "I can let you touch it, but there is a price."

The man glanced at Jesus, "Sure, what?"

"If you touch it all your sins will be revealed."

The reporter pulled his hand back. "Revealed, How?"

"Like hers were last night, for all to see."

The reporter's hand remained by his side. "Tell me one thing, Jesus, what is it with you and fallen women?"

* *

Hutch, watching the interview in his office with a group of students, clapped his hands, "What a question! Anyone need a topic for a thesis?"

Elizabeth said, "Good thing Hosanna's not there. Listen Professor, last night on that show, you know the doctor of divinity, the one no one remembers the name of, I got to ask you, do you remember. . .?"

"I'll never forget, and yes I had that thought too. I was hesitant to voice it. The resemblance is uncanny. It kind of reaches into the far corners of the last vestiges of the concept of impossible." He turned to the others in the room, "As you know Elizabeth and I were present at the beginning of Hosanna's previous ministry. That night she summoned some demons and pitted them against one of the doctoral fellows. I'm sure you have read the accounts, last night that the man could well have been the same person as was dispatched is this very room."

One of the students asked, "What does that mean?"

Hutch shook his head, "I would be amazed if any answer I could come up with was even close to the truth."

* * *

Hosanna watched the same interview and resisted sending the reporter a pack of demons disguised as small yapping dogs. She looked around the apartment and spotted Catherine of Sienna, formerly a statue in St.Patrick's, standing at the window.

"Hey, Cathy, you used to talk to God a lot. I'm beginning to get a familiar feeling that things are starting to go bad. Now I learned a lot last time about my will and not letting it run amok, but, I feel like I'm getting pushed to the edge."

The woman turned to her before answering, "I don't know what to tell you. Serving God is one thing, I enjoyed it at the time, then I find myself doing statue duty in this church with a bunch of whiners. More than once people have prayed that their credit cards be restored. There were times I wished the ability to summon demons."

"It's not that hard, but got to warn you it can get you in trouble."

Chapter

Upon returning to the apartment Jo Anne did not expect the exuberant welcome she received. Charles and the woman she now knew as Cloe and about six others applauded as she walked in the door. Someone popped a bottle of champagne and glasses were quickly filled and raised. Charles said, "They will be on the run. Within a week they will be a footnote in a history of strange sects of the 21st century."

Jo Anne wanted to believe him, but a little voice inside told her the children were not through with her. The thought was put aside when Charles and Cloe came over and hugged her. She remembered the night before when they had been far more wanton than the video shown earlier. It was time, she decided to take the advice she had often given, and live in the moment.

* * *

Wanda was thinking it was difficult getting time alone with Jesus. The kids required a lot of attention, and outside the apartment there was a constant presence of the press and a cordon of believers, who thronged as close as the police would allow. In some ways that suited Wanda fine, because his attention was a little hard to figure out. After Frankie she had taken a pledge not to get involved with another man for at least forty years, subject to review after fifteen. Though she didn't really believe she could keep that promise, she had not been anywhere near ready when He came upon the scene.

There were extenuating circumstances she supposed, to start with she wasn't really sure He qualified as a man. She'd been in the room when a couple of theologians had debated the point while waiting to go on a TV show where the children were giving a

lesson. Wanda had followed the discussion for all of about thirty second before getting lost between a trans-substantiation and Arian concept. He seemed real, his touch was warm and, she had to admit, both soothing and exciting. The downside was He had been dead for quite a while and had not answered any questions about how long he was planning to stay around.

Not that this had ever been a real consideration before, she'd had relationships with people who had a taxi waiting.

Hosanna had given her a gentle warning, "I'm not trying to tell you how to do or what to do anything, but it will help if you remember that bro's got a bit of a handicap when it comes to relationships. Imagine having your mother along on a double date, that's sort of the way it is for us. But there is good news, because He can see inside your heart, you have to believe that he likes what he sees."

"The question is," Wanda answered, "what does he see that I can't?"

"That's easy, I see it too. The real you. Not the You that was always condemned, or ridiculed and judged. Your biggest problem is that you started to believe what others said about you. And after a while you started fulfilling the prophecy?"

* * *

"Why should society be any more willing to listen to a prophet today than it has historically? It might be different if the prophet was telling people that they could find salvation if only they could increase their consumption of fast food and drive larger vehicles." Hutch looked up from his lectern, "But that does not seem to be the case."

He paused and looked at the audience in the small lecture hall. These were an impressive lot a group of students he felt honored to be teaching – or at least most of them. “There is an ancient Chinese curse, ‘May you live in interesting times.’ Well, curse or not, we certainly are in the most theologically intense period in history. We have more people believing that Armageddon is upon us than ever before. Trouble is, it’s not following the script in Revelations. Instead we have... ”

“What we have is no time for fuddy-duddies like you.” A young man, who had been seated towards the back of the room, stood. He was yelling, his voice strident and, at the same time holding an annoying nasal edge. “We are seeing that you and your knowledge is obsolete. Your best thinking can not explain any of this.”

“Perhaps not, but at least we fuddy-duddies show the courtesy of listening. If you believe you have a better take on the current state of affairs, you may share it with us at this lectern when I am done.”

The man started to answer, but the door at the back of the hall opened and a man who was wearing a very loud shirt entered the hall. He said, “Blessed be those who know when to shut-up.” His voice was calm and soft, but it carried to everyone in the audience. He walked down the aisle until he was next to the angry young man. “And when to sit,” he added softly.

The man thrust his hands into the pockets of his black jeans and stood defiantly. “And just who are you?”

Jesus smiled, “That seems to be a matter of conjecture. I suspect you would call me a ‘has-been.’ I’m not going to contradict that. On the other hand,” he made a

sweeping gesture encompassing the rest of the audience, "I suspect they would rather see your angry demons expelled than have to listen to them."

"Bullshit." He pulled his hands from his pockets and clenched them into fists.

"Stupid." Jesus turned away, "Hosanna is right, you can't cure stupidity." He took a couple of steps further down the aisle.

The man started to follow, but stopped when a very large angel materialized in his face. She had been a black woman, and had not lost her southern accent. "He won't whoop you upside the head, but I got no such constraints." She reached out with an arm as large as the man's leg, grabbed him by the ear and marched him up the aisle and out of the room.

There was a smattering of applause which grew.

Jesus looked over his shoulder, "Thank you Sister Clara." He proceeded up the aisle and approached the lectern. Hutch moved aside, gesturing for him to take his place. "Thanks, I won't be too long." Jesus said before turning to the audience. "Let's start with an easy one. What's going on?" He was quiet for a moment, "Clearly God is taking a direct interest in what is happening on Earth. Avoiding issues as to exactly whom and how many his previous prophets / emissaries were, there at this moment seem to be an unprecedented number of them. And why is this, do you think?"

"Hosanna," he continued, "uses the analogy of a teacher in a classroom who ignores a few whispers, then a giggle and someone moving around, but a moment comes when she decides that she has to do something or get out of teaching. So what does she do?"

“She says, ‘now children.’ They don’t hear because they are having too much fun. She says it again, a little louder, and a few of the goodie goodies go back to their desks, but most of the kids stay well out of control. That Hosanna reckons was my previous visit.”

“‘Cut it out!’” He spoke loudly, “That comes next, and that was, to my way of thinking Hosanna’s first visit.” He shook his head, “Didn’t work either. My sense of things is that if you don’t listen this time, Sister Clara is going to be next.”

“Your debate on free-will versus the hand of God, will need be revisited soon I would think. I also have a feeling that if there is any organizing force behind evil you will see it soon.”

He paused and looked at the faces of the audience, “Does it surprise you that I don’t have the answers?” He paused, “It shouldn’t. Father, Son and Holy Ghost are not one and the same, despite what they said at Nicosia. I personally think it’s a bit much for you to try and calculate degrees of divinity, but if it were my thesis I’d probably argue the Aryan position.”

He smiled as a hundred pens made a note. “So where does that leave us? As your professor said, ‘We are living in interesting times.’” With that he stepped from behind the podium and strode out of the hall.

* * *

Wanda, after some serious searching, found a hat that could cover the halo. Necessarily it was very big. It made her look like a rasifarian, in great part because she had found it a shop which specialized in Jamaican products. Crocheted of green red and

black yarn it drew almost as much attention as the coolly illuminated golden blue circle would have.

The AA meeting was in a church basement several blocks uptown. The secret service helped her escape the cordon of press and faithful by arranging a ride with a UPS truck. As she walked down the cement steps, Wanda tried to put all the insanity behind her. Here she was much more likely to be accepted for who she was. She could put the focus back on keeping things simple. Or at least try.

There were two men standing immediately inside the door. They thrust their hands out at her before she could even get her bearings. "Welcome to Westside Wanderers," one said, "I'm Jim."

She had considered using an alias, it was, after all, an anonymous program, but instead she took his hand. "I'm Wanda, visiting from another universe."

"Hi Wanda," the other man said, "I'm Pete." He took a close look at her, "You look as though you really need a meeting."

The laugh started low in her stomach and grew as it soared upwards. "You have no idea."

He touched her on the elbow steering her towards the table at the back of the room where the coffee pot stood. As she walked she noticed the room was filled with metal folding chairs set up in concentric circles. The seats were already about a third full. Her first sponsor had said that she should always try and sit in the front row, but this was going to be one of the times she considered it a suggestion. She looked for a vacant chair to slide into, but before she could break off, Pete said, "Marsha, this is Wanda. I think we got you your speaker."

“What?” Wanda wanted to take a step back, wanted to run for the door.

A woman, blonde and looking too sophisticated to have ever ended up here, turned and walked over to them. In the two seconds it took, Wanda had come up with six good excuses. Marsha held out a slim hand, “Thanks, Pete.” She looked at Wanda, “Repeat after me. ‘There are no co-incidences.’”

“You have no idea.” Wanda, took a deep breath, “Look, I know that there is a tradition of never turning down a chance to share, but this may not be a good idea.”

“You’ll do fine. You know the drill, Experience, Strength and Hope.”

Wanda nodded. “But.”

“You’re an alcoholic, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Pete’s got this amazing ability to spot people who really need to share. I’ve learned to trust it.” Marsha looked at her watch, “Five minutes. In the chair next to the one with the book on it.” She pointed to a seat in the innermost circle.

Wanda fled to the bathroom, locked the door behind herself, and turned to the mirror. The hat made her look as though a giant caterpillar was sitting on her head. She had come here wanting to be anonymous, to hear something and as always happened leave feeling better.

Pete was right. She did need to share. She needed to tell her story. She needed to remember who she was. “Ok,” she muttered, “fasten your seatbelts.”

After the preliminaries of preamble, some announcements, and applause for newcomers Marsha turned to her, “Our speaker.”

Wanda had been hoping there would be more readings first, and was caught between breaths. Reaching up she pulled out the bobby pins and lifted the hat. It caught on the halo and she had to tug hard. There were some gasps.

“Hi I’m Wanda. I’m an alcoholic and wearing the hat meant I was hiding something. I know if I want to stay sober I can’t have any secrets.”

“I’m nervous. I did not expect this. I wanted to sit in the back and listen. But,” she nodded to Pete, “That was not to be. Marsha said something to me about there being no coincidences – boy can I relate to that one.

“You know it’s funny that I’m nervous. Used to be I could take my clothes off and dance in front of a room full of strangers. Used to be I wouldn’t even bother putting my clothes back on between sets. I’ve learned a few things from being sober. One of them is that it’s a lot easier to keep your clothes on when you don’t pick up that first drink.” That line garnered a few laughs.

“I didn’t want to speak, but now that I’ve started I realize I’ve got too much to tell you, so there are going to have to be some condensations. I grew up in a home that had a lot of alcohol. I learned to drink early, and learned that I liked it. I ended up dancing naked in a bar called the Devil’s Den. I had a lot of close calls and did not believe in God. I now see that somebody was looking over me.” She shrugged, “more on that later.” Don’t let this halo fool you, I am not a saint. There is no delicate way to put this, I was so drunk I don’t remember fucking the Holy Ghost or who-ever it was.”

“I had to give up dancing when I was started to show and switched to tending bar. I gave up drinking too. It was hard, but the doctor scared me pretty good with photos of alcohol syndrome babies. When my daughter was born, and I went back to work at the

bar, somebody bought me a drink, but for some reason I didn't pick it up. That was the first miracle.

"Remember, I didn't believe in God. So it takes a real slap in the face to be considered a miracle. I wasn't drinking, but I wasn't sober. I was real mean and predatory. If you came into the bar, you didn't leave until your wallet was empty, your charge cards belly up, and I'd had your watch appraised.

"Long story, but there was this one customer who was different. He drank ginger ale. I didn't like him, it felt like he could see through me. I was having trouble with child welfare and he suggested I go to a meeting. I figured it might look good, so I did.

Wanda took a long look around the room. "I did not like you people. There was something wrong with you. My daddy said, 'never trust a man who doesn't drink,' and that was about the one thing he said that I held on to." I was so used to lying that I didn't know where truth began, not that I saw it much."

"We're going to skip over some things here too. I was never one to take suggestions without them being administered with a baseball bat. But I got enough to get me by. I couldn't bring myself to leave the bar though. A part of me really liked plucking dollars out of men's wallets. A guy I know says it has to do with self-esteem. I didn't have a lot of it except where cleavage was concerned.

"So there I was living in a trailer in Texas with my daughter. I leave the bar one night and drive home. As I get out of the car I notice the yard is kind of lit up. That's funny I think, It's not full moon." She cocked her head, "Believe me, you work in a place like the Devil's Den you know when it's full moon."

That got a laugh.

“So I look up and there is this really bright star.”

“I didn’t think much of it, and went inside.”

“My daughter who should have been in bed is standing there, ‘Did you see it mom? That’s my star.’”

“Her name is Estelle, I said, ‘of course it is. Time for bed.’” Wanda stopped, and took a quick look at her watch. “I’ve still got some time, and that’s good because this is the important part. The part I’ve never told anyone.”

“Remember, I did not believe in God. Even though I was in the program, that was a part I was still having trouble with. I knew there was something special about Estelle, but most mothers think that. I’m sitting there and the phone rings. It was the woman who I called my sponsor even though I hardly ever called her. She says to me, ‘Just keep an open mind. Soon you will believe.’

Shaking her head Wanda took in a deep breath, “Then this preacher shows up. He’s got a letter from the commissioner of children’s services says he’s going to take Estelle away if I don’t let him be in charge. I went into my bedroom and got a gun one cowboy had left behind once, but when I picked it up, I heard a voice. It said, ‘Don’t sweat the small stuff – and he’s definitely small stuff.’ Now someone had said that at a meeting I’d been to the day before. That was the voice I heard.

“A couple of days later Hosanna shows up and I see that next to her the preacher is definitely small stuff. There was something about her that made me feel safe even though there is this mob of reporters and others outside. She says that I’m coming with her. I say. ‘Me?’

“She tells me that she needs me. That I’m not a bad person, and for the first time in my life I really believed it.”

Wanda reached up and pointed to her halo. “Things got a little crazy and then a lot crazy. It’s still going on - I’ve seen things I still don’t believe – and I’ll tell you that long about now I believe in just about everything. And I mean anything.

“But this program says to keep it simple. So I’m going to try and end this that way. Well, if there is one thing that I may have learned over the past month or two – it is that there is a spiritual core in each one of us. Hosanna says Hers isn’t any stronger than mine. The kids’ may be, but only because they haven’t had time to trample on it the way we did.

“I think this halo is somebody’s idea of how to convince me of this. I’ve said I don’t deserve it, I’ve tried to get rid of it. Once I even got so mad I bitch-slapped a preacher in front of Jesus.” The audience gave a gasp and a couple of people chuckled, “Yeah I know, I’ve really needed this meeting for some time.”

“So that’s it – One day at a time. I believe in a higher power that I don’t pretend to be able to understand. Even Hosanna and Jesus admit to confusion now and then. So I’m in good company.”

There was silence for a full ten seconds before the applause started as though they wanted to make sure that she was finished.

She turned to Marsha, “What now, show of hands?”

Marsha nodded, “Usually there is no shortage.”

Not that night. After a couple of seconds Wanda pointed to a heavyset man sitting to her right. She’d noticed him scowling now and then. “Why don’t you start?”

“You want to hear how good you sound?” His voice sounded like a wheelbarrow full of gravel going across rough ground.

“No, I want to hear what you have to say.”

“I think this is horse-shit. I’m here because the court sent me, even though I told them it’s a god-damned cult. And I’m fucking right. Who are you to tell me what to believe?”

One guy rose and moved towards him, somebody else started to say something, but Wanda raised her hand. “Are you done? Anything you’d like to add?”

He shook his head, “I’ll keep it simple, you’re full of crap.” He got up and moved towards the door, “And you don’t have to throw me out I’m leaving.”

“You know, you’re right, Wanda said.

He stopped.

“We are full of crap. That’s our disease. We come here so we don’t believe it. That’s our recovery.”

A couple of people applauded. Wanda said, “Shush. Before you go, one question, what would it take to make you believe?”

The man shook his head and headed for the door.

This got people talking. The first two thanked her, told her they admired her spirituality.

The next person she called on was a young black woman. “I’m Tashia, I’m an alcoholic and a drug addict, I’ve got to say that sitting here listening to you, I heard a lot of my life. You change a few things, a trailer in Texas for a shitty apartment in Bed Sty, that bar you were in for the after-hours place I used to go with my pimp and we’re a lot

alike except your baby is walking around on TV and mine is locked up in foster care.

You think if I go get me a halo they give her back to me?"

Wanda reached up, "You want this one, you can have," she stopped because to her amazement she was able to touch it. She held it in her hand for a second then, gently tossed it, as though it was a Frisbee. It slowly sailed across the open space between them over a guy in the first row and settled over the startled woman. "It."

Tashia reached up and tried to touch it. Her hands stopped two inches from it. "Girl, I was just joking."

"Hosanna is always talking about how God has this sense of humor." She pointed to the halo, "That thing taught me a lot. And who knows, maybe it will help. Especially if the angels are still running Children's Services."

After the meeting a number of people gathered around. One woman asked, "What's He like?"

"He's got really bad taste in clothes. In the kitchen he's amazing, he makes a lasagna like you would die for. He doesn't like to talk about being dead, and when he listens to you – you know he's listening to everything all the way down to the beating of your heart."

As she left she handed the Rastafarian hat to Tashia. "You may want this now and then."

The woman took it, "Listen, tell whoever it is, that some of the stuff I prayed for, I really don't want it."

"That could be the topic for tomorrow's meeting."

* * *

Jo Anne lay on the couch with her head in Cloe's lap. The woman's long slender fingers stroked her hair. "How did this happen," she mused? "Things were going so well. I was on top of the world. I mean I had everything I wanted, not I suppose like some of the really rich people, but certainly I had my share."

* * *

The Reverend Thomas Green woke up in his spacious bedroom overlooking the 12th fairway of The Lord's Bounty Country Club. It was the only golfing facility in the south-east with a church adjacent to the dining room in the clubhouse. His ministry had been an inspiration whose brilliance he freely gave to his God. "There is no reason that Golf and God should be mutually exclusive." Since it would be inconvenient to urge golfers to come to services far removed from the links, he'd brought the church to the course. Services were staggered to accommodate Tee off times, and he'd built little chapels at several especially daunting points on the course. At one particularly diabolical water hazard a sign pointed out that Jesus would have no trouble with this hole, then asked, "How strong is your faith?"

As he looked about, knowing from the light that the Lord had given him another glorious day, he was aware of a presence in the room with him. With a grunt he pushed himself to a sitting position while putting on his glasses.

There was someone, a man he thought, standing at the other end of the large room looking out the picture window. "Who are you?" Thomas asked as he pushed off the covers and reached for the panic button which would summon security.

"I'm your golfing partner. Hurry up, we're set to start soon."

“You must be mistaken.” The sun was behind the man but the reverend had the notion that he was short, bearded and long haired.

A second later he recognized the man. “You, you’re the imposter who is tagging along with that blasphemer Hosanna. How did you get in here?”

He pointed out the window to the grass beneath, “A chariot pulled by a team of angels. I thought we’d use it instead of a cart.”

The reverend was up and, despite himself, he went to the window to look.

There below was a chariot with four angels tethered to its front. It had to be a joke, one of his buddies was showing a warped sense of humor. Then it struck him that it might be real and for the first time in years his faith wavered. This was not the God he worshiped. “This,” he began, but then he faltered the next words crossing his mind too fast to be diverted to speech. ‘Is impossible, Can not be, What if it is?’ then they repeated.

“Impossible,” Jesus said, “an interesting concept. But not one that bears close scrutiny. At least not lately – seems like we’ve seen a lot of impossible lately.”

The reverend found his tongue, “We agree on that.”

“You’ll find that we agree on many things. That will be a comfort to you as you work to reconcile those we find we differ on, but I’m getting ahead of schedule.” Jesus gestured to the master bath from which came a golden glow, “Go and prepare yourself, I will meet you in the garden.”

Though he was a man of rigorous prayer, the reverend did not recall the last time he had knelt in his bathroom. He prayed to wake from this bizarre dream. When that did

not happen, he prayed that this be a temporary delusion, finally he prayed to be given the strength to endure this test of his faith.

As he emerged, blinking at the brightness of the morning, the reverend saw that the delusion or test was continuing. The chariot was white with wheels four feet high, the angels turned towards him as he crossed the grass, and immediately he recognized one of them. It was Michael, a former member of his flock deceased now two years, who had been the leader of an unsuccessful attempt to thwart his ministry. Next to him was a woman, blonde and beautiful, a sensual sinner who too had once worshiped in his church. She had been killed in a tragic collision of lust and jealousy by another of his flock. That person was not there, nor would he be, the reverend understood even though at the funeral he had sought forgiveness. The final two members of the angelic team were no less shattering, his mother, and the man he had talked into donating the land on which the golf course and housing complex now stood. At least his assurances that the donation would serve the man well at the gates of heaven had been born out. It was a small comforting thought. His mother did not seem all that pleased to see him.

They settled onto an empty first tee. Jesus dropped a ball on the ground and pulled a club out of his bag. It was a five iron the reverend noted. The hole called for a wood. He started to say something, but Jesus was already into his swing.

Clearly he had never played before. The club struck the top of the ball and it bounced forward ten feet, rising about a foot into the air. From the right a brilliant slate blue and gold falcon swooped, snagging the ball in its talons. Its powerful swept back wings flapped once and again before it soared down the fairway. It grew smaller, but

they could see it clearly as it braked and perched on the flag. It dropped the ball into the hole and then flew off to a tree.

The reverend found himself on his knees. "I now see I was wrong about you."

Jesus looked down at him. "That's a beginning, but I suspect you'll make a better shot if you stand."

It took several breaths before the reverend felt capable of swinging his club. To his mild surprise he hit the ball cleanly and drove his shot straighter down the hole than it ever had before. It took a very fortunate bounce and ended up on the green five feet from the hole. He'd never made the green in less than three before.

Two holes later, after an attempt at a confession to a disinterested Jesus, and asking forgiveness from each of the angels in turn, the reverend had a notion of what lessons he was being taught. "You are showing me the truth in my own words, that golf is a way to learn humility and a vehicle to show us the glory of His creation. That's it, right?"

"Nope." Jesus paused to watch as a woodchuck passed his ball to a duck which swam it across a pond. He turned to the reverend, "I don't understand this game. Just as you don't understand me. But that's ok."

"But I want to understand you. You are my savior."

"Really? What if I said that would require giving all this up and going to work helping the sick and dying? What if I said it would take shit and blood and other nasty things to wash the greed and lust for power off of your hands?"

Jesus got onto the chariot, “Hate to cut this short, but I’ve got other stops to make.” He nodded to Michael, “Why don’t you stay? Perhaps you can help him understand. It may take a while to sink in.”

The duck, having reached the other side and having trouble waddling up the steep bunker, sees that Jesus is leaving. It turns and, with a flick of its bill, pitches the ball into the water. It goes, “plop” and sinks.

Jesus sees this and shrugs.

* * *

Jo Anne smiled as she tried to frame the answer, “Anti Christ? No, not at all. Actually that used to be simpler when you could get a consensus on what Christ was. There were differences in opinion and dogma, yes, but essentially everyone had a notion. Lately this has become blurred. According to an estimate I saw there are six million people in New York who describe themselves as on a pilgrimage to see the pretender. This is a real shame. And I do mean shame – on society.

Our, and by our I mean society’s, notion of Christ is a blend of history and belief that has been handed down over the centuries. If this man claims to be the Son of God, the Christ, then let him prove it with more than a little sly innuendo. The object of our worship is holy, not some ill dressed character who consorts with well, that doesn’t need repeating.

* * *

The newscaster put on her grim face as she read, “Police report that the continuing conflicts between the various groups of self styled believers, erupted in violence again last night. Several factions, reportedly including a Knights of Columbus

Chapter attacked a group who were holding a vigil outside the building where Hosanna, the children and the purported Jesus are staying. There were reports that at least fifty people were taken to hospitals for treatment of broken bones and lacerations. It was further reported that restraints were used to keep the various victims from continuing the battle when they were waiting for treatment in the emergency rooms.

There is a further report that Hosanna has canceled the children's segment today and is reportedly considering her options.

* * *

This time they had taken Exodus out to sea. The fog had failed to dispel the radar equipped press helicopters, but sailing far enough off shore that they would run out of fuel was effective. Jesus was very impressed by the workmanship that had gone into building the vessel. He also had expressed great admiration for the two piece suit that Wanda wore on deck once the copters turned back.

Hosanna exclaimed, "It's starting to get crazy all over again."

"More like still, Sis," Jesus interrupted.

There was a silence, finally he said, "But go on. I didn't mean to stop you."

"I would if I knew what to say. We've tried this, we've tried that, we've been nice and we've shown a bit of muscle. Frankly I'm just about out of ideas."

"Maybe," Jesus said, "you're starting to take it personally again. That was a mistake the last time. I can tell you from personal experience that the title, 'Savior' is over rated and not a little inaccurate."

Hope stood and climbed up on the deckhouse, "I think it's you who aren't listening. We've reached a lot of people. It's hard to measure, but there are a lot of them. Sometimes I can hear them. It's not always big changes like we would like, but even a small change can make a difference."

"Yeah," Miguel piped up, "I think you were expecting too much again." He pointed to Jesus, "Just like with him. Only some people got the message and they are still arguing about what it is. Truth is everybody wants to think they are right."

"Maybe they are," Wanda said.

"What do you mean?" Jesus asked.

"I don't know that I even have a right to get involved in this discussion. I mean, who am I?"

Hosanna's voice was gentle, "You have the right. Probably one of the reasons you were picked."

"I never was one for deep thought, but you remember when we went to Princeton to see that tweedy guy? Well I went for a walk and ended up talking to this student who was studying very little things. She told me that her boyfriend was an astronomer who looked at really big things, and every thing he looked at was part of something that was a lot bigger. She said it was the same for her, but the other way. She started with an atom and then looked at its parts and the parts of the parts. Anyway the thing is that everything depends on where you are seeing things from. That what to us is a big deal is either a little nothing when you look at the bigger picture – or it's too big to worry about if you're looking up at it." She stopped, "Maybe I'm not making any sense, but it seems to me that

it all comes down to doing the best you can. Worrying about the results is like telling the wind not to blow. All you can do is put up more sails or taken them down.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“How about having the children do another play or a show – whatever they come up with. Remember this is their trip and their message. People will either watch it or not and they’ll either get it or not. That’s not our job.”

Faith’s voice cut through the murmurs, “Another play? This time we’ll have time to plan it.”

Chapter

Alexandra had always considered her foresight a mixed blessing. It had never been particularly accurate for events concerning herself. It had enabled her to earn a living in a number of interesting ways, but it also had given her what was often an uncomfortable view inside people. Roy was very much an example of this. She had been able to blast through the cocky cowboy persona and see a substantial soul underneath.

He, a rarity among men, had accepted the fact that she could see his innermost thoughts and desires. For that she could tolerate his wandering eyes and frequent fantasies. The bigger issue was his ambition. The galumphing hick was a clever cover for a cool calculating character who realized that this visit of Hosanna and the kids would, sooner rather than later, have to end. He wanted to be in a position to capitalize on the vacuum that would follow.

Hosanna had eschewed disciples this time. She said, "None can speak for me, because I'm no longer certain of what to say." She also had not forgiven Roy his sins against her friend even though Wanda considered the slap to have pretty much evened things out.

The most disturbing thing was Roy not trusting his own heart. Still uncertain about the re-incarnation of his Savior, he resisted loving the man afraid that too close an association would taint his ministry. At the same time he realized that his access to the inner circle was potentially his key to a stardom so large it would eclipse Billy Graham. He had notebooks filled with quotes to later be used, "When I was talking with Jesus, He said..."

He also had started a dialogue with Hutch, hinting that he might be able to provide access while extending feelers about getting a degree or some other endorsement. In his fantasy he would be awarded an honorary degree, though he was enough of a realist to resist suggesting this.

And with all of this Alexandra was still attracted to him. In some ways they were not that different. For herself, she blamed it on her impoverished and deficient childhood, but she still harbored dreams of a stardom of her own. At the heart of it was the conviction that she had something to share – something real, powerful and if only people would listen, valuable.

For Roy the contents of the message were a bit more flexible than was the certainty of the strength of his leadership.

Alexandra reached across the table in the restaurant and took his hand. “You know that between us - we’ve got what it takes?”

It was a modest place for Manhattan standards, but as with most of them, the tables were small and close together. A few of the patrons had recognized them. He spoke softly, aware that others might be listening, “How much longer do you think it will be before we find that out?”

She lowered her voice, “When they come back they’ll be preparing for the final act.”

*

*

*

Jo Anne had never heard of the American Council of Consumer Products Providers when she got the call asking her to come for an interview concerning her a full time consultancy position.

The ACCPP occupied the three top floors of an office building on 57th just off of 5th ave. The interview took place in a corner office that looked down on St Patrick's with the view extending to the East river.

There were two men and a woman in the office. One of the men stood and walked to the window. Gesturing with his right hand at the city arrayed beneath them he asked, "How do you suggest we should respond?"

For a second she wondered, 'to what?' But quickly she realized he was referring to Hosanna, the children and what the media had taken to calling, 'The Spiritual Challenge.' Jo Anne knew she had to take charge of the interview so she stood and walked over to him. Pointing at the street below, she said, "There is the culmination of civilization. It is many things, but evil is not one of them. Never before has a society offered its members such a diversity of means of expressing themselves. The message we have been hearing has to do with feeling good about yourself. This has been misinterpreted by some, to mean that materialism is bad.

It is a subtle difference," She reached out and took the man's wrist, pulling back his sleeve slightly. If you need a Rolex to make yourself feel accomplished, then they are right. After a momentary pause she continued, "But if buying a Rolex is an act of rewarding yourself for your success, then it goes to furthering the common good. This watch has spread the wealth in ways the government can only dream of. It has supported those who mined the gold, those who cast and assembled the works, those who promoted

and advertised the product, and, in turn, those who work at the magazines the ads run in. It can be taken farther to include just about everyone they patronize – landlords and waiters, travel agents and tour guides in exotic locales.”

She turned and faced the others, “This has nothing to do with faith as some would say. Instead let us look at belief. We have been blessed with bounty. Just as some consider it a sin to leave food on your plate, I consider it a misplaced notion to refuse to partake of the banquet that has been set before us.”

She realized she could let it go at that, but there was one more point, “As a psycho-therapist, my job was to enable people to feel whole, to find and exploit their strengths and find ways around weaknesses. Here, the role is much the same. We provide the means for the world to live their lives at their best.”

The other two stood and stepped forward to shake her hand. The man who had asked the question pointed to the polished desk, “Your first assignment is to put that answer into writing.”

Riding down in the executive elevator a few hours later Jo Anne's faith was renewed. What a bizarre roller coaster. A month ago she had been as high as she had ever thought she'd get – and was well pleased with her life. A week ago she'd been tested in the extreme and, though she had come close to losing it, had held on until the tracks turned up again. Now she was much higher than her previous existence and able given the perspective of altitude, to clearly see that this was her destiny.

*

*

*

After the lecture Hutch had returned to his office in something of a confused daze. Hosanna's first visit had provided him with a lifetime's worth of study and speculation. He managed to grab the opportunity and become the scholarly authority on her, and he freely admitted, truly relished the role. What he did not admit often was that her visit had been the start of a profound transformation of his faith. Before it had been belief – that originated in well constructed thoughts, since it had become a heart based understanding. The part he didn't ever talk about was that all of his knowledge was of very limited use in his new awareness.

Before meeting Hosanna he would have dismissed the concept, that Jesus could stroll into a lecture hall utter a few remarks and then leave, as science fiction. His former self would at the same time have wished a chance to ask not a few questions. He did wish that he had not been so stunned that he failed to make some final remarks to Jesus as he was leaving.

“What would you have said?”

The voice came from everywhere at once. Hutch jerked backwards in his chair. “I ... I ... I guess I would have thanked you. I would have asked if you would be interested in a guest lecturer position. I might have asked about your taste in shirts.”

Jesus materialized in front of the fireplace. “First visit had crowds grabbing for my robes. This time it's not happening. Not sure if it's the tropical motif, but it is a lot easier this way.”

“Speaking of miracles. You haven't.”

“Not publicly. Again, easier this way.”

“Do you think the children can get the message across?”

“To some. Just as I reached some, and Hosanna a few more, yourself included.”

Jesus walked to the window and stared out through the diamond shaped leaded panes.

After a moment he spoke, “Do you remember the Demon Hosanna unleashed upon you?”

“I could not forget that.”

“Does it remain thoroughly conquered?”

“I pray so.”

“I fear more demons. Likely to be less obvious, probably using seduction rather than claws. But do not underestimate the power. You are an obvious target.” He turned from the window and placed his hand on Hutch's chest. “In an early talk Hosanna gave, one that only a few watched, and fewer paid attention to, she said, ‘Let your heart be as big as your ego.’ I wish I'd thought to say that back when. It is the recipe for a secure soul.” Jesus pulled his hand away and moved around the desk to the main part of the office. “Oh, one last thing,”

“Yes?”

“That boy in the lecture, the brash one. Give him another chance. I believe Sister Clara was able to straighten him out some.”

As Jesus left Hutch realized that not telling others about the visit would be the first act in keeping his ego on its new diet.

* * *

Jo Anne had not asked about budgetary constraints. They were not relevant to her mission. “University of Universal Understanding. We will attract only the most eminent

scholars in the world. We will give them absolute freedom in an atmosphere free of administrative or scholarly pressures. While our purpose is to have them examine the current events and make sense of them, we will not deign to suggest this. They will find the subject so compelling that our interference will not be necessary and in turn can not be used against us.

“It is essential that this facility be the world’s best. It will cater to the desires of the faculty and will provide them with offices, residences and research facilities in a number of locations including, New York, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, as well as meditative retreats in Tibet, India, China as well as some isolated islands in the Pacific. We will provide first class transportation, five star food and suitable entertainment as is called for.

Jo Anne Looked up from the memo, and said what she could not put in writing, “It is only by the strict adherence to a policy of academic freedom that we can guarantee the scholars will produce results we are seeking.”

“How can you do that?”

She nodded pleased that the question had been asked. “Scholars, even religious scholars, are still people. We are selecting them because they are pre-eminent, but with that they bring some baggage. They did not become pre eminent without a fair amount of ego. They will not, I can assure you, be satisfied with an easy answer. They will give us contentious debates. They will provide much ammunition – because they of all people have the most to lose by saying accepting the new faith of Hosanna and the Children.” A couple of members around the table looked a bit skeptical. “Old time religion always has its say. We celebrate Christmas on December 25, but as best the scholars can tell Christ

was born in the spring. But the early church picked our Christmas to co-opt the Pagan winter festivals that the people were going to celebrate. The same thing will happen here. Human nature does not fail us.”

* * *

Rid of her halo, Wanda found she was able to use a scarf and disguise herself sufficiently to become invisible among the crowds of the city. Estelle was with her that day as they passed a travel agent with pictures of mountains and beaches in the windows. “Kind of makes you want to run away,” she asked half joking.

Estelle looked up at her and asked, “Aren’t you happy?”

“Yes, I suppose I am. It’s just that all this is a little crazy.”

“Well I like it better than living in that dusty trailer, and it was pretty crazy there too. Remember when your car broke down and the man you knew from the bar came by to take me to school on his motorcycle.”

“What about it? I mean nothing happened did it?”

“That’s because he was faster than the police car. I didn’t tell you because he told me that you’d kill him if I did and then the police would be after you.”

Wanda shook her head, “For once he was probably right. Oh Baby, I’m so sorry that I put you in all those crazy places with all those sick people.”

“That’s ok mom. Once I stopped being afraid the chase was pretty fun. The kids at school thought it was pretty cool.”

“Someday this will calm down and you’ll go back to school. Do you think you’ll be able to handle that?”

“It’s going to be tricky. I already knew most of the stuff they were trying to teach us. And Hosanna’s brother he’s been teaching us a lot of things too. Actually,” Estelle said, “I’ve been thinking that maybe I need a different kind of school.”

“What kind is that?” Wanda was thinking that maybe the professor at Princeton could help.

Estelle shrugged. “I don’t know yet.”

* * *

“Who knows the story of Noah?”

The kids looked at each other, finally Jacques raised his hand. I remember the priest talking about how God made a flood and Noah rescued the animals.

Jesus nodded. “Very good. Why did He do that?”

“Rescue the animals?” Hope asked, her voice incredulous at the stupidity of the question.

“No silly,” her sister answered, “make a flood, right?”

“That’s the question,” Jesus said.

“Because,” Miguel answered, “Because people were mean and stupid and deserved to die.”

“That was pretty harsh don’t you think?”

“I think it should happen again. Soon.”

“Why”

Because people are still stupid and mean. When it happens they'll get together and say, 'we're sorry,' but they'll only be sorry because the water is rising and it's what they think God wants to hear."

"But it's not?"

"No, it's too late."

Jesus looked at the other kids. "Who else wants this to happen?"

The kids looked at each other and then down at the floor. "No, there are good people too. We've got to find a way to scare them so that more people get good."

*

*

*

Hosanna 2 where it is going..... thereee

A child is threatened or attacked. Coalition of religious zealots CRZ

Hosanna pulls them all back to regroup

God appears again – says "That's it – since you're on a boat I'll go for another flood. Some discussion of how best to dispatch those who will survive on jet skis.

This time by sun not by rain. I'll melt the glaciers and the Antarctic. We'll see who's got oceanfront property now. Everybody.

The world has one and then seven and then thirty of the most beautiful days ever. Jo Anne sees it as a victory – The kids have sailed off and God is obviously blessing them. Sales of beach homes reach a new high

The first reports of trouble come in - water is rising, but the kids learn that the frogs in the tropical rainforest are suffering. The kids object.

The association of consumer products providers comes up with a response to rising waters. First a dyke and second – a system that allows one to jack a house up above the waves. Giant rafts when the pilings get too high. Ford changes production to boats.

"Stop it you're being a meanie."

Chapter

While Jo Anne spent her days recruiting the finest minds of religious study and philosophy, she had an associate combing the churches, temples and mosques seeking a group who could be counted on for a second front.

This was a more difficult group to approach. Not a few of them had been branded terrorists and they were universally suspicious of anyone who did not share their beliefs to a precision of at least three decimal points.

* * *

The three men converged as the children emerged from the playground. One pushed Wanda aside, as another swung a cloth bag over Faith. In an instant he had her on his shoulder and was moving towards the van. The first man said, "Do nothing and no one will be hurt."

Wanda felt the power of his hate, but it was Hope's voice that made the hair on her neck tingle. "Too late for that." In her hand there appeared a sword. The golden flames were so bright they created shadows of their own. She sliced twice and the van fell to pieces. The clothes of the man inside began to burn.

The man holding Faith screamed as an eagle swooped down and set its talons in his face. As he released the child, the Eagle grabbed the bundle and flew her to safety. His troubles were not over, Jacques summoned a large snake that enveloped him with its coils and calmly set about swallowing him, starting at his feet.

The third man ran, but was stopped when he ran into the side of an elephant which Estelle was riding. He ducked, trying to evade the trunk, but to no avail. In the next second he was tossed into the air where a swarm of bees covered him. Their venom

turned his body to liquid, and when they dispersed there was only a puddle surrounding his empty clothes.

Faith who had squirmed out of the bag and was sitting on a branch next to the eagle, accepted a ride on the elephant's trunk and settled beside Estelle.

Wanda moved towards the man lying in the remains of the van. He had succeeded in putting out the fires which had consumed most of his clothes and was watching in horror as the snake had reached his partner's waist.

Wanda asked, "Who sent you?"

He shook his head.

"The snake looks like he wants to eat you next."

"My God will protect me."

"I don't think there's time for a theological discussion." The snake moved its mouth up the man's chest." His arms flailed, he screamed.

The other man began speaking. His voice was rapid and high. "I don't know, there was a phone call, money, keys to the van and instructions."

Hosanna was beyond pissed. "How could they? How dare they?"

Jesus tried to calm her saying, "The children took care of themselves."

The schooner sailed through the night with four angels flying close formation beside while smoothing the seas ahead. At dawn a huge whale breached alongside. It moved closer then rose so its back was as high as the deck. A man appeared standing

behind the levaton's head. He looked like the depiction on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with white hair and beard.

Without apparent motion he stepped aboard.

"The birds were cute, but it's time to go back to the original form," He said as a way of explanation.

He looked down at the kids and smiled. "Don't worry, you did good. You did the best you could." He looked up at Jesus and Hosanna, "Just like you. It is clear the problem is not going to be solved by human form."

He looked down at the boat, "It's a good thing you've already got a vessel. They want waterfront I'm going to give them waterfront."

It was a beautiful day. The sun bright but gentle, the wind soft. "This time by sun - not rain the seas will again rise. I've been saving the glaciers just for this."

That evening meteorologists all over the globe commented on the sudden changes. "The trough that was going to bring rain tomorrow was somehow sub-ducted. Tomorrow will be beautiful. Everywhere. We anticipate no clouds. Anywhere. This is unusual, to put it mildly."

The next day was lovely. Indeed no one could recall a nicer day.

And the next.

Exodus sailed down the coast. God had returned and was standing at the wheel. From off the starboard bow a trio of jet skis approached.

Hosanna scowled, but was not worried knowing they could not approach. "Next time, do me a favor - find a way to keep man from inventing those."

“Didn’t have that problem last time. What do you suggest? Creatures of the deep?”

“Seems a little harsh,” Jesus answered, “they don’t know any better.”

“That excuse is worn out, don’t you think,” Hosanna answered.

* * *

“This is Marcy Davenport reporting from Miami where the President’s council on sea level is meeting.” The camera panned back to show her standing ankle deep in water at the beach. “At the conference there were numerous papers and proposals, there were committees that produced reports that grappled with the fact that science is not able to say yes or no without a study that lasts twenty years.

“The truth is that although this may be a normal fluctuation resulting from a conjunction of the moon as the government claims, it is also possible that the water level is higher.” She pointed down, “I am standing this is where the lifeguard’s chair used to be. The scientists call this evidence ‘anecdotal.’” She waded out of the water. “But combined with anecdotal information from other beaches and from places like Greenland where anecdotal evidence tells us the ice is melting, I’m willing to bet that it’s only a matter of time before someone in authority tells it like it is.”

Jo Anne turned off the television and looked at the people around the table. “My mother never said this, and if she had I probably wouldn’t have ended up a psychologist, ‘when God gives you lemons – make lemonade.’” There was a subdued laugh.

She shook her head, “I know it sounds hokey in a 42nd floor conference room, but the truth is that this presents us an unparalleled opportunity. And we are the ones best equipped to respond. “As you might guess there will be a huge market for seawalls,

dykes, and pumps. In areas where this is not sufficient, a system that would allow us to jack up houses would be very valuable. Finally, a system of rafts that would permit evacuation not only of people but of domiciles.” She pointed around the room. “The industries assembled here can meet this challenge.” The stock market has taken a hit, but If we respond to the situation with pluck I believe we can give people faith in our ability to continue to take care of our consumers. In the short run, next year’s model cars can be modified to be able to go through two feet of water. I’ll bet the will be especially popular in the south-east and parts of Southern California. In the longer term we can make them swim.”

There were still a couple who looked unconvinced.

She moved to a map. “The question is how high is it going to go?”

She swept her hand across Florida and up the East Coast covering eastern North Carolina, up across tidewater Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, She stopped and tapped Long Island and continued on to Rhode Island and Cape Cod. That’s a lot of sump pumps. If the insurance industry approves the float your home to safety concept and are willing to help homeowners pay for the rafts, and figuring that we can make money with new foundations - we’ve got trillions of dollars at stake.”

“And if the insurance industry is able to call this an Act of God?”

“They will try. However, one benefit of a more faithful bench, is that the Judges I have spoken to are going to ask for proof beyond Hosanna. No court so far as I know has ventured into the area of defining her divinity. Besides, I somehow doubt that she will answer a subpoena.”

* * *

The camera showed Marcy standing on the deck of a Sailboat. “Good Evening, at nine forty this morning the Governor of Florida, announced that all residents South of lake Okeechobee should consider evacuation. He also amended all local laws to allow residents to move aboard boats without incurring additional tax liability.”

She pointed at the boat, “Last month Channel 7 news purchased this boat as a mobile base. It has proven to be a remarkably successful investment. Today we turned three offers each in excess of two times what we paid for it three weeks ago. Another government agency announced today that the rate of rise remains constant at three inches a month. Lest this sound like a little I would like to remind our viewers that an elevation of ten feet is considered high ground around here. The road to Key West was officially closed to all but certified high clearance vehicles because a stretch where the water is reportedly three feet deep at high tide.”

* * * *

OUT OF PLACE

* * * *

“Got something interesting in the mail today, Jeanne said as she sat down to lunch with Martha.

“Let me guess, another invitation to the next Armageddon Expo. I really should have saved that one.”

Jeanne smiled and then said, “Actually, you are not that far off, but then again there is a significant difference. Remember Dean Clifford at Princeton?”

“Among other things, yes?”

“Well he’s having a symposium, he’s calling it “Mystics, Magicians and Madmen.”

“Let me guess which panel I would be on.”

“Actually he says he wants you to be the keynote speaker.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t be so quick to say no. He says this is going to be very interesting. In his letter he claims to have a commitment from the Dali Lama, and several other extremely notable personas.”

“I don’t think I’d have anything to add.”

“Of course you do. You may not know what it is until you say it, but. . .”

“It is an interesting subject. Tell him I’ll come, but there is one condition.”

* * *

Marie had resisted all attempts to get her to wear the clothes Jeanne had bought for her. Wearing the hospital issued pajamas under a seersucker robe, and shuffling along on her paper slippers she walked with Martha to the podium on stage at the lecture hall.

For ten, then twenty, and thirty seconds she silently regarded the audience. There were a couple of coughs, and a couple of whispers, but the assembled stared back. She turned and looked at Martha for a second and then turned back to regard the audience. A spotlight bored across the auditorium and lit her. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the prism Martha had given her years before. She held it up and watched as it threw

rainbows across the stage. She leaned towards the microphone. Her voice was like a child's whisper, "First thing God made." She paused. "Light."

She focused on the brightly clad Dali Lama who was sitting in the front row. Stepping back from the lectern, Marie walked to the front of the stage and reached out holding the prism towards him.

After a second he got to his feet and moved to the stage. The stone was out of the spotlight and had ceased to sparkle, but as he reached out, it began to glow, brighter and more pure than before.

He took the stone from her fingers and turned to the audience. In the third row there was a nondescript man wearing a shabby suit. The holy man leaned precariously forward and the beam of light fell on this man.

He seemed to shrink, but after a few seconds reached out and took the stone. He looked quickly around and handed it to a woman seated two places to his left.

As it was passed through the audience the stone's hue changed slightly, once or twice it pulsed. When it reached the last row, the woman who was wearing a minimal habit and a brown dress stood and made her way down the aisle. She took the stairs that were set at the edge of the stage and walked to where Martha and Marie were standing.

She did not hand the stone to them, but instead approached the microphone. "Without light – we all are blind." She paused and held the stone aloft. "Even with light, we often can not see."

She turned to Marie and held out the stone. "Thank you for improving our vision."

With that the audience rose and stood silently, somehow knowing that applause would terrify this gentle woman.

* * *

The Dali lama took Marie over to the buffet table, and for a moment Martha was left standing alone. Dean Clifford made his way towards her, “Well, you certainly have a facility for taking all my learning and reducing it to a concept too simple for words.”

“First thing God made. Light.” He shook his head. “I’ve gotten lost in the thousands of words following that.” He shook his head. If I thought it would mean anything to her, I’d suggest the department award her a doctorate. Most dissertations don’t say so much, even with a hundred pages of footnotes.” He stopped and took Martha’s hand. “What I’m trying to say is, thank you. I guess I still don’t know Didley.”

“You’re welcome. I needed to get out. She bent forward and dropped her voice a bit as she said, “I’ve been writing again.”

His hand tightened slightly. “Oh My!”

“Right now I’m not talking about it. When it’s ready I’ll ask you to read it.”

“Of course. I’d be honored, can you tell me anything.”

Martha thought for a moment. “If you buy ocean front property, think of it as a short term investment.”

He laughed. “Hosanna’s back.”

Martha put her finger on her lips, “Let’s keep it quiet for the moment.”

He nodded, “of course.”

From across the room came the sound of two voices rising in agitation. “Who said academia was not a blood sport,” The dean nodded and made to leave her, but Martha put her hand on his forearm. She pointed. He turned and watched as Marie moved towards the men. The Dali lama trailed along behind.

Then men sensed something and stopped arguing, the room fell silent. “You both are wrong. No sense in talking about it.”

One of the men started to say something, but Marie shook her head. “Look. Here.” She raised her hand which was now holding some beads the Dali Lama had given her. They gave off a golden glow, soft and pure.

After a moment she said, “That’s it. Words don’t work.” Then putting the beads back in her pocket she moved back to the buffet table.

* * *

Donny Mayer had lived on or around water for all of his thirty two years and knew that the rising sea level was not just a freak coincidence of tides. He also knew that it would ultimately be bad for business, but – on the other hand he saw that he stood to make some incredible short term profits. With any luck he’d be able to tow his floating docks to a higher spot, though he was pretty sure it wasn’t going to be south of Atlanta.

He sold out his entire stock of jet skis in two weeks, and as he was negotiating a new shipment, he got the first report of the attacks.

Billy Bates loved his machine. It was like a motorcycle on water, but better. Here there were only a few traffic regulations and the cops couldn’t catch him anyway. There was something about skimming across the bay that made babes just want to say yes. On

Tuesday, as he rounded the buoy at the end of the jetty, he noticed that the waves looked a little different. His motto was 'when in doubt, hit the throttle..'

He took the first wave, then he realized the second was moving, but not like a wave. The hammerhead sharks rose to the surface on both sides of him, and with flicks of their tails sent him headlong into the water. Billy did not have time to get his head above water before he was seized and dragged under. A few minutes later his life vest popped up and was plucked from the water by a coast guard boat which had been summoned by a fisherman on the jetty.

It was, by Donny's count, the third shark attack on jet skis in the past week. He decided against ordering another truckload. Instead he decided that more substantial craft were going to be in greater demand.

* * *

Fred and Jackie Ellis considered themselves lucky that they'd bought their condo when they had. Since then prices had soared and environmental rules had practically stopped further development. A couple of times Fred had mentioned that they ought to "do the numbers," and see what selling out and taking a profit would do for them. Jackie who liked it there just fine asked him where they would go.

They never did the numbers because Fred never had a good answer to that one.

Now, as he stood on the balcony staring down at the water that starting to invade the parking lot every day at high tide, he knew he'd be lucky to sell for half what they paid for it. The association was talking about sand bags, but he knew that would only work for a while. Even if they raised the level of the parking lot with gravel as some

were suggesting he knew that the access road would be next. On the TV they were talking about a rise of three inches a month. Not much, he'd thought, but then someone had pointed out that was three feet a year, and last night there had been a show that said the rise might increase.

A year and a half ago Jackie had gotten involved with some church. At first Fred had thought it was not a bad thing because it got her out of the apartment and gave him a little peace.

But then Hosanna returned and things got crazy. Fred tended to get nervous because he'd been caught up in it when she'd done her trick with money the last time. Eventually it had all worked out, but for a while there he had a really expensive butterfly collection. This time he was happy that things had started off on a different note. The kids were cute and more importantly they were not doing things like making forked tongues.

* * *

"What are you trying to do with your new book Martha?"

"Finish it."

When it was clear that answer was not enough, she continued, "The message is much the same. This time the lesson plan has been modified, the teachers are trying a different approach."

* * *

Roy woke in the middle of the night and walked to the window overlooking the city. Across the park he could see The Avenue, Fifth. The one everyone seemed to be

trying to get to. He was there only on the coattails of Alexandra, who in turn was riding on her prior friendship with Hosanna. Having been expelled from several congregations in the past, he again sensed that this visit was not going to last. At the time it had seemed like his demands had not been excessive. But time and time again, his flocks had told him they preferred a minister who was less strict, more understanding. The first two times he'd argued, and tried to show them the error of their ways. It had not worked and he'd used tactics he now regretted. He suspected the reason he had lasted so long at his last church was none were willing to so blithely handle the serpents.

When they left here, what would he do? He could not preach the same gospel, but, from what he saw, no new church would come from this visit. A return to storefronts was not something he thought he could stand. He'd mentioned a desire to study at Princeton to Hutch, but had been politely referred to the admissions office.

James sat on the bench he'd once shared with Hosanna and mourned the loss of the little people. He hated to admit it but Cheryl was right, he had been pre-occupied with them and a lot of it had been because he'd imagined it would be a path which would lead him to some greater degree of recognition.

On one level he knew that he had attained an elite status, having not one but three extended encounters with Hosanna, two with the kids and one with the man who called himself Jesus. He'd already had calls from a lecture booking agency, and a literary agent who suggested he consider a book or two.

James wondered why he wasn't happier. The miniature cathedral, though not quite unique, was drawing visitors from five continents. He had added a third Sunday

Morning service and still had to turn people away. Not a day passed without someone from his remote past trying to contact him. He noted this group contained a large number who had at one point or another snubbed him.

He guessed the dis-satisfaction was partially because he was basking in the reflected light of those who were far more holy than he.

* * *

Martha looked up from her keyboard and wondered the same thing. Her biggest fear was that she was writing a dud and that no one would have the honesty to tell her while there was still time to make corrections.

* * *

The children had moved to the foredeck and were huddled around the forestay. Wanda started to move forward.

“Leave them be,” said Hosanna.

“But it’s pretty rough.”

“I suspect that’s because they like it that way. Besides, they’ll be back soon.”

She was right. In another minute the children all shook hands and then made their way back along the deck. When they got into the cockpit Hope said, “We’ve got to talk to the bird.”

Hosanna smiled and pointed to a flock that was gliding a foot above the water off on the port side. “Which one?”

“Not one of those, silly. THE bird. You know.”

“Yes, I know, trouble is the bird kind of keeps its own hours. Sometimes when you...’

A shadow passed over her as an albatross swooped across the deck before turning and exactly riding a current of air took station over the cockpit.

“Cool,” shouted Estelle.

Hope looked up and said, “We’ve decided to tell you something.”

The bird shifted slightly and looked at each of them. “Yes?”

“You’re being a meanie. The flood is going to hurt the wrong people.”

“Especially the frogs,” said Jacques

“Yeah, the frogs the birds, and people too. You’ve got to find another way.”

“I’ve got to?”

Estelle took a step forward, “Yeah. This rough tough stuff, doesn’t work. Just like my mom says.”

Wanda felt proud, and terrified, at the same moment.

The Albatross lifted slightly on a puff of wind then slipped a little closer to the deck. *“And what do you suggest?”*

Faith said, “We’ve got a lot of ideas. Miguel wants to send dinosaurs to eat the bad people. But how would they know? That’s a problem.

“Estelle wants to give good people halos, like her mom had for a while. That might be a way to tell the dinosaurs who not to eat. But it also might be enough, cause if some people got them then others would want them and to get them they’d have to be good.”

“Or the dinosaurs would eat them.”

Estelle waved a hand at Miguel. “We might not need the dinosaurs.”

“Awww.”

“Who would give out these halos?”

“You could.”

“I don’t do that.”

Estelle pointed at Jesus, “What about him?” Her finger shifted to Hosanna, “Or her?”

Hosanna put her hands up, “Don’t look at me I’d be likely to give bubble heads to all the stupid ones. You know how I get carried away.”

“I remember.” The bird slipped sideways until it was flying next to Jesus, *“What do you think?”*

Jesus took his time to answer, “All I did was give some sermons, do an occasional small miracle, and it got me in a lot of trouble. I hate to say it but there seems to be a pattern here, and I don’t see how handing out halos is going to help things much. The assumption is that people who don’t get one will become good so they will.” He stroked his beard, “Some might, but others might react differently. How about something like a world wide healing? I mean Zap and all the petty thoughts are gone?”

Hosanna said, “Hutch would mention free will.”

“I’m not so concerned about the finer points of philosophy. I just want the kids to be able to walk without having to worry about ... ” He paused, “Come to think of it I would have appreciated some crowd control the last time around. But, I thought this was their turn.”

“They’re the ones looking for an alternative to the flood, Your name came up.”

Jesus did not look happy. “I’m not sure this resurrection, or what ever it is, calls for a me being more than a tourist. I kind of like not being the messiah, that’s a heavy hat”

Hosanna chimed in, “I know what you mean, bro, but the kids need our help.”

“Mom, don’t get carried away.” Exclaimed Faith.

Hosanna looked up at the bird and shrugged. “Tell me, is it this way with other forms of intelligent life in the rest of the universe.”

“Who says this is intelligent?”

“Oh I get it, we’re like a tank of tropical fish, pretty, fun to watch, but not suited for conversation.”

“Pretty? Fun to watch? How warped do you think I am?”

“If you are, can’t say that I blame you.”

“Now what is that supposed to mean?”

Around the boat waves grew steeper, the sky drew down as dark gray clouds boiled.

“Stop It! Now! All of you,” Estelle yelled in what Wanda realized was a pretty good imitation of herself.

“We didn’t come here to argue. We didn’t come here to fix everybody’s problems – not in one day. It doesn’t work that way.” She looked around and saw Jesus who was smiling broadly at her. She pointed to him, “He had some good ideas and they helped some people.” She pointed to Hosanna, “Hope and Faith’s mom, she tried too. Maybe too hard. I heard her say one time her mistake was taking it personally. Whatever

that means?" She reached out and took Wanda's hand, as she said, "We tried too. Some people like what we say, others are too busy being busy. Why should that be our problem? Just let us go and live our lives. I want to go to school and learn to be a teacher." She turned and pointed to Miguel, "He can grow up and help the people like his mom. Jacques likes birds, he'll be important that way."

Faith interrupted, "What about us?"

"To start with, you have to keep your mom out of trouble,"

"Wait a minute ..."

Estelle hushed Hosanna by putting her hand up, "Princess Alexandra once told me not to worry because we would go where were supposed to go. I started to ask her what she meant, and then I got it."

* * *

In the pockmarked gravel parking lot of the Devils Den, Wanda leaned down to the man sitting in the passenger seat, "Wait here. This is something I have to take care of on my own. It won't take long." She waved her hand indicating the three angels hovering nearby, "and they'll be a help."

The halo was back, she reached up and adjusted it slightly. Then with a nod to the angels she set off for the front door.

And angel darted before her and opened the door by tearing it off its hinges. The other two ripped off the roof and filled the cinderblock structure with a light so brilliant it caused the shots of whiskey on the bar to burst into flame.

"I've come for my back pay," she said.

The manager started to say something about her not giving notice, but the angel who had opened the door, sliced into the cash register with his flaming sword.

The man got the point and pulled a handful of twenties out of the drawer and held it out to Wanda.

She looked at the money and then up into his piggy eyes. "No, it is not cash I want." She reached out and took the sword from the angel. The owner took a step back.

Tapping the blade on the bar where it scorched the wood, she said, "I declare this to be a holy place, a temple to stupidity, carnality and drunken debauchery. It shall be known as the church of the drunken fools. Pilgrims who seek redemption will come here and will see you all serving as acolytes of the bouncing boobs.

"As is fitting with a place of worship, from this day forward, a few things will be different. First it will be light, so you can not hide yourselves. The booze will not make you drunk, and finally," she pointed to the slightly haggard woman who was spinning around the brass pole on the stage oblivious in her drunken drugged state, "Until there is love in your hearts there shall be no love in your loins. And gentlemen, saying it - isn't nearly enough."

* * *

* * *

(Back in the city)

Hosanna stood in the doorway with a phone in her hand. "Wanda, the security detail has someone at the check point who says he's your father, Name of Billy Bob.

"Wanda, did you hear me?"

“I heard you. I’m just having a little trouble thinking right now. He ... He... I don’t know him,”

“He left?”

Wanda laughed, “I guess you could call it that. More like he was run off, long story, my mom’s brother in law was a deputy sheriff. When Mom caught my dad tom catting around, she gave him two chances then had Jimbo set him on the road. She was like that, in fact I think she might have told Jimbo to rough him up some.”

“What should I tell them?”

“Who?”

“The security checkpoint, your dad.?”

“Tell them to flip a coin, Heads, take him out and shoot him, tails send him up.”

For once she did not mind having the halo. It positively screamed, ‘I did fine with out you!’

Billy Bob had a cowboy hat, battered and sweat-stained. He held it in his hands, twisting the rim. “Hello, little girl.”

She wondered if she should give him the benefit of the doubt or credit for being nervous. She had learned how to be honest, “Little girl? That was twenty-seven years ago. You know the only thing I remember about you was that you would have me go get you a beer out of the refrigerator. I remember being proud, then one day you were gone.”

He took a step back and put up his hands, “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“Maybe you should not have gone, in the first place.” He started to move towards the door, “Wait,” she said. “Maybe it’s the halo talking, but you shouldn’t go until you get to know your grand-child.”

He broke into a wide grin and took a step towards her, opening his arms as though to hug. “Wait!” she said it louder. “Don’t for a minute think all is forgiven. And you are on total probation. First stupid thing you do and I’ll have the angels give you an eighty-six so hard you won’t stop bouncing till the outskirts of Dallas, and after that you’ll skid on your face right down the center of the freeway clear to Houston. You hear me?”

It was Billy Bob who talked Jesus into wanting a truck. “Hell, every carpenter I knows has got one. It’s how you carry your tools, how you get to the job. I’m tellin’ you if you’d join my crew we could get some premium prices, what people would pay for a kitchen done by the man himself. Whoa!

* * *

“What are you going to do?”

“A part of me wants to take Exodus someplace remote like Easter Island, but Faith and Hope need friends and school and all that. I was thinking about suggesting that we find a place to settle into together. I’d consider most anywhere, but not that trailer park.”

Wanda laughed, “No way. All I want from that place are the baby photos of Estelle, one of my G strings, so I can remember how it once was, and the flamingos from the front yard.”

“The flamingos? There goes the neighborhood.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve had some offers too.”

Offers?”

“Yeah mostly sent to the network, but occasionally in person. You know that guy at Princeton, well he asked Jesus to teach a couple of courses, and I could go to school there too. And that minister in Rhode Island, the one that used to have the statues, well he said that we could come there too. I’m not sure what we’d do exactly, but it was nice there.”

“So Jesus is going to stick around? I was wondering.”

“He says that he feels like he got cheated a bit last time. He’s got to be careful, but for the most part people are leaving him alone now that they believe he isn’t doing healings. Or forgiving any new sins.”

“I heard there was trouble last week.”

“You know him, he doesn’t listen too good sometimes. Billy Bob has been talking to him. Trying to talk him into going into construction, telling him to get a truck and they’d make a killing doing renovations. He’s not sure he wants to do carpentry, but he does want a truck. So I tell him he’s got to have a license. Now I suppose I could have had the kids make him one, or he could of, but instead he decides to go to the DMV.”

“With or without escorting angels?”

“Without, at first. I gave him a hand filling out the forms, and told him there might be some problems, but he goes and stands in line.

So eventually we get called and there is this little old woman on the other side of the two inch thick plastic. First problem is his last name, he left it blank, finally we put in 'of Nazareth' birth date was March 12, 00 and the woman says he's too young. He explains it wasn't 2000. She tries to type it in but the computer won't accept that he's two thousand years old. She fudges it a bit, and then asks for id. He does a couple of quick little miracles there on line, but she says it's not good enough. Tells him to come back.

That was when he called the angels. Now you know that we've learned that the angels are sort of absolutists. Either Good or Evil, not much in between. We get back on line and one of the angels has the woman's own mother, a resident of heaven for some time now, vouch for Jesus. For most people that would have been enough, but this woman it seems has unresolved issues with her dead mother.

"As they argue you can see the angels getting nervous. Their swords start glowing brighter but just before they start wailing away on the computer the supervisor comes over, looks at the paperwork, and asks Jesus if he's a citizen. Seems he needs a different form if he was born overseas. The first woman says it's time for her break, and that's when Jesus lost it. Now he doesn't have the ability with demons like you do, and it's a good thing cause the angels did quite a job by themselves.

First thing that went was the Plexiglas and the barriers. They set up a different system. The people go in and sit on comfortable couches and the workers come out and wait on them, filling out the forms and even paying the fees if people don't have the money.

“So Jesus gets a license and he goes out and decides that he wants a truck. Now just up the road is this third string used car lot. I’m telling him how he might want to talk to you about how to do it, but he just gives me this smile and goes right on doing what he was doing which was talking to Honest Hal about a car.

“Now Honest Hal is neither. His name is actually Tony and he starts to tell Jesus that he’ll give him a real deal if he can put on his billboard that Jesus buys his car at Honest Hal’s. Jesus, sometimes he’s so simple, says “Well that may be true, if I get the car here.”

Honest Hal goes to back of the lot and after saying a few prayers he gets this old Chevy to run. If you didn’t pay attention to the black smoke, it ran ok, but Jesus sees this red pick-up truck. It has white stripes and a set of little orange lights across the top of the cab.

“At first Honest Hal didn’t want to give it to Jesus, but then he starts getting these visions. He hears this voice, “Why did you deny me?” So he brings the price down some.

“Now, your brother never got around to getting a Master Card, so his credit report is pretty bad. Seems like he skipped out on paying for the last supper or something. Anyway it’s starting to look like Jesus is going to have to take the beater, when I get this bright idea of telling Jesus if he could turn something into gold Honest Hal would take it.

“We look around the office, and there is this brick that is being used as a paper-weight. I suspect some unhappy customer tossed it through the window one night, but anyway, Jesus picks up the brick and in a second he’s holding twenty pounds of gold.

“Now I know that that truck wasn’t worth twenty pounds of gold, but Jesus doesn’t care and neither does Honest Hal. He signs the papers over to us in three seconds, slaps an inspection sticker on it and gives Jesus the keys.”

She paused, “Next thing you got to picture is Jesus sitting way up high in the cab, and you got to remember his previous driving experience was about 20 centuries ago and consisted of a donkey. Not quite the same thing.

“I don’t know what it is about men and pickup trucks, but he’s got it bad. The angels pile into the back and I’m sitting up front, praying like I haven’t prayed at least since I stopped drinking and getting myself into crazy situations like this. Now this truck had a big engine in it, and after some experimentation Jesus found the accelerator. Got to tell you you’ve never merged until you’ve gone across four lanes of traffic with two angels flinging cars out of the way. After a bit he got the hang of steering and stopped saying “whoa” in Aramaic.

“Up until then I think the angels were kind of liking this duty, sure beat standing at the pearly gates telling yuppies their reservation hadn’t been accepted. But when we got back they were pissed, or as pissed as angels get.

Hosanna nodded, “I heard something about that. Got three requests for transfer. Not something that is covered in the personnel manual.”

“So we get to the city and you know how it is with parking. He wants to park right in front of the building, but there are no spaces. Again he has the Angels do some heavy lifting. They move a car into the Diplomatic zone and then he tries his hand at parallel parking.

“About ten minutes later he does a healing on the car behind. He comes up and starts talking to Reverend Roy about bed liners and other pickup truck options. This is not a good thing.”

The Gospel of Faith and Hope.

Hi. We're writing this because somebody said that someday people will wonder what it was like. To start off, we know it's different. We sometimes think we are very lucky. Most kids don't get to go on TV when they have a good idea. Most kids don't have a Mom like ours, though sometimes she can be a bit much.

We live in a big apartment, at least for now, and even though it is pretty big, it is getting a bit crowded. We Kids have two bedrooms, mom has one to herself because she spends a lot of time talking to God, and Jesus and Wanda share another. They used to each have their own but Aunt Alexandra and Uncle Roy came to stay and they had to move in together.

Aunt Alexandra is really neat. She can tell us things about tomorrow. And Roy is so funny when he tries to tell Jesus things about his last visit. Jesus keeps telling him, “That's not the way I remember it.”

He, Jesus that is, keeps trying to sneak us off to have fun. He's had some big fights with the guy from the FBI, about this, and somehow because we're not supposed to do it – it makes it more fun.

“Sometimes though it is kind of hard being who we are. Everybody thinks we have ALL the answers. We don't, though sometimes we see things that other people can't.

Estelle, Jacques, Miguel and now a new girl, Jean, are our friends too. When we get together we can talk in our heads and sometimes we play tricks on the grownups. The elevators are the most fun. I like to fill them with butterflies. Estelle makes better butterflies than I do though.

The really strange thing is the crowd in the park across the street. We keep telling them to go home. We keep telling them that we don't want them praying to us, we may be a bit special, but that doesn't mean THAT much. They could be special too and that's what we're going to say the next time we go on TV.

* * *

Miguel stared at the camera and said, "We asked God to stop the flood. We said that you deserved another chance."

"God was not happy," Estelle added, "but she agreed. For now. But Florida has to stay under water."

"So here's what we think we have to teach you. First you have to stop looking to other people like us to be special for you. You have to find the good part inside you and then you have to make it grow until it's the biggest part of you. If you let us be the good part then you can't do it for yourselves."

Faith stepped forward, "You should remember, we don't know how many more chances you're going to get. My mom always tells me 'This is your last chance. Sometimes it is, I've learned to think that maybe she means it.'"

* * *

“This is Heather Cloud reporting from what was once Miami, and I guess it still is if you talk to some of the people who are still trying to live here. In general the water level here has risen twelve feet leaving much of Southern Florida under anywhere from one to eleven feet below water. There are some islands and the high rise buildings behind me are considered such, by their residents. The word from the Kids that the flood has been stopped, but that Florida is going to stay under water, is not viewed as good news by most of the residents here.

“Officially the local governments have said that all residents must evacuate since there is no power, no water and no sewage services available.

“In response some residents have brought in generators, are drinking bottled water and are not concerning themselves with what happens when they flush their toilets.

“Hosanna was asked why God was targeting Florida, and she answered, ‘I have no idea, but if I had to guess, God doesn’t like ugly. I find it interesting that this rise in sea level seems not to have affected the Bahamas which are equally low lying.’

* * *

The last time Roy had seen Joyleen, it had been in the rearview mirror as she stood in the middle of the road throwing rocks at his truck.

Her photo graced the cover of the scandal sheet. The headline proclaimed, “Man of God? Hell no. Not even much of a man.”

She was still pretty, but her mouth hadn’t gotten any less mean.

He wondered if he should show the article to Alexandra. He had been hoping to take the relationship to another level, but every time he tried to get her into a romantic

situation, she thwarted it. Nicely, for the most part, but it still hurt. Even though she explained that it was not the time or place to be diverted by a relationship, Roy did not get it.

*** ending??***

Exodus cruised carefully between the skyscrapers of Miami. Hosanna listened as Phillip told her of the refugee camps in Georgia, and of the prayers being said asking for the return of Florida. He also mentioned acts of violence against those who had taken to wearing Moebius strips as a sign of solidarity with Hosanna.

She pointed at a McDonald's sign rising from the water and said, "Why do they want it back?"

Phillip shrugged. "No accounting for taste."

"Now I'm not saying I can do it, and even if I could, I'm not sure it's a good idea, but if I did, do you think they would be willing to forgive and forget?"

Roy cleared his throat, "If I may?"

"So long as it doesn't involve snakes."

"Believe me I have no notion of going back there, What I wanted to tell you is that these folks will be so involved in getting on with their lives that they won't pay you no mind."

"I suspect you're right."

"But if you don't – remember these are the folks who still carry a grudge or seventeen going back to before the civil war. You've spoken of trying to find a quiet place and settle down to raise the kids. It ain't going to happen so long as you hold the promised land hostage."

“Promised land?”

He shook his head, “That’s how a lot of them see it.”

* * *

The sea surged as the land slowly rose. Hosanna stood of the foredeck of Exodus which was standing off shore. “I still think it’s a mistake, you really think they’re going to learn anything?”

The land continued to rise, torrents of water poured off the new found land. The flow pushed the flotilla of spectator boats back.

* * *

Moebius Strip

Hosanna stood before the crowd. The children and Jesus a step behind her on the stage. In her hand there was a strip of silk twenty inches long and one inch wide. With both hands she held it over her head. “Behold, this is the answer.” She took one end and giving it a twist joined it to the other end. It’s called a Moebius strip. It has one edge and one side and goes on forever. I have chosen it as my final lesson. It is too simple for anyone to make it complicated. It is too complicated for anyone to really understand it.” She draped it around her neck, “And there you are.”

She took a step back, “It’s a clue, if you can figure it out maybe you can find a way to please God before the water rises any higher.”

* * *

I like the example of a boat. You have to take care of it or else water will start to come in. Some days it is calm – other times it is rough.

This goes somewhere before.

Roy woke in the middle of the night, with an idea so grand, so crazy, it had to be divinely inspired. He went to the window and looked out at the lights of the city and wondered what it would take to carry this off.

There were Several problems. Though he had climbed most of the way out of the doghouse, he was still viewed as a man who six months previously had been using venomous serpents as props in his preaching. There was the problem that Billy Bob was tending to keep Jesus occupied with his dreams of forming a construction company. There was the problem that the children had announced an end to their televised lessons and this meant he would no longer have quite the access.

Still, he knew he had to try and the first question was whether to take Alexandra into his confidence. He was half afraid she'd come up with a good reason for him not to do it. Margaret O'Brian's direct line was posted on the refrigerator. No one had told him not to call. He just had to figure out how to keep his pitch short, so that he could get it in before she realized he wasn't calling on behalf of the kids or Hosanna.

“A new show – Judgement Day! In which contestants are called to answer for their lives.” That was, he thought the right first sentence. He really wanted to be able to slip an endorsement from Jesus into the second. He didn’t think Jesus would be interested in hosting it, why should he when Roy could do it so well. Still there were some special effects, like the halos and the flaming swords that would really make it something special.

He walked out into the living room and approached the large parrot that had taken up residence on the back of the sofa. “I’ve never prayed like this,” he began. “You know a lot of times it was just for show and I didn’t think that there really was a connection.”

The bird regarded him with a baleful yellow eye and said nothing.

“Everybody else seems to talk to you, so I figure why not me?”

“Maybe they have something to say.”

“Maybe I do too. I’ve just had this idea, a way of spreading your word, it came to me in a dream I’d like to think it was inspired.”

“You and the rest of humanity, but go on.”

“Well It’s an idea for a television show called Judgement Day.”

“Are you willing to be the first contestant?”

That stopped him. Roy, for the first time, missed the rattlesnakes. If you made a mistake there it could, at most, be fatal. He was struck with the thought that maybe he’d just made a mistake that was eternal.

“Lord, I am such a fool to take your time up with this. Let’s forget it, I’ll go back to bed.”

“Wait!”

Forgiveness, I've got to ask for forgiveness, Roy thought as he eyed the brilliant Red and Blue bird.

"Well, Lord, I guess the way I see it is that people are confused in so many ways that you need to have a variety of messages going out there. The children attract a certain sort, but I have the feeling that they are missing a certain element. It was my misguided idea that the show could perhaps reach them."

"And in your dreams you would dispense halos, and chastise others with a flaming sword?"

That had been the fantasy, but he hadn't told it to anybody, he dropped to his knees with a thud that woke the Mc Alasters in the apartment downstairs. "I know it was arrogant. It's just being around all these miracles on a daily basis, I said why not me."

"Are you willing to be the first contestant?"

"I would fail." He wanted to run down the hall, find Jesus and beg for intervention.

"Why would failing keep you from doing it if it was what I commanded?"

He was trapped. The bird had a distinctively hawkish look in its eye. "I will do whatever you command." He thought briefly of Abraham and of Job before the bird spoke again.

"In the morning, call the woman, she will expect your call. Tell her you will be working with Catherine, she'll know who that is."

**

**

**

WHERE IS THIS GOIN?

**

**

**

He had not paid a lot of attention to the woman before, but now he could see there was something unusual about her, she was small, but that wasn't it. When she looked up at him her eyes seemed to reach into the depth of his soul. This was not a place that Roy particularly favored someone poking around, but he knew he was powerless to stop her. She spent some time looking at his relations with LouAnn who had almost been his first wife, one drunken night in particular, the one after the poker game when he'd come home and told her the sexual things he'd heard that other guys wives did for them. In truth he didn't believe all of it, but he thought it might be worth a try. The result was a night that he still shuddered when he thought of it. LouAnn had cried and tried to say no, but he was very persuasive.

The next day she was kind of quiet, but he thought she'd get over it. Three days later she was gone.

"She still hates you."

Roy knew what this woman Catherine was talking about, but his first instinct was to say, "who?" Resisting that impulse he merely hung his head.

"Carrying that hate for so many years has been a burden. You must help her reclaim her life."

"How?"

"By allowing her to degrade you in a way like you did to her."

Roy didn't see how this could possibly happen, but at the same time knew how bad it would be. He felt an urge to sink to his knees and ask for mercy.

The mysterious woman seemed to read his mind, "Grace must be earned," she said, "at least in this case."

When Roy found the courage a few minutes later he asked, "How exactly do I earn this grace?"

"It is made more complicated because the woman is dead. She is happier now, of course, and her passing put much of her life into a different perspective. To have her return as an angel forcing you to replicate as victim this time the acts humiliating, degrading and painful, is not appropriate."

Roy thought for a moment about trying a plea of drunken stupidity, but knew the intoxication had simply allowed the angry evil from deep within to emerge.

"Purge. It's an old word. Not used much anymore, but it is the only way you can become cleansed. That which resides in you will always be with you."

"But how?"

She smiled. "One thing about New York, you tend to hear some rather amazing confessions. One thing about having been a woman, especially in the time I lived, is that you would not be human if you did not build up some resentments about arrogant men."

"But you are a saint."

"Was, according to some people. Not at all sure what I am now."

Roy quickly looked at his options. He could, he imagined, run as he had done in the past. But he knew she was right, the slime on his soul would stay with him. Or, he could surrender to this petite woman. How bad could it be, he wondered?

Her powers made Alexandra's seem stunted. "Worse than you could imagine. In the hundred years I stood over those candles I learned many things. One woman, her name is not important, would come in three times a week. Unlike you she had a plausible excuse, having been molested as a child. It had twisted and hardened her. In the warped world she found, there were men who begged her, who paid her rather well to administer torment.

"Most times I was just a statue to those praying, but to some I let them know they were heard, and to a very few I gave comfort. This woman was one of them."

Roy did not like the way this was going, but knew it was too late to run.

"For most of her customers, she called them, 'slime puppies,' the punishment did not absolve anything. For you, the outcome can be different, providing you can let go your defective notions and."

"And?"

"And you don't end up liking it. Some do, you know."

Brimstone was a club with no need for a sign outside. The entrance was a set of stone stairs that descended into the vast warren of rooms and chambers under a warehouse in a part of town unknown to all but truck drivers and very the decadent. Roy stopped at the top of the steps. "I don't know."

"Of course you don't," Catherine cut him off. "We been through this before, most don't get a chance like this till they are standing at the gates. You are at the edge of losing it."

“But ...”

She held up her hand, in it there was a leather strap designed to fit around his head and prevent him from speaking. “You’d better put this on now. One more word from you and you will be cast out.”

Roy had been up against a lot of last chances in his life, and recognized this one as it flew in his face. The words cast out had touched the pit of his soul. He reached out and accepted the gag.

Inside the club was everything he had preached against. And he knew now, had secretly lusted for. Catherine was wearing a leather habit which got respectful nods from several people. She had decided that Roy should wear a costume like that of Playboy bunnies and work as a waitress. She removed the gag, telling him that he knew what he must say. A table of loud lesbians started by pushing ice cubes inside the tight fitting suit, He thanked them for their kindness. They invited Catherine to sit with them.

Roy was happy to wake from the tormented sleep in which he dreamed that LuAnn had appeared at the club wearing metal studded gloves. His body hurt so he was not sure where the reality had ended and the dreams began. He did have a vivid memory of Jesus saying, “Not for those sins, did I die. They are yours and yours alone.”

He now saw it would take rebuilding his life to put him at a place where he could seek some succor.

*

*

*

The Secretary of Commerce stood as Jo Ann entered his office overlooking the Mall. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"It is my pleasure, how may we help?"

"I've spent the last four days talking with a variety of economists. The only thing I know for sure is that they don't have a clue. Some say this disaster," he pointed to the wall and a large map which showed the inundated areas. "Will ultimately prove beneficial as it will provide jobs and create markets for goods such as lumber and building supplies. Others point to a great depression with bankruptcies, bank failures, and a homeless population of untold proportions."

"We tend to view it as an opportunity. There will be those who are hurt of course, but our belief is that the growth potentials will outweigh the bust. America has a history of fortunes made and lost and made again. We also see the opportunity to use this as a means to bring America back into a religious conformity that jives with that of our founding fathers." She held her hand up, "this of course can not be a stated objective, but it is a beneficial side effect none-the-less."

"The President voiced similar views today in the Cabinet meeting. Our present concern is, what steps do we take now?"

Jo Anne paused for a moment before speaking, "First let me be clear that I and the members of my organization stand to profit from the course of action we are endorsing."

"Thank you for your candor."

"Having said that, we believe that while we may be able to preserve some of the higher regions of Florida, the limestone base will ultimately make dikes generally untenable. Our hydrologists tell us that the water will simply migrate underground and

will pop up behind any dikes. That is why the pontoon house removal project is our number one priority. And I don't have to tell you that the key to that is insurance. If the courts uphold the "Act of God" provisions and do not fund removals, then we will be hard pressed to..."

He waved his hand interrupting her. "Bankrupting the entire insurance industry is not a good thing either."

Jo Ann nodded, "Agreed. We were thinking some governmental reinsurance program might enable..."

He shook his head. "Perhaps if the democrats were in power, but this administration believes that everyone should pull their own weight and polls prove that the rest of the country does not think we should bail out Florida."

"Loans then? If the insurance companies can walk away from this then the banks holding the mortgages will fail, unless we can get the property to higher ground. If that happens the government will foot the bill."

"That was what we had in mind. Loans to individuals, processed and collected by you. We will provide some seed money, but it will not be 100 percent. Your group will need to finance the startup, and any other initial costs. Once in place our loans will cover 30 percent, which should cover materials.

"But not shipping, labor. Labor, jacking the house up – putting it on the floats is expensive."

He held his hands up, "That's the best we can do."

*

*

*

“Hey Mark, you know the float your house to safety program? Well there are a few problems.”

“Nothing you can't solve I'm sure.”

Rick wasn't buying the I'm delegating to you because I have confidence in you routine. “Well why don't you let me tell you a couple and see if you can come up with some answers. The first has to do with when we get to where we are going with the house where ever that is. Unless we've arranged for an ocean front lot, and most people are leary of that, we're going to have to get it off the pontoons and move it inland. Trouble is the houses are too big to fit on most trucks at least the ones worth moving are. So maybe we cut the house in half, but even then we'll have to take down utility lines, road signs and stop lights along the route. That gets real expensive. It has to be done at night when there is no traffic that means overtime.

“A related issue is that you can't just plop a house down and use duct tape to put the two halves back together. You need sewage, water and other hookups. You need a street to put it on. A street high enough above water that the client is willing to pay for it. Trouble is that most of the people we will be moving won't have jobs and don't know where their employers are going – if anywhere. No job means it's hard for them to take out a loan for the new land, the truck, you get the drift.”

“So what it looks like is everyone wants us to get the houses onto the pontoons before the water reaches them. But our idea of being able to reuse the pontoons doesn't look like it's going to float, if you'll forgive me.”

“Sometimes your humor gets in the way of your productivity.”

“Yeah, well if you spent your day having people yell at you...”

“You’ve got to get someone to take those calls. And I don’t see a problem. “The house is worth something, usually a lot otherwise they wouldn’t bother moving it, right?”

“Yeah. But...”

Mark cut him off, “I’ve told you how I feel about buts. Let me finish. We alter the contract to specify the owner is responsible for all costs at the end of the trip. We also insert a clause that institutes a penalty if they don’t vacate the pontoons. The equity in the house will be the guarantee. It’s that simple. As for the pontoons, we’ll just build more. I’ll call about that as soon as we are done.”

Rick knew when he’d hit a brick wall. “Good idea, thanks.”

**

**

**

**

**

**

The stock market has suspended trading in several sectors until the situation in Florida has been resolved. With the potentially huge losses for insurance companies and businesses the chairman said, “It’s too big a gamble.”

“So how are you going to get us out of this one,” Hosanna asked?

The pigeon that was pecking on the sidewalk replied, “Don’t ask me, I’m just a street bird. But I suspect She is around here somewhere, probably a falcon.” It looked around nervously and shook its wings as though making ready for a quick getaway.

“And you are just about right for lunch.”

“Hold it!” Hosanna said, “Leave the bird alone, and answer the question.”

The falcon broke off its dive and settled onto the top of the canopy over the apartment building’s doorway.

“So tell me, did you make the rules?” Hosanna asked the falcon.

“What kind of a question is that? Of course I made the rules, ruler of heaven and earth, remember?”

“Not those rules, the other ones, the ones Newton discovered.”

“Newton! Newton! let me tell you about Sir Isaac. I gave him brains, but”

“Not now, those laws, call them something else, did you make them?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’ve got an idea but it may require bending some of those laws, and other things like that.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“I think I may have the solution, we give them back their ‘promised land’, but we do it on our terms.”

“And what might OUR terms be?”

Hosanna ignored the warning, “You know the expression, ‘there but for the grace of God’?”

The sleek bird did not bother answering, but indicated with a flick of its curved beak that she should continue. “Well, they’ve got to behave, we give them a slightly updated set of commandments, you know, *be fruitful, but don’t over-do it*. Things like that, and if they don’t - instant retribution. Florida is the perfect place for it – enough thunderstorms that there always is a lightening bolt available, or because it’s limestone we can open up a sinkhole under them. Don’t even have to make any new rules for that one?”

“Sometimes you worry me, daughter. I remember when you used to refer to the times of the Old Testament as when Grumpy was God.”

“So it’s possible?”

“All things are possible, you know that!”

* * *

The television camera was a small portable unit. Three technicians had gotten an uplink to the network’s satellite by mounting a gyroscopic controlled dish on the schooner’s aft mast.

Hosanna took the lead, stepping up to the microphone. “OK here’s the way it’s going to be. Florida will be restored provided three conditions are met. And let me state that these are God’s conditions not mine. If you want to hold out for a better deal talk to Her about it.”

She held up a finger. *“First – stop trashing the planet.* Since you have been given a chance to rebuild Florida you might as well start here. Redesign communities to eliminate the need for commuting. Return to the ways of the past when you could walk to work, stores, schools, churches. Do not rebuild the temples to material things. Malls have no place in God’s plan.”

Holding up a second finger, Hosanna continued, *“Stop being stupid.”* She shook her head, “I told God this one would be tough, that you might need more specificity, but She said, *‘No. Let’s keep it simple.’*” Hosanna shrugged, “Ok, but for those who have trouble with simple this includes, but is not limited to: Pride, Anger, Greed, Lust, Envy,

Sloth, and Buffet Breakfast Bars – hey, does this list sound familiar? Possessing firearms fits in there somewhere too. And Lawyers. The promised land does not need lawyers.”

“Third – and this is going to be the hardest one of all, ‘*What goes around comes around.*’ If you think about it – it’s a backhanded version of the Golden Rule. And it will be enforced. That’s why there won’t be any lawyers.” She handed the microphone to the reporter and walked aft.

The reporter bent down and asked Faith if she had anything to add. She started to shake her head, but then nodded and took the microphone. “And go outside and play.”

“You said that before, I believe,” the reporter answered.

Faith nodded vigorously. “Some people don’t hear things the first time. When was the last time you went outside and played?”

That’s easy, on Tuesday.”

“No, on Tuesday you went out and played golf, but you were really trying to get a job with a different station.”

He looked alarmed, “That’s not quite...”

“It was not playing, you let the other man win, so he would like you.” She turned leaving the reporter alone with several of his deadly sins showing.

* * *

The headline read, *Florida to become the ultimate Gated Community*. In a conversation with this reporter Hosanna revealed that the idea for raising Florida had come to her when she heard someone refer to the submerged peninsula as, ‘The Promised

Land.' "The promises, I realized, could go both ways." She said explaining that she saw it as an an opportunity to try something new.

When asked about her third statement that what goes around comes around will be enforced, she nodded and simply said, "Let's put it this way, diving justice has been turned up."

When informed that her ban on lawyers had not kept them from filing thousands of lawsuits she shrugged and said, "I'd like to see the process server who can get God to accept a subpoena. And if She did, I wouldn't want to be within fifty miles of the court room."

Asked if the rumors of Pearly Gates, manned by angels at the Florida Border were accurate, she said, "We're going to try it without at first. People will be given a warning and asked to look into their own hearts. If they are willing to try they are welcome. If they fail, they will get the message."

She went on to say that lightning strikes would rarely be the first instance of divine justice, "Not unless they do something really bad or stupid."

At this point a passerby asked, "Didn't Jesus die for our sins?"

"Past sins. It is not a license to go our and have that affair with Tommy,"

Hosanna replied to the woman. The woman who was with a man who evidently was not Tommy got very red and moved off quickly.

- Scenes – things to work on ---
- Martha More??? Certainly a finale if nothing else.
- Jo Anne – more battles she is working both sides. Preaching an unjust god as well as selling sump pumps... Her failure comes as Hosanna restores Florida and she her career shifts again to picking deposit cans off the sides of the road.
- More resolution for the kids Miguel especially
- Hutch
- Resolve Alexandra and Roy – break off...to make room for Catherine and Roy.
- Roy has something to teach Hosanna

The waters which repeatedly swept over Florida, managed with their stray currents to collect all the roadside debris and deposit it in a long unbroken line which stretched from Miami up through Palm Beach and over to Fort Myers and then back up to Orlando. Like many of the artifacts of the flood it had unusual properties, resistant to all mechanized attempts at removal, it was easily plucked and placed in plastic bags. It became the community service to which all malfeasants were sentenced, now the police was trying to re-establish control. It was

Martha wondered how best to tie up the loose ends. Hosanna needed to find a place to retire to again. Jesus was going to have to be talked out of going into the home contracting business. The whole question of how long he was going to stay around for was something she was trying to avoid. The feeling she was having – the same connection with God that she'd felt in the hospital, was beginning to scare her. There was a power inside her – one which scared her with its intensity and with her understanding of her inadequacy.

* * *

“Hello Martha I've had a chance to read the manuscript, and.”

“And you think it goes too far. It's too far out. It will offend too many people.”

“Well, there are some aspects to it that might. . . Do you remember how the reviewer said that your first book could be used to start religious rioting in any of seven cities?”

“And it was banned here and there, and if I remember I got royalties on the copies the mobs destroyed. Not exactly what I was after as an author, but I was able to contribute to causes that espouse understanding and enlightenment.”

“Do you remember a writer, Rushdie? He wrote a book that caused some religious groups to put a price on his head.”

“I know about that. I also know that I didn't have a choice here either. I'm careful not to use the words divinely inspired, there were a lot of divinely inspired souls wandering around in paper slippers on the ward. But, you remember how it worked out ok last time?”

“It worked out ok, as you put it after you moved to a wilderness with some protective neighbors.”

“But last time, strange as that was, nobody actually had a forked tongue, people really didn't turn blue. The lessons stayed in the book, so to speak.”

Martha said, “You give me much too much credit, if you are refering to. . .”

“The headlines in today's paper, yes, now that you mention it.” The editor looked down and read, “Flooding continues in Florida. Scientists are at a loss to explain why a twelve foot tide has developed in the seas off of Florida. The result is that twice daily much of the state and property valued at over 50 billion dollars is inundated. There has been talk of seawalls and other attempts . . .” She ceased reading and looked up at Martha. “I remember you saying something to the effect that you were Hosanna.”

Martha shook her head then said, “Not like that. It would be a heck of a way to plug the book, but don't you suppose I would have waited until it came out?”

“You have a point. So what's going on? How do you explain it?”

“Read the book again – explaining things is a big part of what gets people in trouble.”

“Martha!”

“How would I know? You want theories? Call the Dean at Princeton, I saw him on one of those shows the other day he said that priests of all denominations had been hiding behind the saying, “God works in mysterious ways,” ever since the first eclipse. Personally I think God may be a lot more involved in things than She is given credit for. Sometimes it seems that the sense of humor is back. Could be she is having fun with me.”

* * *

"I don't think that God loves me," Faith said, her voice thick and eyes moist.

Hosanna answered, "What makes you say that? Did something happen?"

Faith shook her head from side to side, then after a moment nodded. "I guess, sort of. You see I was talking with the bird and I said, 'Why do you have to make it so hard? Why can't you just make it so people can like each other?'"

"And what did the bird say?"

"Well it flapped its wings and then its eye got real small, and then it said in the parrot voice, you know not the one from inside, it said, 'Silly little girl, silly little girl.'"

"Maybe it was just the parrot talking. I never know when She's going to be there." Hosanna said, with as much conviction as she could. Truth was she was pretty sure God was always there and the parrot mode was just one of many voices.

Faith did not look convinced. "Why did God make us special or whatever it is that we are?"

"I've asked that question a time or two myself. And I must say I have never gotten an answer that made any sense."

"Sometimes I want to be like other kids who have ordinary lives. Like it was when we were on the boat?"

Hosanna bent down and hugged her. "Me too, and I'm working on it."

"Really?" Faith frowned, "How are you going to do that? Are we going to sail away?"

"Maybe, for a while, but I want to end up some place where you can live in a house and go to school with other kids."

“And have TV?”

This was something she had not given in on. It was a point of repeated contention. “You know how I feel . . .”

“But we’ve BEEN on television. We know it’s not real.”

Hosanna threw her hands up and theatrically pulled on her hair. “You kids make me almost as crazy as the bird does!”

Faith laughed, “Maybe you should go talk to the bird, mommy.”

“Maybe I should.”

First draft completed? - 2/28/05

Alternate -** ** **

The family farm had been tended by five generations of Rudys until the sons got the bright idea to plant the back pasture in Ganja. For two years they were wildly successful, making more money in a month than their parents had in two or three years of twice daily milkings.

Frank and Fred had been careful not to appear too prosperous, limiting themselves to one Lexus apiece, but they were greedy and when it came time for Frank to divorce May, he tried to do on the cheap.

The farm had been sold to pay legal expenses in what was a futile attempt to keep them out of the slammer. Hosanna purchased it and immediately had the angels set to building houses for Wanda, and the others.

The building department consisted of a burly man named Ed who signed off on all the changes after a discussion with an angel convinced him that there were exceptions that could be made in this case.

The clerk who took their forms did not look at them and probably would not have recognized them in any case. His name was Mark, and he hadn't been interested in much of anything since being told by the navy that his personality did not suit his being put on a ship with other people who would have no way to get off or escape him except by pitching him overboard. They told him this after he'd been pulled out of the water for the fourth time.

He was a stickler for detail. He was glad they had filled the forms out in blue or black ink, but there were several disturbing gaps in the information they were required to submit. First, there were no birth certificates for two of the girls, and none of the children had the required vaccination certificates.

He paid little attention to the information written on the forms, and was not aware as to whom he was dealing with. It would not have made a difference as he considered himself an equal opportunity misanthropist.

The third time he handed the papers back to Hosanna he said, "Maybe you should go home and come back when you have all the required documentation." That was a mistake.

Hosanna pointed with her fore-finger to a place over his head. After a second he looked up, in time to see a bushel basket full of papers being spilled out on him. It was not a gentle cascade as several phone books had been included as proof of address.

Mark retaliated by finding spots for her brats in Mrs. Simon's class in Park Avenue school. There were spots there because parents had been known to go to great

lengths, including acts which might be construed as bribery, to get their children removed from that class.

* * *

Mrs. Simon had a ritual on the first day of school. As the children lined up waiting to be led into the classroom she would scowl. Then after marching them down the long halls she would say one word as they came into the classroom, "Silence!"

She then had them stand by their desks for five very long minutes, before saying they could sit down. If a child raised a hand, she would shake her head and scowl. Mrs. Simon's brother was a lawyer who specialized in employment discrimination. He had reversed an unfavorable evaluation and negotiated a ten thousand dollar award for mental suffering. While he might be able to keep her from being fired, he could not affect her placement or classroom assignment. The superintendent who had originally tried to get rid of her saw to it that she was assigned the basement room in the oldest school in the system.

"What a meanie," Faith whispered to Estelle.

"Quiet!, Young lady, if you have anything to say, raise your hand. When I call on you – then you may speak."

"You are my daughter, you may tell her."

Faith took a quick look for the bird, and even though she did not see it, she raised her hand.

Mrs. Simon ignored her.

Faith made little sparkles come out the end of her fingers.

Mrs. Simon turned her back and started to write something on the board.

The chalk turned into a salamander which wiggled from her grasp.

Mrs. Simon turned back and finally nodded to the child. "What is it?"

"This year is going to be different. We're going to be the teachers, and you're going to learn how to be happy."

Mrs. Simon started to puff up, about to start yelling, but at the last possible moment she shut her mouth because an understanding came over her. It started when she was five, on her birthday, when her grandparents had come for the party. Except all they seemed to say was how pretty her sister was, how smart she was. It was the start of a pattern. All through school, she was compared to her beautiful, smart sister.

Her sister had ended up a thrice divorced alcoholic who dabbled in prescription drugs until she'd driven her SUV into the entrance of a mall, later saying she was looking for the parking garage. The airbag had reversed the effects of the cosmetic surgery which represented the cash payouts of the three marriages. While in rehab the bank foreclosed on her house and she was now living in a motel on old route 17 which rented units by the month.

Mrs. Simon's first realization, her first step on the road to happiness was that she was no longer in her sister's shadow. This enlightenment did not stop her from trying to re-assert her control over the class.

It was too late. The drab linoleum floor had become a verdant meadow with unicorns grazing in one corner and miniature winged horses practicing loops where the blackboard used to be.

* * *