

The Salvation Salesmen

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...and then he awoke. His breath felt light and his face was flushed, but otherwise he was fine. He was resting on the softest surface he'd ever felt. He lay there and took in the calm mood that surrounded him.

"What is this place?" he thought to himself.

His mind drew a blank as he sat up and let his eyes wander. He slowly took to his feet. There were clouds and other vaporous forms around him but somehow he could stand, his feet moving as if suspended above nothing. The air was soft and each breath felt easy and unlabored; he marveled at this as he inhaled and rubbed his hands over his chest. Something was wrong. For the first time in his life he could sense an absolute calm, a need to do nothing. This was sure bliss.

He dug his toes into the spongy surface and knelt down to touch it. It was odd and foamy, like angel food cake. He shoved his arm in as deep as it would go and enjoyed the strange sensation as it was pushed back out, as if by some strange muscle hidden within the wispy surface. He did this time and time again, reveling in the sensation. He felt giddy and euphoric.

"Hello," a voice said, sounding as though it came from all sides at once.

He was startled. He could see no one else nearby, and the suddenness of the voice left him feeling nervous. He stood awkwardly and made as if to wipe his arm free of the mist and cloud but it was already clean.

"Uh, hello?" he replied, thinking for the first time that it wasn't too odd to expect other people to be here, or at the very least for him to identify himself. Come to think of it, where was he?

"How do you feel now, eh?" the voice said. He stood stock still, his eyes fixed towards the distance.

"Uh, well I don't know... exactly... I uh," he stammered. "I don't know where I am," he said as he felt an arm drop down onto his shoulder and gently guide

him away. They began walking towards some unseen destination. He was aware of the man to his right, but didn't dare look. His sense of calm was long gone.

"Oh that's perfectly all right," the dulcet and smooth voice said. "Everyone is a little confused at first, it's quite normal."

They paused there, his hands awkward. Where the hell were his pockets, he wondered, or for that matter, his clothes? He was wearing only a light blue robe, terrycloth of some kind.

"You have considered Jesus first, eh?" the man said, pausing in his tone, as if concerned.

"Uh, yeah..." he said, unsure. "Of course," he continued, aiming for sincerity.

There was a palatable silence.

"Well my son, consider this as you make this most important of decisions," the man said, handing him a pamphlet. He looked at the glossy, folded sheet; it was titled *Jesus and Your Soul: A Guide to Afterlife Happiness*.

"Afterlife!" the thought rang through his head. He ran his eyes over the terrain and its misty, cloudy forms, and the staggering thought occurred to him:

"I'm dead?"

"Oh my son, we prefer transitioned. It's much more soothing..."

"Soothing my ass," a new voice said. He looked towards the sound and saw a man in leather chaps and a cowboy hat approaching through the mist.

"Buddy, he's just trying to sell you that eternal bliss crap. Don't you buy it."

"Oh, wonderful. The smut peddlers have arrived," his host said. Somehow the appearance of this Cowboy emboldened him, and he stepped back to look at the pamphleteer for the first time. He was both surprised and let down to see a dull little man in a pinstriped suit and pince-nez glasses.

"Look, Buddy, if all you want is a boring afterlife any one of these jokers will do," the Cowboy said, waving his arm towards the dozen or so men and women who had suddenly appeared from the mist, each one with a pamphlet.

“The good times aren’t up here,” the Cowboy said, casting his eyes downward and spreading his arms in a stage-like manner.

He stepped back, away from the pamphleteers and the Cowboy.

“Uh, this can’t be happening.”

“Oh, but it is,” said a fat man with olive skin as he handed him another pamphlet. “Try Buddha, it only makes sense.”

“Oh, man... you don’t want no old-world religion,” said another pamphleteer as he stepped through the crowd.

“John Travolta?” he cried out.

“Well, no not really. It never hurts to appeal to the love of celebrity, though.”

“Scientology, Buddhism, Christianity... You mean...”

“Of course, my son,” said the first pamphleteer, “everyone must have some membership here.”

“But it’s all the same?”

“Of course not, Buddy, membership has its privileges,” the Cowboy said, opening his pamphlet. It was full of pictures of neon lights, poolside parties, gambling and slots, late night bars and clubs.

“Come on, I’ll show ya!”

“Damn,” the Buddhist said. “We’ve got to revoke his license!”

They stepped away, and the clouds and mist slowly obscured the crowd of pamphleteers. He wasn’t sure but it felt like they were slowly descending deeper into the cloud base. The Cowboy paused and made a quick snap with his wrist, like the cracking of a whip. There was a brief puff of reddish pink smoke, and suddenly a door was in front of them.

“Nice, eh?” the Cowboy said, turning his palm up and revealing a collection of capsules. “Got ‘em on special. Chicks dig it.” He tossed another capsule where they stood, and a cloud of gray-blue smoke arose from their feet.

“You like the ladies?”

"Sure, who doesn't?"

"Great, then you're gonna love this place."

The door swung open and they stepped inside. In the distance, he heard the heavy thump and rhythm of music. People with straw hats milled around with umbrella drinks. The room was immense, a giant cave with stalactites, cauldrons and wisps of steam and smoke. It was warm.

"Yeah, we finally went back to the old standards. It's what the folks want," the Cowboy said as he steered him away from the action and towards a small desk. There was a clerk there with a bored look on her face.

"Hey Sweetie," the Cowboy smiled.

"Save it for the rest," the Clerk said. She cast her eyes his way. "Name?"

"Huh," he paused. The question stumped him. What was his name?

"You didn't check his status first?" the Clerk said.

"Hey, I had to get him away from all the Holy Rollers and the cultists... you know what they're like."

"Well, dumb-ass, he may not even qualify," she said. She stared at him. "Do you love Jesus?"

"Uh," he paused, unsure what the answer was.

"It's an easy question, Sweet-heart," she said, taking a heavy drag on her cigarette. "Did you give your heart to Jesus?"

"Uh, no, not really."

"Check his tag."

The Cowboy pulled a slip of paper out of the collar of the terrycloth robe and examined it.

"Born 05-16-70, died twelve minutes ago... raised Catholic, last attended Mass ten years ago," his voice faded as he read through the sheet and mumbled off a list of sins and transgressions. "Geez, Buddy, you must've really pissed your parents off."

“What’s it say?” he asked.

“Lived in sin... twice. Cursed God,” he mumbled and counted under his breath, “three thousand times... wow....”

“He qualifies. What’s the name?”

The Cowboy turned the sheet over in his hand. “Joseph Cullins,” he said.

“Yeah!” Joe said. “Yeah, that’s me. How could I forget that? I’m Joseph, I mean Joe!” He ran the name over and over in his head as thoughts cascaded through his addled brain. He remembered late nights drinking and college graduation, puking at his sister’s wedding and the time he got arrested for public indecency in the fountain. It all flooded back into his head.

“Well, he qualifies. Give him the tour.”

“You mean I get to see Hell?”

“Yeah kid, knock yourself out, for Christ’s sake.”

They played craps for three hours, took in a strip show and had just ridden a roller coaster of some kind. Joe was exhausted. They now sat in a quiet corner of a pub drinking Mai Tai’s while the Cowboy pitched Hell to him.

“The rest of the afterlives have nothin’ on Hell, as you can see.”

“But what about the brimstone and the fire and embers and stuff?” Joe asked, sipping the fruity concoction. He wondered if the drinks were always free.

“Oh that,” the Cowboy said, rolling his eyes. “That’s bad press.”

“Bad press?” Joe was shocked. His mind reeled with old Sunday School lectures. “The damnation and eternal suffering and red hot pokers up the ass, that’s bad press?”

“Oh yeah,” the Cowboy stressed, shaking his head and waving away the cloud of cigarette smoke that clung permanently to his face. “You should’ve seen this place before the break-up in the 1500’s.”

Joe ran his hand across the table's surface, spooked by the way his face reflected in the black onyx. His head was swimming. If his mother knew where he was he'd be in deep shit. His thoughts drifted back to Hell and the Cowboy.

"What break up?" he asked.

"You ever owned a computer?" the Cowboy asked.

"Sure," Joe said, not knowing where this would lead.

"Well, how many manufacturers of Macintosh are there?"

"Uh, just the one... that I know of, anyway."

"Right, but there's dozens of different types of PC's, right?"

"Yeah, sure." Joe scratched his head as the Cowboy waved the haze of smoke away.

"Well, in 1517 old Luther nailed those papers to the church door and before you knew it there were a dozen kinds of Christianity, not to mention all the old-world religions vying for God's attention. We just sorta' lost our place then. Now the Christians and the Buddhists and the damn cultists get all the good press."

"But..." Joe wasn't even sure if there were any questions left. "I mean, the suffering and the writhing and stuff, what about that?"

"Would you call Vegas a decent and holy place?"

"Um, no."

"Nuff said. We get bad press, that's all. Worst case scenario, you work off your sins running a craps table or sweeping up the strip."

"Working as a card dealer, that's the punishment for murder and deceit?"

"Or bartending, to start. What do you think old Adolph is doing over there?"

Joe looked to his right and nearly fell out of his seat. Adolph Hitler, the former leader of the Third Reich, was polishing a pint glass and whistling. He winked at Joe.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Where?!" the Cowboy said excitedly.

Joe shook his head as the Cowboy furtively scanned the bar.

“Sorry about that, It’s just that I wouldn’t mind running into Jesus down here. He still owes me thirty bucks!”

Joe was beside himself. He still couldn’t get over Hitler at the bar. Joe felt uneasy and was convinced that Hitler was still looking at him.

“Jesus comes down here?”

“Not since I loaned him that money he doesn’t. Cheap bastard. It’s those high and mighty types who are the worst with the borrowing and lending.” The Cowboy began to mutter and swear under his breath. He leaned in real close to Joe. “Never play poker with those three: Jesus, Buddha and Gandhi...they’ll rob ya’ blind.”

“I’d better go,” Joe said dejectedly. Outside, a parade of floats with neon lights and dancers was passing by.

“Okay Buddy, think about it. That pass I gave you is only good till six o’clock so don’t waste any time. I’ll be in touch.” The Cowboy wandered out into the crowd and disappeared. Unsure, Joe stood for a moment, then sat listlessly at the bar. Hitler came over.

“So, you want another drink?” Joe shook his head in amazement and Hitler went back to glass polishing.

“No, I mean... yeah, I’ll have another. I can’t believe you’re here.”

“You are an admirer, or yet another angry person, eh?”

“What? How could someone not hate you? You’re Hitler, for Christ’s sake.”

“Well, get to know me, eh. Then it is another question.”

Joe shook his head and glanced out the window. The street was empty again. He turned back to Hitler as he set down the drink.

“Why haven’t they, I mean the others...”

“Killed me? Hunted me down? You forget; I’m already in Hell. Besides, people tend to forgive once they make it to the afterlife. Most of the Jews are in Heaven anyway.”

“Why, why did you...”

“Do you really want to know why, really?”

Joe shook his head and stood up, digging in his pockets until he remembered he carried no money and had no pockets. Hitler laughed and continued to polish the glasses. Joe left.

He found himself where he had begun, back in the misty cloud room, surrounded by pamphleteers who by now were ignoring him. More and more people were milling around, dazed looks on their faces. A group of pamphleteers on bikes rushed by, and the little Christian in the pinstripe suit perked up.

“Okay, look sharp everyone. There’s been a plane crash... plenty for everyone.”

One of the pamphleteers simply shrugged his shoulders and slowly shook his head. He was dressed like a regular guy, jeans and a t-shirt.

“Hey,” the Guy said firmly.

Joe pointed at himself and mouthed the word “me?” the Guy approached him and held out his hand. Joe went to shake it.

“Hi my name’s...”

“Joe,” he said, finishing Joe’s sentence. “Yeah, I’ve been watching you.”

“Why haven’t you been hustling me?” Joe asked.

The Guy shrugged his shoulders and sat down on a bench that Joe hadn’t noticed before. Joe sat next to him and watched the melee develop as the victims of the plane crash made their way across the blanket of clouds.

“Those vultures,” the Guy said, “they make me sick.”

Joe opened his mouth to say something but found he had no words. His head was swimming from the cocktails. Hitler made a mean Mai Tai.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve let you be when the others were swarming all over you, huh?” the Guy said. Joe nodded his head in agreement.

“You came to me. It always works that way.”

“Who are you? I mean... what’s your religion?”

“That’s the beauty of it. I don’t have a religion. These other guys will hustle you for their package, offer you a custom-made salvation. Me, my package is all-inclusive. Did you like Hell?”

“Uh, well, it was all right. I guess it’d make a great spot for a party.”

“Yeah, well, with me you get Hell, Heaven, Valhalla... the works. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds great. What’s the catch?”

“There is none. Here,” the Guy handed Joe a card. “Read it.”

Joe glanced at the card. He saw that it was embossed with only three words.

“I,” Joe read, “am agnostic.”

He chuckled under his breath at the simplicity of the whole thing, half ashamed at saying the words aloud here in the afterlife, but then he knew they’d always been true. Joe turned, but the Guy was gone and so was the business card.

The little Christian returned with a new convert and glanced at Joe. “I see that SOB got to you, eh?” he said as he passed.

Joe looked down at himself and found he was now wearing jeans and t-shirt. His head was clear, and the possibilities seemed endless. Suddenly he felt like having a good stiff drink, and he knew just the Nazi to get it from. Who knew, maybe tomorrow he’d do Heaven.