

The Last Nightmare

by Steve Ray

Everything went blank for a moment, but that moment seemed like eternity. He felt a motion, not with wind and breeze, but a motion none the less. He was traveling, moving, floating, transcending—he wasn't really sure. The sudden blackness gave him time to regain his thoughts, just enough time to recapture the last moments. Though his first thoughts were garbled and dreamlike, they slowly began taking shape, like a tree seen through a thick fog, slowly it all came back to him out of the swirling, traveling, blank void. Utter confusion was giving way to bits of clarity. They had rushed him to the hospital. He remembered the sirens and the cold hands of the paramedics. Cold hands all over his body, probing and poking. Yes, there had been screams, he remembered now—and the sound of sobbing. Then the horrendous sound resurfaced, a sound that could be felt. It was a sound that had subsumed his whole being, wrapping itself around him, ripping through him. Then the sound of crunching metal, broken glass, and twisted carnage. What must have lasted only seconds seemed to him a long and troubling nightmare—then the dark, foggy void.

His internal world of thought was still clearing as the mist swirled toward the perimeters of his subconscious. He now remembered the red flash, yes, the red flash. The truck was red and had swerved into his lane. Then the crunching, the sound that could be felt, the impact that slowly shoved him with mysterious strength past the sound and the pain into the void. He tried to gain control of his hearing. Why was it so quiet? Where was the screaming that had ripped his senses only a moment ago, or was it only a moment ago? Fear gripped him in the darkness as he struggled to shake himself back into physical consciousness. Something was not right . . .



something was very different. He slowly realized, as his efforts to regain self-control failed him, that he was not as he once was. A deeper fear gripped his returning awareness. Had he been killed? Was he dead? He had often wondered what it would be like to die, to pass beyond the boundaries of space and time. Something was different. Gravitational forces seemed suspended now. Space and time seemed suspended, and again he felt the sensation of moving, unfamiliar to him. Rising, escaping, something like the plunge of a roller coaster only upward.

Was there really an afterlife—a heaven or something—and was it really up? It was one thing to believe in a heaven while walking through the woods or sitting in front of the fire, but was there really, really, such a thing, he wondered, as he was uncontrollably transported through the mist. It was one thing to believe then, it was quite another thing now. His eyes widened. What if death was a dark, heavy, slamming door—and then nothing? But he hadn't heard a door slam and though his current sensation was more like "nothingness" than he had known prior to this nightmare, it was still not "nothing." He was aware, and, that was something, that was a good sign. He couldn't imagine "nothing"—non-reality. There was no category in his mind or experience for such a notion. "Nothingness" would conflict with all his aspirations and hopes. "Nothing" as the final state would make a mockery of humanity he thought. Either men had a soul, or they dreamed it up in their imagination to avoid the dread of "nothing." One cannot live without hope, even if it is a false hope, a game one plays to deceive oneself.

Had time stopped? He seemed to have many thoughts passing through his head and thoughts took time to think. He was suddenly jolted with sheer joy and relief, for he realized that the theoretical "nothing" following close on the heels of death, had not seemed to happen to him, for he was still thinking, he was still feeling. Time may have stopped but he had continued—oh joy, oh ecstasy! He was thinking and feeling, he still existed, he was still conscious—he must still be alive!

Slivers of recollection zoomed past and he numbly grappled with them before they slipped away. Try to remember! He had heard solemn words. What were they? Try, try, try to remember. They came again, resembling dancing prisms of light and with great effort his mind reached out and grasped at them. Yes, there were words. It was coming back. "We're losing him, quick, we're losing him!" Then a female voice had shouted, "What a mess! Stop the bleeding, quick! Someone help!" Then there were other voices too, but they were drowned out by encroaching fog. Other mental shapes crept into view beyond the bounds of his awareness, crouching in the fog. He struggled to focus, to comprehend. They were darker than the rest, harder to grapple with, yet he must. Other voices, very familiar voices: "No, no, please no. Oh, God, no." Then, another deep moaning wail, "Oh my God, I can't believe it! He just left home an hour ago; he was fine. No God, no. He can't be . . .! Oh God!"

So, he was dead. He had died and was now in the middle of the great mystery. He tried to

raise his head to see but everything was dark, he could only make out a few glimpses from the past. Should he be afraid? He was, but should he be? He was still conscious so he had the ability to fear. Had the great “mystery” been “nothingness” he would not have had the ability to fear, so he rejoiced in his fear. He wanted to jump up and down with joy because of his fear. Fear was something, not “nothing.” Even the darkness was something. Darkness and fear: these two things gave him hope. He was overjoyed for a moment, but only for a moment as he continued his upward surge. To be conscious was to still exist and that was good, or was it? Maybe it was good, but only depending on what this new existence consisted of. Would he be caught in the upward torrent forever? Forever was a damn long time. He had the distinct perception that time no longer existed, neither did space, even though his thoughts still flowed in a time sequence and he seemed to be moving. Forever could be very good, but on the other hand, it could be utterly dreadful. For example, if he continued this inexorable upward motion, beyond his control, would it ever end? If time had given way to eternity, or if he had exceeded the speed of light and somehow been transferred into another dimension of timelessness, this darkness and lonely isolation could actually last indefinitely—forever! The fear increased; his heart pounded in his chest.

He had heard stories during his lifetime, stories about heaven and hell, after life experiences, and the like. He wished now that he had paid more attention—not been so busy with things that seemed awfully trivial right now. The day before the accident it had been life shatteringly important to get the car washed and the oil changed. He remembered the urgency he had felt; yet now it seemed a million miles away, so very unimportant. He had looked up at the stars when returning home on a chilly evening, about a week early, and had wondered about the size of the universe, the meaning of life, and he had noticed how small he felt. It had only lasted for a moment, but he remembered it very clearly right now. Maybe he should have taken the cue and spent some time thinking on these “philosophical” or “religious” things a bit more—you know, putting his life in perspective. But he had to get up early the next day and wanted to catch the news before going to bed, and the next day had troubles and distractions of its own.

What if this new timeless existence was lonely or worse yet, painful and lonely? Maybe it would have been better if death was just a door into “nothing” like a deep sleep that never ends. This was a scary turn of mind. Better to not exist than to exist unhappy or in emotional or physical discomfort. Yet, he still couldn’t quite comprehend the idea of not existing. There had been many religious and philosophical theories about death and the hereafter. They had bandied about incessantly for everyone’s attention. The secularist or materialist claimed we were just sophisticated animals and would someday be buried, the door would slam, and that was the end. Worms would eat his unconscious corpse, his memory would persist with friends and family a few years (or would it?), and then. . . . Some folks in this category even denied we were persons. They were called “reductionists” and usually studied in the sciences or dabbled in poetry. They reduced human beings to machines: complex computers, collections of molecules, hormones,

electronics, and chemicals. When these machines ceased running—when they were crushed or their parts wore out—their basic molecular components were simply recycled by the larger machine, Mother Earth, who then unconsciously and randomly formed them into some other form of machine, maybe a tree or a cow.

He tried to remember if the people who advocated such a belief ever actually lived consistently with their ideas. He didn't think so and remembered them going here and there as though they were important. He remembered that they were even offended if other "molecular machines" didn't treat them with the dignity, respect, and fair play that a "person" should be afforded.

He was certain now that he had burst through the barrier of time and had entered a strange sort of cosmic existence. He felt very different, kind of light, yet much heavier than before. His other existence, before he was enveloped in the dark void, did not have the heavy sensation he was experiencing now. Even though he was gliding on lightning bolts, lighter than air, his whole being seemed so much heavier, weightier. It was explained better as a "weight of significance" more than an actual weight measured in pounds and ounces. Terror again seized his thoughts. What if this continual, wretched darkness is forever? What would he do then? He was entertaining himself all right for now, but he couldn't keep it up forever? And the solitude—it was starting to concern him.

His mind darted back to molecules and gods. Some of his friends had been what they called Pantheists—taking their ideas from Eastern religions who considered everything as part of the cosmic unconscious. The core of their belief was that everything was god and god was everything. God then, is impersonal, the Life force, or the unknowable principle behind the curtain. Life had meaning only as each individual lost their own identity and merged back into the "nothingness of what is," back into the impersonal Life force. He remembered a few friends in the New Age movement toying with these Americanized forms of Hinduism, paganism, and Buddhism. He wasn't impressed.

The sensation of speed brought him out of his thoughts as he realized he was speeding up, rapidly speeding up. On his left and right he started noticing flashes of light and patches of darkness darker than actual darkness. They were rushing around with blinding speed making him nauseous. "Stop, stop!" He didn't realize it instantaneously, but it was his own voice. This was all too weird. He was getting dizzy. He wanted to go back to the familiar, to his family, to his home, and his job. He wanted to watch the news, hug his kids, and eat dinner. A funny thing though, he had been in this suspended animation for a long time but there were no pangs of hunger—but what was time here? He longed for his ordinary, daily routine, but that was impossible now. Everything was so strange.

Not only were there the atheist and pantheistic types he had known, but there was also those who always spoke about God as though they knew him. His neighbors had been like that. They were the ones who said they knew there was life after death—their blasted

Book said so. He had always considered them to be pompous idiots; well, at least deluded simpletons. He had never taken them too seriously. They tended to be stuffy, hypocritical, and always attacking everyone who believed in the freedom of thought. He had sarcastically called some of them “Bible-thumpers,” and the others, “papal slaves.” They were intolerable. How could such bigoted people catch onto something of such import as the afterlife? “Oh, God, I hope they weren’t right!” he moaned.

He watched the surrounding darkness increasingly transformed into a rosy-colored hue and continued to question his circumstances. How many possible explanations were there—to decipher the reality of life and existence. Reality demands an explanation. He tried to remember. When he had read the Saturday papers, he was always humored by the many religions, each promoting their own little ideas on the religion page. There must be hundreds, if not thousands, of explanations. It seemed that everyone was desperate to find meaning behind their hurried pace of life. In their desperation they had all created many varieties of gods in their own image. He decided to set aside the other jumbling thoughts crowding for attention, especially the gruesome memories surrounding the red flash. He had to make sense out of all this craziness; waking up in such confusion was a definite reason to think as fast as possible.

Whoever was theoretically right or wrong, he thought, the universe should be explained. Had it existed forever, or did it have a beginning? He decided that every machine or piece of art had a creator—someone or something behind it. When looking at art he had always asked, “Who made that?” The universe and everything in it was complex yet unified and orderly. Who made it? How did it get here? What would explain the unity and diversity, and what would explain the unique qualities of human beings—their personalities, their ability to communicate verbally, their creativity and capacity to love, and especially to think abstractly? Appropriate thing to be thinking about as his surroundings fled past in a blur of ever increasing cosmic redness—an ever increasing sensation of speed as well. Now that the darkness was giving way to the reddish haze he began to make out shapes to his left and right, and a short distance in front of him. He could not see behind himself. The shapes were like nothing he had seen before, and emanating from them came a brilliant light that obscured their shape and proportions. His first thought was angels, but that was silly, he had dismissed such childishness and superstition long ago, but then, he would have considered this whole undeniable experience as childish superstition.

Things seemed clearer in this new environment; his mind was more lucid than he remembered it being before the accident—before his death. He was thinking faster. He was analyzing the multiple explanations for existence. Then he realized, it was simple! It came to the forefront of his mind like a shot. The possibilities were not endless: there were only three. All the religious, philosophic, or scientific theories boiled down to three possible solutions.

He was spinning now, twisting in the wind so to speak. He was struggling to keep his

balance. What was he thinking about? Concentrate! Oh yes, the origin of the universe with only three possible solutions of how it got here. First he thought, it could have come from nothing, but that seemed to go in one brain cell and out another—that wouldn't make sense; it's against reason. That left either: a personal beginning or an impersonal beginning. The universe was ultimately the result of either impersonal "matter" configured by time plus chance, or it was ultimately personal, with an artist behind the construction. He sure wished he had taken more time to think about this when he was still alive. Maybe life, what he now realized was a very, very short period of time between birth and the Grim Reaper, was a preparation for this bewildering event. On an earthly scale, every action has a reaction; every choice has a consequence. What if, oh God, what if our choices and actions on the earth somehow impact this strange afterlife? The usual expletive blurted from his mouth, "Oh shit! I could be in big trouble! I wish I'd thought more about these things."

The brilliant creatures, or whatever they were, glowed brighter now, but he tried to dismiss the idea of angels. They must be some kind of cosmic glare or helium explosion. The problem though, was that they stayed right with him, almost, oh, he sure hoped not, almost with the appearance of escorts. He better keep thinking and he better think fast because again, things were changing, and he wasn't sure how much time he had left to finish his mental gymnastics. Think, think, come on, think! He was beginning to worry a bit now. The "dream" was not going away, the sounds of crunching metal and words of death still howled in his ears like a banshee while the darkness continued to brighten and the fog gradually dispersed. He had the distinct impression he was drawing near something important, but what it was he didn't know what. Think! He had to prepare. "Damn, I wish I had paid more attention when I had time to pay attention!" He realized now that loneliness was not going to be his problem, nor was too much time to think. He was scared. He had a lot to think about and he was getting the distinct impression he was running out of time to think.

The glowing objects surrounding him on either side and in front were now joined by others. He realized now that the bright ones were also accompanied by dark ones—kind of shadows of shadows, which he had glimpsed a few moments ago. They were the opposite of light, not just a shadow caused by light. If there was such a thing as a "black hole" these things were it. They seemed like substance voids, the opposite of matter, the reflection of darkness, ominous and full of treachery. He grimaced with the realization that if he drew too close to these dark voids he would be engulfed, swallowed up by their darkness and become nonexistent. Now the dark objects seemed to far outnumber the bright one. Think, think! What the hell is all this?

OK, OK, calm down, think! Where was I? Oh, yes, two possibilities—personal and impersonal. Everything started from either matter plus time plus chance, or else it started from a personal source, a personal being who made everything because he or she or it wanted to. So, something has to be eternal, either matter or a personal being, since reality

cannot have emerged out of absolute nothingness—something has to be eternal, infinite with no beginning. Damn, he thought, I should have paid attention in school and religion classes. It would have made this a lot easier, a hell of a lot easier. It is reduced to these two. There is no way around it: one or the other, personal or impersonal. So, what are the implications of each. One would tend to have moral, ethical, and relational overtones, whereas the other would not, only “What is, is right,” or “Might is right, the survival of the strongest and the fittest.” A personal origin would provide a good explanation for what he experienced as a man on earth, and now for that matter, and the impersonal origin seemed to give no adequate answers.

Impersonal, impersonal. What would that mean? If the material cosmos is, was, or ever will be, then there is nothing behind it and matter and energy are all there is and immortality and personal significance are not existent, some kind of cosmic joke on humanity. Now I’m getting somewhere; progress, progress, I’m making progress. If matter is all there is, then personality, as I viewed it, love as I experienced it, hope that I depended on is all reduced to mechanics and meaninglessness. I was, I am, just part of the bigger machine. A clockwork! Boy, I wonder if that is what that movie was about, I wish I’d paid more attention to Burgess and Kubrick. A clockwork, and I am just a gear, just a spindle, or a spring.

What meaning would this whole thing have—would I have? I felt important, I feel significant now, he thought! He remembered some philosophers saying that life was meaningless and absurd, but he had chuckled. If everyone else’s life was meaningless, his sure wasn’t. He created meaning for his life everyday; he played the game. Oh no, but that was only temporal, existential, day by day—what about now? Time plus chance plus matter doesn’t seem to adequately explain the reality he lived in. Love was more than hormones and sex, there was something real there, deeper than molecules. Guilt and joy had to be more than genetic “hand-me-downs,” more than sociological conditioning, more than the chemical interactions within his cells. And how would random chance explain the order to the universe, the beauty? Even Darwin hadn’t accepted that premise. Nature left to itself disintegrates, breaks down, reverts to chaos. He remembered the Second Law of Thermodynamics in science class. Yes, the impersonal route seems to come up short. Detectives follow good leads, not dead ends.

The alien objects accompanying his flight grew more plenteous. He reluctantly gave up his hope of relegating them to some impersonal cosmic substance. The dreaded word angels surfaced again. They were definitely moving, he could see that as the lightness increased and the fog was almost gone. They were moving along with him and even seemed to be communicating in some fashion, and the dark voids seemed to stay their distance. One drifted in closer than usual and the man felt a shudder of fear as he felt a frigid blast of cold and a sudden sucking gravitational attraction. A sound, whether a voice or the sound of a heinous, slobbering lust, he wasn’t sure. He was sure though, that terror surged through his veins like an adrenaline rush. A bright light darted in and with a

sudden whoosh the stinking void was cast back and a vulgar discharge of venomous air was the only result.

He realized their speed was again increasing with his hosts constantly rearranging themselves as if jockeying for position. His mind was racing with the ever changing situation around him and the bizarre sensations he was trying to process, while at the same time he was attempting to continue the analytic line of thought he felt was so crucial to make sense of this nightmare. He was an unwilling participant in what was becoming more than a simple physical experience. As he shot through what was now appearing to be a channel or spatial corridor, he began to sense a moral pervasiveness. It was like good and evil had become physical realities, like flavors or sounds, like air going in and out of the lungs. He could “feel” ideals, virtue, and moral integrity like he could feel physical objects. This was really strange. The metaphysics and morals were intermingled. The atmosphere was changing and he could taste, hear, smell, and feel these moral virtues. He decided that the personal explanation for the existence of reality must be the correct one. There must have been some sort of Being behind the physical reality, and humanity. He had the dreaded impression he was being drawn toward, or escorted beyond the physical bounds of the material universe toward this Artist, this Creator, this personal Being.

This made perfect sense when he thought about it. If he as a man had personality, love, creativity, language, and the other traits of human persons, he must somehow reflect the one that created him and the universe. Just as an artist, whether he realizes it or not, leaves something of himself in each work of creation, so must this Creator. Looking at a body of work, either by an artist, poet, or architect, one can understand something of the person behind the work. The personal Being behind the universe must have “reflected” himself in his artwork. His creation was outside of himself, but reflected his nature and personal qualities. The creation of the world does, then, show his invisible nature, his eternal power, and his deity. This god has made it clearly perceived in the things he has made.

“Oh God, why didn’t I think about all this when I could have, with no cosmic crisis breathing down my throat? Why didn’t I do something about it at home, with my family, to make sure I was ready for this journey toward who knows what or where?”

Earlier he had felt only the sensations of moving, the physical impressions, but now the moral tastes and sensations far outweighed the physical realities. The fragrances of purity were wonderful and the feel of virtue tickled his flesh and tantalized him deeper than he could explain or understand. He began to feel as though new senses were being born within him because the perceptions he was now receiving could not be described in terms of the five physical senses he had known on earth. These were deeper senses, richly profound, and he wondered if his ability to see the creatures escorting him upward through the corridor was not the indication of a new sense that he had never known

before, something like a sixth sense or the ability to perceive the unseen or spiritual world—new senses awakening to perceive new, or until now imperceptible realities. And the moral sense, which seemed to overwhelm all the others, was churning in his bowels. It seemed like a primeval sense, a primordial awareness, something that had lain dormant in his being and was now rekindled like a fire raging in his breast. A wave of inadequacy flooded over him, a sense of having somehow fallen short, of a true moral guilt. He knew instantly that his nature somehow contrasted with the moral essences washing over him.

This increased awareness of a moral sense brought about a spasm of panic like none he had known before. The red flash and the crunching metal paled in comparison to this fear. This dread had the ability to break the bones and shatter the soul as well. A scream choked him; it welled up in his throat but was too deep and too painful to utter. The shadowy creatures were carefully watching him and began to show excitement, as though they could hear his inaudible scream. They moved in. Rasping, evil voices could now be heard, maybe the result of another new sense awaking. At first their guttural sounds only disgusted him but as they became decipherable they filled him with horror. The surroundings were now much brighter and wider, the speed had increased beyond description. The multitude of sensations, from the original five to the indescribable new ones, overwhelmed the him. He struggled deep within himself to continue thinking, realizing that something was dead ahead, something that smelled sweet and wholesome, massaging all the senses like nothing on earth could compare.

Personal beginning verses impersonal, oh yeah, he had concluded it must be personal. This fragrant moral sense of virtue and justice caused him great distress and confirmed his conclusion. Such a dichotomy: it was so delicious and pure, so sweet and ambrosial, yet so repelling. Why did he sense revulsion at something so alluring? He didn't understand. This personal Being, to whom he was being irresistibly drawn, must be the source of this great sensual flood. This Being must be magnificent beyond all description, too extraordinary for the human mind to grasp. There was something in him that was attracted, and something in him that retched. He wrestled with the paradox and wasn't sure why he was so repulsed by such goodness.

Maybe this strange Being had made men like himself in some respects, good and magnificently fragrant with morals and justice—in his own image so to speak. Maybe he was at odds with him—not on friendly terms. Oh God, he was sure feeling at odds with him right now and didn't understand why. Could this have something to do with the primordial moral impulses he had felt only moments ago? Maybe something in him was radically contrary to the Being and was causing the vomitus reaction every time the sweetness and purity breezed past him. This bode poorly. The bright creatures saw the terror and consternation on his retched face and they became concerned and exceedingly protective. The shadows-darker-than-shadows seemed animated with glee by the man's facial expressions, like a fire of lust was ignited in their bowels. The glorious beings always stayed tightly around him like an impenetrable shield. Realizing the increasing

seriousness of his situation, he began to jerk and twist, looking frantically around him. The forward gravitational suction grew stronger causing his facial skin to stretch and his teeth to clamp down. His eyes tightened into a grimaced squint. The emanating sweetness and delight that were now blasting him in the face were causing great discomfort. He was being twisted inside and his organs groaned with a moral sort of pain, something that he had only had minute twinges of while on earth—only twinges, but firm memories none the less. It resembled something like his conscience when he had stolen candy and lied to his father as a child.

His perception of the realities around him became increasingly sensitized and the voices he could not distinguish only moments ago were now beginning to be discernable, as though a radio station was tuning itself in. They spoke in a language and style foreign to him. He was gasping now and struggling to process the mysteries that were swirling around him. The vile black holes spoke first and quite rudely, with sinister glee. They sputtered, almost in unison, “He’s ours! See the terror in his eyes, he’s ours; we’ll take him the rest of the way.” The glorious ones ignored them, showing no sign of having heard. The only indication that they noticed the request was an almost imperceptible tightening of their ranks. The dark ones grew more animated, “Step aside, you know the decrees, they were built into the universe from the first days. He’s ours.” The celestial powers stayed on course, unruffled. One spoke for all and its voice resembled the piercing blast of a cosmic trumpet, deep and rich in tone: “You do not determine decrees, He, the source of all joy and sweetness, virtue and justice, it is he who decides.” An uneasy truce appeared to have been reached, but the glee never left the eyes of the dark ones and their glee did not escape the traveler.

His terror raged unabated. He put two and two together. He felt the deep pleasure wafting down the corridor, the forward blast of light and purity bathed him in its pleasure, but at the same time he felt a revulsion and fear; he realized now that the moral and virtuous aspect of the universe was just as strong—no, stronger—than the actual physical aspects; he knew now that he must be out of step with the Being or he would not be repulsed by the delicious flood that overwhelmed his confused senses. But worst of all, and the factor that convinced him he was correct in his reasoning thus far, were the hideous sucking sounds made by the loathsome shadow beings. They were taking cruel delight in what they read on his face. They also noticed that the great ones, though they shown brightly in their flight, had no sign of joy or assurance of victory on their stony countenances—only determination and a sense of duty.

The scream that had lodged in this throat moments before finally escaped in a torrent of words: “Stop, stop, let me prepare myself, let me think! It is all moving too fast damn it! Stop! Let me think! Please, please!” The great beings carried on with great resolve, dutifully, maintaining a disciplined silence and unity of purpose. It was increasingly obvious that they experienced the joyful emanations washing over them with great pleasure, but something, possibly the decrees surrounding their ward, muffled their joy.

The only words came from the grunting and belching ring of darkness. “He is ours, he made the choices, he is ours.” The celestial escorts seemed resolved to leave that determination in the hands of the source of light and pleasure which appeared to be dead ahead. The accusers on either side and below yelled and howled their condemnations and continued to jeer the detainee and comment on the fearful look in their intended victim’s eyes. They knew, and they knew that he knew. He did know now, and knew that they knew—he began a violent struggle. The dark ones screeched again, “Let us have him, he already knows. If he were upright and blameless, able to face the Creator he would not be repulsed by the flood of virtue. See, it affects him the same as does us. It is painful getting this close. He too is in pain. And you, you loyal ones who look into the Being’s face, you who can bear the awful light, you always love to enter that place. But this captive will not be able to bear the consequences of justice, the blinding force of holiness. He is repelled. It’s over for him, give him to us!”

How could he have been so naive? Oh damn! What a fool he’d been. Why didn’t his gaze up at the stars send him on a search for truth? Why did he let the days slip away? Why had he neglected his duty to the Person behind the universe that obviously had a claim on his being? Why did he go through his whole life without a sense of wonder, without the questions that wonder inspires? Why had he always tried to justify his actions when even he knew they were wrong? His wife and others reminded him of his shortcomings and transgression. How could he have neglected the mercy that was so abundant? He knew it was abundant because even now it was flowing down the corridor to earth in a steady and luxurious flood. He had been a fool, a self-centered, procrastinating fool. He had considered himself so chic and wise, and now this, now this horror. The greatest horror of all was the revulsion experienced when such melodious music and sweet fragrances should have drawn him into the sheer joy of it all, but shame and discomfort forced him, yes, forced to avert his gaze. He, like the dark ones, shaded his eyes and turned away.

The light was blinding and getting worse by the moment. Now he longed for the darkness he once dreaded. He was suddenly aware of his guilt and shortcomings, of his inner ugliness that such beauty and light exposed. He had kept it covered but now it shown for all to see. He couldn’t hide. Suddenly they burst out of the corridor into a translucent and ethereal courtyard. Throngs of people and angelic-like beings without number danced and sang. He noticed others bowed before the unbearable light. It burned right through the crouching figures, and there was no shadow. Others, over to the right, together with the throngs singing around the courtyard and surrounding the throne, were basking in the light as though it caused them no discomfort, as though it fed their beings, and gave them indescribable joy and ecstasy. He couldn’t understand how they could enjoy the very light which burned him with such intense suffering and agony.

He looked closer, shielding his eyes from the iridescence brilliance. Those who cringed before the radiance had obstacles in their souls that seared and festered in the light, moral flaws that marred their visage. The Being was ensconced above him, but the man could

not look at him. The shriveled man realized, as the soft words boomed forth from the throne, that the joyful throngs had nothing odious in them, nothing to resist the light, nothing to curdle like rotten milk under the unrelenting gaze of justice and holiness. Their champion stood in their midst, in the form of a humble lamb. But the Lamb still bore the open wounds of the battle. He stood as though slain, a Lamb who had removed their lust, greed, and selfishness. He had removed the moral obstacles that stung with venomous poison and brought corruption, which ate like a cancer into the beauty and wholesomeness of the Artist's creation. Those whose eyes could behold the beatific vision were those who had cooperated with the Lamb and allowed him to cleanse their garments, their souls, as no launderer on earth could do.

The next moments cannot be adequately described. The man had found it impossible to process all these new experiences, even with the lucidity of his mind and the additional senses provided. The Personal Being, full of kindness and compassion, not to mention creativity, beauty, magnificence, justice, mercy and awesome power, had tears in his eyes as he watched the man involuntarily recoil from His gentle presence. He had known the man and had sent friends and family to love him. He had tried to touch the man Himself, and cause him to feel the seriousness of justice and the sweetness of mercy, but the man had recoiled then as he recoiled now. He had watched the man look up at His stars, His handiwork in the heavens, and hoped the man would realize that it must have been an Artist who created such an expanse. He had never been far from the man; in fact the man existed by His awesome power. He had given the man a conscience to guide him in the ways of justice and righteousness; the qualities deeply imbedded in the fabric of the whole universe. The man, however, had soiled his garments willingly, and had refused to have them cleansed. He had resisted the heavenly guide, his conscience, until like a laborer's hands, his heart had become callous and unresponsive. Even when the crunching accident occurred, it was recorded here in the eternal records that the man's first response was, "God damn it!" instead of "Lord, have mercy!"

Compelled by the eternal decrees and the man's own cringing attempt to escape the radiance, the bright ones sadly and unwillingly stepped back from the cowering man now who groveled before the majestic beauty and moral purity. He shielded his eyes from the blinding light. He was such a noble creature, a man, yet now his visage darkened and his stature contracted. What was made to be bathed in pure light and to reside a little lower than the angels, now crouched as an unholy beast. The decrees established before the creation of the universe were in force. He was creeping away from the light, looking for a shadow, anything, to protect him from the unrelenting gaze. How could the others bear it?

The fiends howled with glee as they seized him. They sneered at the lovely face on the Father's throne—the kindly Father with tears rolling down his cheeks. They taunted and mocked Him as they roughly took charge of their new companion. The entourage of angels stepped sadly aside; the decrees had been enacted. They never quit; they never gave up until it was too late though they knew that once the man was in the corridor, his

fate was sealed. They were battle-worn and weary from their labors, but they quickly regained new strength from the life-giving virtue that was absorbed with each breath. The sight of the great Creator and the grace that flowed from the Lamb at His right hand filled them with renewed strength and resolve. They shot back down the corridor with a flourish of wings to rejoin the battle.

The dark and wicked spirits rose into the air with their unresisting ward in their clutches. They flew straight up, over the palisades of the throne room, over the throngs and sweet melodies, before taking a steep dive down, down past the cross and the spires decorating the walls of the courtyard, and down again, away from the painful light, down into the billowing smoke. Gehenna.

The next day another truck veered across the median and another heart stopped. Cancer devoured the last breath of another, while age kicked the feet out from under a fourth. A man placed a gun to his temple, and a forgotten parent never woke from her hospital bed. The Grim Reaper surprised many that day.

The earth continues to spin for a time—and the angels are ever at work. The story of the Creator is faithfully spread and ever available, but most folks are busy washing their car and changing their oil. They sneer and recoil at the fragrance of mercy. They are preparing themselves for the inevitable meeting at the end of the corridor—their last nightmare.