
Mental Dimensions

Tales of Fantasy for a New Generation

2nd Ed.

by Andrew G. Alt

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Dedicated to the people I love...

Changes

Changes from the first edition:

- Rewritten
 - The Search for the Enchanted Balls
 - William and Mary (renamed to "A Shared Ending")
 - The Magic Brain
- Added
 - The Pebble
 - Glass Prison
 - Zachary's Brief Visit to the Other Side of the Wall
- Renamed
 - The Grasshopper and the Cliff -> The Ant and the Cliff

I've also done light editing to several other stories.

I've opted to use gender-neutral pronouns in cases where the gender of a character is unknown or not relevant (e.g., ze/zir/zirs replaces he/she/him/her/his/hers).

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The Search for the Enchanted Balls

Centuries ago, on a planet called Gossameria, there lived animals that roamed carefree over its unspoiled landscape. They lived in harmony with their neighbors and gathered regularly for the purposes of frolicking and celebrating special occasions. In summer, they picnicked near the beaches of lakes which were so clean that all life swimming within it was clearly visible. They played joyfully in vast, grassy fields. It was quite common for the animals of this world to live for thousands of years.

Two cats were members of this community: Katharine (a primarily orange cat with narrow brown stripes) and Jacob (who had black fur on his back that blended into gray around his sides and white near his tummy). They had been best friends for almost three hundred years. They each owned a special enchanted ball and played with them almost every time they met. Katharine's ball was pink with purple stripes; Jacob's was bright green with small yellow circles.

Almost every day they played in a meadow covered with green grass and dotted with yellow, red, and purple wildflowers. When the grass grew too high, several helpful sheep would eat some. The cats were grateful for the sheep's efforts. Katharine and Jacob

found it much easier to play with their enchanted balls when they could see each other, and their balls could roll freely over the ground.

One day as they were playing, they both became momentarily distracted by a large dog wandering nearby. They turned their attention back to their enchanted balls, but to their dismay, they had vanished. Katharine and Jacob frantically searched the field for several hours.

After the sun set, they reluctantly agreed to return to their homes for the night and continue searching tomorrow. They were heartbroken. After arriving home, Katharine and Jacob fell into their beds, all joy and hope drained from their bodies. They cried and meowed until a heavy sleep overtook them.

Soon after, their sleep became disturbed by nightmares and their limbs began to frequently twitch. Hours later, they were awoken by a rooster crowing at the rising sun. They felt as if they hadn't slept at all. Later that morning, Katharine and Jacob met under a weeping willow tree standing near a lakeshore. They peered out over the water, which softly reflected the sunlight. Neither of them appreciated or even noticed the beauty of the scene, nor of the shade and shelter the tree generously provided.

Their tails hung low. Katharine suddenly turned to look at Jacob. As they stood there, Jacob saw that Katharine was thinking hard, and then he observed her tail slowly begin to rise. Katharine declared, "We have to keep searching." Jacob sadly looked into her eyes. She continued, her voice firm and direct, "It doesn't matter how much time we spend—at any cost, we must find them."

Hesitantly, Jacob replied, “We looked all over that field, Kat. We covered every square inch. Where else could they be?”

She sidestepped his question and with a wry smile answered, “We’ll know that when we find them.”

Jacob appeared dubious but after a few moments he finally agreed. That fateful day, they both completely committed themselves to the search for their enchanted balls. They went back to the meadow and searched it again. They asked the sheep if any of them had seen the balls. They searched around the lakeshore. They looked through nearby fields and hills. They went even further away from their homes and searched through mountain passes and valleys.

Weeks went by. They felt very discouraged, but more determined than ever to recover their beloved toys. They continued searching every place they could think of.

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Three years after their search began, humans suddenly came to Gossameria for the first time and began colonization. Steamships and airplanes were among the many things the newcomers constructed. Katharine and Jacob took advantage—they were able to steal passage on vehicles that moved over water and through the sky, which allowed them to search previously unreachable areas.

It wasn’t until 128 years later they completed searching their entire world. Still, they hadn’t found their balls.

It was at that time when the humans began building spaceships. Although a spaceship had originally brought the humans to

Gossameria, the planet didn't have the required materials to produce the correct type of fuel. It took over a century for six generations of engineers to finally manufacture a ship that could use the resources available on Gossameria.

Katharine and Jacob curiously watched the construction. They fled in terror the first time they heard a spaceship's engines ignite.

One night, they crept into a large building near the launchpad. They slowly walked near to a group of people. It consisted of mechanics and ground crew flight coordinators. Katharine and Jacob eavesdropped on their conversation. The cats happily learned that spaceships could help them continue their search. They also learned the precise time and date of the next launch.

They anxiously waited seven days. At dawn, they sneaked into a top-secret facility. They sniffed the area and spotted some very large plastic cargo containers. They jumped up and landed inside one. Most of their weight fell against the side and it almost tipped over. They landed on human clothes and blankets. They burrowed under the soft, warm material.

As the dust settled, they both sneezed several times.

After only a few minutes they heard a human walking nearby. They heard a "snap" as a lid was secured over the container.

"Kat, I'm starting to wonder if we're making the best life-choices," Jacob declared.

"Keep quiet. We'll be all right. Did you sharpen your claws yesterday?"

"Yes. Do you think we'll need to resort to violence?"

"Probably not. I hope not." Katharine replied in a flat tone that

didn't sound convincing or reassuring.

They felt the container being picked up, moved a few feet and set down on a wheeled cart. It was pushed to the launchpad. Soon, someone carried the container into the ship's cargo hold and set it on a high stack of other cargo.

At this point, the cats were frightened and wanted to escape. They knew, however, that it was too late. Based on the activity heard from their surroundings, they would most certainly be spotted if they tried to make a run for it.

About two hours passed. No voices could be heard. They pushed up on the container's lid. It didn't budge. They continued trying for two minutes. They looked around for a tool and found a belt buckle. Jacob was able to wedge open the lid enough to loosen it. They became confident escaping at the last minute—if they felt proceeding would be too risky—would be possible.

Suddenly, the ship's engines came to life. Moments later, the cats felt the pull of gravity throughout their entire bodies. They remorsefully realized it was too late to change their minds. Also terrified, they made sure not to loudly meow or cry. Their tails became very tense. They closed their eyes and breathed heavily... and waited for the horrible experience to be over.

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After two days, Katharine and Jacob were starving and thirsty. They agreed to start searching for a food and water supply. Jacob opened the lid far enough to get out. After being loosened by the belt buckle, the lid separated easily from the top of the container. They both crawled out and then stretched their bodies and tails as

much as possible. They had never been trapped for such a long time.

Katharine and Jacob sniffed around, whiskers twitching wildly. After several minutes they found a water source and scraps of food left by some crew and passengers (who apparently didn't understand that food is meant to be eaten, not thrown onto the floor). The cats quickly and easily found adequate nutrition.

They desperately needed to use the bathroom before returning to their container. Fortunately, while searching for water, they had stealthily observed the humans using a computer-automated waste recycling system. Katharine and Jacob were able to dispose of that which they would have otherwise buried in sand or dirt. Afterward, they went back to the container and slid the lid back into place. They fell asleep after only a few minutes, and blissful dreams about their enchanted balls began shortly after.

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After three months of confinement (interspersed with scrounging for food and water), the cats felt the spaceship land. They were in good health but poor spirits. They cheered up considerably when they knew the ship was on the ground and their freedom was imminent.

Jacob whispered, "How long should we wait before getting out?"

"After the human voices and footsteps disappear. We'll watch carefully and try to follow the last one outside."

They knew how many people had originally boarded the ship—they had figured it out easily during their three months on board.

They also knew one had died. A passenger had contracted some disease that wasn't detected before departure. Without proper medical facilities on the ship, "There wasn't anything that could be done," the Captain was heard saying, with regret and sadness clouding his voice. The passenger was given a respectful funeral, and ejected into space. She was cremated after the gravity from a star drew her in (luckily, that was the custom within her family).

Katharine and Jacob counted the humans as they departed the ship. One of them had a frayed thread hanging from the leg of his uniform. Jacob wanted to chew on it and bat it with his paw, but Katharine held him back. She snapped, "Jacob, stay focused!"

Katharine counted the humans as they exited the ship. "16... 17... 18... 19. All right, quietly now, let's get behind that tall human and follow him out; he's the last one. When we reach the other side of the doorway, look for cover, then run toward it as fast you can."

They sneaked near to the human's feet, Katharine on the left, Jacob on the right. The human suddenly stopped, put his arm to his face and sneezed. The cats looked at each other with concern. They had heard humans do this before and knew that sneezes sometimes happened when humans were in proximity to them.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, blew and wiped his nose; then he glanced down and spotted Katharine and Jacob. They looked directly into his eyes but weren't able to sense whether danger was imminent. Jacob looked to Katharine for guidance. Trying to scare the human, she meowed loudly, bared her teeth and emitted a hissing sound. Her efforts were in vain. The human simply turned his head and shouted outside, "Cap'n! We got stow-

aways!”

He leaned over, hands and long arms coming down toward Jacob. “Run, Jacob!” Katharine commanded, her instincts taking over. Jacob sprinted toward the doorway. Katharine followed him straightaway.

They got past the exit and kept running in a straight line, darting past five humans easily; however, one was standing directly in front of their escape route. It was the ship’s captain, and he looked very displeased. He squatted downward to snatch Katharine and Jacob. Katharine directed Jacob, “Veer left! I saw some thick bushes!”

Jacob hadn’t seen any but he trusted Katharine enough to do as he was told. He slowed almost to a stop and started to make the turn, but the captain grabbed him by the sides of his stomach and scooped him up. “Well, little fellow, did you think you could get free passage on my ship and then just run away like a scared little kitty-cat?” Jacob squirmed in his grasp, squealed loudly, then looked to his left. He saw a bunch of green raspberry bushes but didn’t see Katharine anywhere. *I hope she got away*, thought Jacob.

“Argh!” the captain suddenly cried out, dropping Jacob.

He landed safely on his feet and saw Katharine gripping the captain’s right leg with all four paws. Jacob realized she had created a diversion by digging her claws deeply into his calf. The captain bent over to reach for her. At the same moment, she retracted her claws, fell off the captain’s leg, and yelled, “Run to the bushes, Jacob!”

He ran as fast as he could. Halfway to the bushes, he looked

behind to make sure Katharine was with him. He saw the captain had grabbed her, and she was ferociously attacking his arms with her claws and teeth. Jacob was terrified. He stopped, then started running back so he could help. It wasn't necessary though; Katharine had managed to inflict so much damage on the captain that he couldn't hold her. He dropped her and she started running toward Jacob. "Go!" she screamed.

He saw the captain and some crewmen begin chasing them. He turned back around and ran, just as Katharine ordered. He felt reasonably confident she was no longer in any immediate danger.

He reached the left side of a row of thick bushes, ran behind them, and then zig-zagged through some tall flowers on the other side. He stopped to wait for Katharine. Quite familiar with his smell, she found him easily. They heard the captain and two of his crew members nearby and swiftly approaching. "There, that forest." Katharine pointed to a large wooded area.

"But there's no cover between here and the tree line! They'll catch us!"

"We can outrun them. Let's go!" Katharine started to sprint towards the trees, not waiting for him to verbalize his agreement. Jacob decided there was no other choice and continued after her.

The pursuers relented after two minutes. The captain shouted after them, "You won't be so lucky if I ever see you again. From now on, I'll make sure there's a dog on every ship to prevent stowaways like you from ever boarding!" He and his crewmen walked back to the ship, feeling angry and humiliated from being outsmarted by the two cats.

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Katharine and Jacob reached the tree line and entered the forest. After catching their breath and walking for several yards, they stopped at a large pile of oak leaves and crawled on top. They lay down to rest. After a few minutes, Jacob glumly declared, “We’ll never be able to get back home.”

“Let’s not worry about that now. At least we’re safe. We need to stay focused on finding our balls.”

“What makes you think they’re even on this world?”

Suddenly, Katharine and Jacob heard pawsteps softly approaching. They looked in the direction of the sound and spotted a hollow log. From the darkness within it appeared a small pair of eyes. They seemed to almost glow. Katharine and Jacob remained cautious, ready to scamper away.

A white Persian cat slowly stepped out from the log. Jacob and Katharine relaxed a little. Though somewhat relieved to see a creature their own size, they remained in a state of heightened anxiety. The unfamiliar cat sat down on his hind legs. He looked directly at them and said, “I understand you are searching for something. In my experience, the only time one can clearly see is when he or she ceases to look for things.”

Katharine and Jacob looked at each other with confusion. Katharine asked, “Who are you?”

“My name is Tobias. And you?”

“I’m Katharine, and this is my friend, Jacob.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. Welcome to the forest.”

“Thank you,” Jacob replied. “Is this your home?”

“My home is anywhere I am happy and content.” Tobias paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I overheard you speaking about the search for your balls. May I ask why they are so important?”

Katharine replied, “They were enchanted, and our favorite toys.” She went on to chronicle the story of their search; Jacob filled in a few gaps he felt relevant.

They finished relating the tale, and Tobias said, “It is indeed unfortunate that you lost your enchanted balls, but in my opinion, it is even more unfortunate that you’ve lost so much time looking for them. Lost time is a sad waste of a precious thing that can never again be found.”

Katharine and Jacob became angry and reflexively extended their front claws. Jacob irritably exclaimed, “It wasn’t a waste! We just haven’t found them yet!”

Katharine replied coldly, “You don’t understand. You never played with our balls and so don’t realize how wonderful they were.”

“Forgive me. I did not mean any offense, nor did I intend to minimize your efforts or intense grief from the loss.” Tobias paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Have you considered the possibility that your enchanted balls rolled into a lake and became submerged?”

Katharine retracted her claws and replied, “Yes, of course. But Jacob and I don’t like water. It’s good to drink, but other than that we don’t really see any purpose to water.”

Jacob continued, “Most of the time we spent on dry land. Sometimes we stowed away on boats to search other islands and

continents, but we didn't really care for the water being on all sides of us. It was really very nerve-wracking."

"I see," said Tobias. He paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

Katharine looked at him curiously for a moment and asked, "Why do you keep doing that?"

"It relaxes me."

"Are you nervous?"

"No," he answered. "Deep breathing is a habit I started a long time ago. It helped me through a very difficult period in my life."

"What do you mean?" Jacob inquired.

"Many years ago, I had a friend named Brittany. We also owned a pair of enchanted balls. One day when she and I were playing, we lost control of them, watching helplessly as they rolled into a fast-moving river. We ran along the riverbank after them, seeing them floating on top but powerless to do anything about it. The river continued to swiftly carry them further away. It soon became evident that it would be impossible to retrieve them.

"Suddenly, Brittany said, 'I'm going in.' I tried to stop her. As she was about to jump in I shouted after her, 'No, Brittany! It's water! You'll never survive!' She ignored my warning and jumped in." Tobias paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"I never saw her again. I believe she now rests with the *Divine Felinity*, in the spiritual realm where food is always abundant and cats never gain weight; where water is always cold and refreshing to drink, yet it never touches a cat's fur, and contains no soggy food

chunks from the day before; the place where a new toy appears daily, and one's curiosity is always stimulated by some external object possessing a strange new smell. Although she's at peace, I do still miss her."

"That's awful!"

Jacob looked thoughtful. "I almost lost Katharine during our search when she was captured by a human."

"I hope you consider yourself fortunate."

"We do, but we still need to find our balls," Katharine declared.

Jacob paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "No, we don't."

"Jacob! Of course we do. You don't mean that!"

"I do. Our search nearly cost your life. You mean more to me than any enchanted ball."

"But Jacob, we agreed—"

"Katharine, you're a good leader, and able to make quick decisions, but take a minute to think of how you'd feel if you lost me."

Katharine didn't need a minute. After a few seconds, she knew her friend was correct.

Tobias said, "Come, my friends. This forest has much to offer. There is ample food, many new things to smell, and it offers an abundance of corners and things under which you may hide, if you feel such a need. I believe you will find peace and contentment if you decide to stay."

"Thank you, Tobias."

He acknowledged with a single nod. "Some even claim this forest is enchanted. You might be surprised at how quickly you

forget about your balls.”

Indeed, Jacob looked around and spotted some low-hanging vines swaying in the breeze. He joyfully exclaimed, “*Those* look interesting!”

The Obedient Parents

Once upon a time, in a land not far from yours, there lived a small boy and a small girl who sometimes did not like to listen to their parents. The boy's name was Billy and the girl's name was Holly. Sometimes the parents would say "It's time to go to bed, dear" or "You can't have ice cream until you eat your vegetables, honey." Often the parents had to order the children to clean their bedroom.

On this particular occasion, Billy and Holly were cleaning their room because their parents told them to do so. As they were picking up their toys, they each reached for a small plastic elf. When they touched it at the exact same time, it began to glow bright-green and made a sparkling kind of noise. The elf quickly grew to be as tall as Billy and Holly's teacher at school. He had a bright-orange mustache and beard. His ears were pointed and he was dressed in clothes that seemed to be about 5000 years old.

They looked at him in astonishment, as he said, "Congratulations, children. Because of your teamwork, you've won three wishes."

"Yay!", exclaimed Billy and Holly.

"Holly, what should we wish for?"

"I don't know Billy. I want so many things I can't think of what I

want the most!”

“I know!”, shouted Billy. “Let’s wish that mom and dad have to listen to us from now on. Let’s wish they always have to do what we tell them.”

Holly replied excitedly, “That’s a great idea, Billy!”

The elf said, “I don’t think that’s a good wish, but I’m willing to grant it.” Instantly, enchantment music and flashing multi-colored lights flooded their bedroom.

The music and the lights quickly vanished, however, and the elf shrank back to his three-inch toy form. At that moment, the parents came into the room. “Why aren’t all your toys picked up?” The father asked.

Billy answered, “We forgot, Father. Please forgive us.”

The father’s expression became blank, and—without emotion—he replied, “I forgive you.”

The mother was confused at the father’s demeanor. She suggested, “Richard, why don’t you go run your errands now? I’ll talk to the children.” As she spoke, the father’s expression turned back to normal.

“Okay, Elizabeth. I’ll be home in about two hours.” The father turned to leave and began walking out of the room.

Billy yelled, “Stop!”

The father stopped, as if frozen in time. Billy and Holly looked at each other, mischievous grins carved on their faces. The mother said, “Richard, dear, is something the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter, Elizabeth. The children told me to stop, so I stopped.”

“But Richard, why are you obeying Billy and Holly? Is this some game you three invented without telling me? I don’t think it’s at all appropriate and—”

Holly interrupted, “Be quiet, Mother.”

The mother looked at them angrily, but said nothing.

“Mother, don’t be angry with us.”

The mother smiled at Billy and Holly, and gave them a warm tender hug and kiss.

“Give us ice cream, Mother. Father, clean our room.” The parents did as they were told. The children were so happy they completely forgot about their remaining two wishes.

From then on, the parents were absolutely obedient to every whim and desire of their children. Billy and Holly decided for themselves when and what they’d eat, what time they’d go to sleep, and when they could play.

The parents would still tuck the children into bed at night, and give them love and hugs and kisses. However, if Billy and Holly commanded them to do or not do something, they had no choice but to obey.

And that’s how life in their home went for the next seven years. It finally came to an end one day though, when the parents were cleaning the children’s room. It was a rainy and cloudy Tuesday evening. Elizabeth accidentally dropped and broke Holly’s favorite decoration—a lovely replica of Cinderella’s glass slipper. She screamed at her parents, “Get out of here! I never want to see you again!”

The parents slowly turned around and walked out of the bed-

room. They walked downstairs. They walked to the front door. They opened the front door and walked out to the driveway. They entered their car and pulled out of the driveway.

Billy heard what happened and met Holly in her room. “We have to get them back, Holly! We still need them!” Holly, having had a chance to calm down, agreed, and both rushed downstairs. They hurried outside and looked around. They saw their parents far off in the distance driving away in the family automobile. It was so tiny it looked like a little dot on the horizon. They shouted, “Come back!” But their cries were simply not loud enough for the parents to hear. They began running after the car, but quickly became short of breath and grew pains in their sides (due to a lack of exercise). A few moments later, the parents completely vanished from sight.

Billy and Holly both trudged back home. They laid down in bed, crying themselves to sleep. They had terrible nightmares. In the middle of the night they woke up soaked in sweat and tears. They wanted to crawl into bed with their parents, and get love and hugs and kisses, but quickly remembered their parents were gone forever. They went back to bed and cried again until morning. After the sun came up, they went to the kitchen to eat, for they were very hungry. But there were no clean dishes, and they had never learned how to wash dishes. Billy and Holly also never learned how to prepare a meal or operate an oven. Finally they found some dry, packaged food in the cupboard that required no preparation or cooking. They spent the remainder of the day trying to escape from their self-created nightmare and played in their room.

Every day they ate a little food from the cupboard, and every

day they tried to pretend nothing was wrong. At the end of each day, however, they were weaker and thinner than the last. Their tummies started showing the outlines of their ribs. Their cheeks had lost all color, and drew in as they lost weight from undernourishment. Their eyes became dark and hollow. Without good food and love and hugs and kisses from their parents, they became ill. After several weeks they could barely get out of bed.

One morning, Holly was in bed feeling extremely weak but wanted to get some water for Billy. He hadn't opened his eyes for almost two days and he could only speak in short whispers. Holly was getting very worried. She reached under her bed for a glass, but her hand grabbed something else. It was a toy shaped like an elf. She picked it up, looked at it, and remembered.

She cried, "Oh magical elf, please help us!" Nothing happened. She crawled over to Billy and placed the toy in his hand. Suddenly, the magical elf reappeared. He looked down at the children with sadness in his eyes.

"I may be able to help you," he said. "I hope your second wish is better than your first."

"Oh... I wish that our parents were back home."

The elf replied, "That wish is granted." Just then, Holly heard footsteps downstairs near the front door. "You have one wish left. I suggest you make it worthwhile."

Holly thought hard. Her head was spinning and she fought back the urge to faint from severe hunger pains and thirst. She looked over at Billy with tears in her eyes. "Elf, I wish we'd never made our first wish." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, sound

effects and a rainbow of colored lights flooded the bedroom.

The father looked at them and said, "Why aren't all your toys picked up?"

Billy replied, "We're sorry, Father. We were playing with this elf and forgot."

The mother said, "It's okay. Finish cleaning your room and come down to eat in a half-hour. We're having steak, eggs, carrots, and Brussels sprouts. For dessert we'll have some ice cream."

"Okay!"

The parents smiled at their children and turned to leave the room. Out of the corner of his eye, however, the father spotted the toy elf. He walked over and picked it up. He smiled at the children and said, "You won't be needing this anymore."

He met with Elizabeth in the kitchen, handed her the elf and said, "Do you think the children learned anything?"

"I think so. Did you notice how they didn't talk back when I told them we're having Brussels sprouts with our dinner?"

"Ah, yes, of course. Well, I'm sure they'll never forget, just as we never forgot. How old were we when you found this elf?"

"Five or six years old. I found it the day my family and I moved into the neighborhood next door to you and your family. You were arguing with them about doing dishes."

"Yes, I recall that. We met the next day. I'll never forget playing with you and that elf, and making that ridiculous wish about having obedient parents."

The children finished cleaning their room and came downstairs to join their parents at the dinner table.

The Ant and the Cliff

On a dry, hot day, the sun shone brightly onto the top of a cliff. An ant looking for food wandered to the cliff's edge. For several minutes, he peered down and considered jumping from it. He knew he might not survive the fall but was curious nevertheless. Finally, he decided against it and went home to his family.

The following morning, the ant remembered his urge to jump from the cliff's edge. He walked back to it and looked down for several minutes. Afterward, he went home to his family.

Every day for three years the ant returned to the cliff. He fought back the impulse to jump each time he visited the cliff's edge. And every day, he crawled back home to be with his family. During those three years, he forgot how to have fun, how to learn new activities, and how to have original ideas.

One day as the ant was standing at the cliff's edge, a hungry crow flew down and scooped him up with its mighty beak. Now, many years later, the ant's family still misses him and doesn't know where he is.

The Pebble

The sky is crystal-blue. It invites hundreds of puffy white clouds to join it. An ocean, vast and silent, rests below.

One of the clouds suddenly shudders, and from it a pebble slowly emerges. It's no bigger than the head of a minnow. It's round, dark-gray, smooth, but has a few parts on it that are flat.

Looking up several miles into the sky, the pebble can be seen leaving the cloud, falling toward the ocean.

A soft wind carries it sideways a short distance, but then abandons it.

The pebble touches the top of the ocean, and a few ripples fluidly appear before the pebble vanishes beneath the surface.

Under the surface, the pebble reappears, still falling, but slowed down as the water cushions it and allows it to pass. The pebble falls slowly several feet and then is taken gently by a current. The pebble offers no resistance and enjoys the underwater dance.

The pebble now sinks diagonally as the current tries to keep hold. After several hours, it falls out of the currents touch, and begins its long descent to the ocean floor.

Later, now only a few feet above the floor the pebble can be

seen, ready to rest upon the the sand, in an underground garden filled with waving plants. They greet the pebble as it approaches. Finally it settles onto the bed of sand, causing several grains to rise up, float and swirl around the pebble.

Five grains of sand settle on the pebble, the remaining grains float down and rest near the flowers in the garden.

The Camel in the Desert

It was many years ago, on a planet in the Andromeda system, in a desert that spanned thousands of miles, when a furry brown camel walked near a narrow stream of water. He excitedly lowered his head to drink. Sadly, by the time his lips almost touched the water, it evaporated. He began walking again to find more. He'd hoped to find a lake, but even a small river would make him happy.

Being thirsty made him sad, but he was also sad because he was the only camel remaining on that planet. His other camel friends had died; most from old age, some from physical disease, and two from suicide. Regrettably, he hadn't been able to say good-bye to all of them.

He walked along further. In the distance, he saw a scaly gray lizard that wasn't moving. The camel approached him slowly and asked, "Mr. Lizard, why aren't you moving?"

The lizard replied, "Oh, Mr. Camel, I'm so thirsty I can barely move my legs even a little. I'm conserving my energy until it rains."

"But that may not be for months! You'd probably die before it rains. Let me help; I have water stored in my hump. I'll give you some." The camel spit on the lizard's back, and onto the ground in front of him. He drank and soon felt much better.

“Now climb onto my back. You can rest until I find a small river, or hopefully, a large lake.”

“Thank you, *thank you*, Mr. Camel!” The lizard slowly crawled onto the camel’s foot, up his leg, around his stomach until he was resting comfortably upon the camel’s back.

They traveled many miles. Several weeks later, they spotted a woodpecker with black and white wings and a tan belly. She was very thirsty. After exchanging routine social pleasantries, the camel gave her some water, just as he had done for the lizard. He then invited her to perch on his tail while he continued his search for water.

Finally, they saw a small patch of grass, and beyond the grass, some green bushes. Beyond them was a large lake. The three travelers—after going through such a life-threatening ordeal—were now good friends. They each drank from the lake and ate berries from the bush.

After their meal, they spent a few hours scavenging the area to gather materials needed to build a rudimentary shelter.

It rained later that evening, and they knew they’d chosen a fine spot in which to stay. Soon, other creatures wandering through the desert found their little settlement. They expanded it over time, and after a few years it became a well-populated city. Rain fell regularly, ensuring none of its citizens ever died of thirst. It became a tourist attraction to some space-faring camels that landed there by accident when their ship ran out of ion particles (a fuel that could be engineered using water and leaves from berry-bushes).

The Magic Brain

Once upon a time, a man named Orson lived on the planet Aurelius. Orson had a wife, two children, and a very active imagination. At least once a day his family requested that he tell them a story or a joke. He gladly did so, creating events and characters so quickly that one would believe he was reading the story from a book, and his jokes were so funny that his children's cheeks were often sore from too much laughter.

Although interesting and imaginative, the characters in Orson's stories could not perform magic; they had no special powers nor could they grant wishes. The reason for this was that unlike the people of Earth, Orson, nor any other Aurelian, had ever encountered magical fairies or other cosmic beings who granted wishes or cast evil spells.

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On a bright, comfortably warm day, Orson sat on the grass, his back against a tree, looking at an extremely large rock. Although the rock was motionless and not doing anything noteworthy, Orson had been intently watching it for nearly two hours. This might seem like a boring activity to most people, but because he had a fluffy and glittery imagination, the things he saw on the rock were the

same things the people of Earth would see on a movie screen. He was imagining an adventure unfolding, and with only the power of his mind, he was able to see many action scenes and characters joining together to form a movie.

Suddenly, a fairy appeared from a gentle wind blowing nearby. Most would think it impossible, but ze wasn't merely an imaginary fairy—ze wasn't a fairy one might read about in fictitious stories—ze was a real fairy. Ze had white, translucent wings on her back and was wearing an orange-colored, ankle-length dress that was wrapped around her pleasantly plump figure.

Orson had never before seen a fairy so had mixed feelings about her sudden appearance. He was partly curious, but also scared because he didn't know what a fairy was, nor what ze was capable of doing. Fortunately for him, ze was a good fairy.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "My name is Orson."

"Greetings, Orson. My name is Arden. I'm a good fairy. Consider yourself fortunate."

He felt more relaxed after hearing Arden's pleasant-sounding voice and seeing her friendly demeanor. Orson politely asked, "Would you like to sit with me and watch this interesting rock?"

"No, thank you. I've recently arrived on your world, and I'm here to grant you two wishes."

"That sounds nice," Orson said. "Which wishes would you like to give me?"

After a kind laugh, Arden replied, "I see you're not quite in tune with how this works. Allow me to elaborate for you—whatever you would like, no matter how impossible or improbable, I will give to

you.”

“Okay, but I’ve never wished for anything before. Could I have some time to think about it?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need,” Arden replied congenially.

Orson considered several options and then finally decided. “I would like to wish for a magic brain. I would like a perfect brain that never makes mistakes.”

“Your wish is granted,” Arden said while dramatically waving his magic wand. Instantly, all the colors of a rainbow streamed out of Orson’s ears, nose, and mouth. He also became surrounded by the soft, upbeat music that is typically heard when a magic spell has been cast.

After a few seconds, the bright colors and twinkly music faded and vanished, which indicated the effect of the magic spell was complete.

Orson immediately noticed the difference in his brain. The thoughts in his mind seemed quieter and moved more slowly. He attempted to do a difficult math problem in his head—he thought, 128 times 323 equals...41,344! And he knew with absolute certainty that he had calculated the correct answer.

He thanked Arden, and asked, “How may I contact you when I would like to fill my second wish?”

“Simply call out my name three times—the winds will carry your voice to me.” Ze then leapt upon a passing breeze and disappeared.

Orson sat down to continue watching the large rock, but failed

to see anything interesting. Its surface was smooth but it also had a few sharp edges. He decided the rock no longer had any special features. Standing up, he departed for home.

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Orson lived in a three-room log cabin near the edge of a forest, in a village where eleven other families resided in cabins of their own. Between the village and the forest was a stream, which could be crossed using a narrow wooden bridge that had been built a decade before by Orson and three other villagers.

Orson was walking home through a large meadow on the opposite side of the village. Usually he greeted the cows and horses that were grazing in the meadow, but today he decided that saying hello to them was pointless.

He finally arrived home, and as he walked through the front door, his wife, Melody, and two children, Laura and Deborah, greeted him with happiness in their eyes and smiles on their faces.

“Hello, Melody. Hello, children.”

“Good evening, Father,” the children replied.

“Welcome home, Orson,” his wife said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Why kiss me on the cheek? You’ve kissed me there many times already.”

Surprised and confused by Orson’s reaction to her kiss, Melody thought he might be joking and studied her husband’s face for a moment, but she was unable to detect any indication that he was playing with her.

Melody hesitated before replying, “I just—I just felt like kissing you.”

Orson thought for a moment, then simply said, “That sounds logical.”

Melody, still puzzled by Orson’s odd behavior, didn’t know what to say, but allowed the matter to rest for the present moment.

Melody resumed preparing dinner. The children became bored waiting for their meal and begged Orson to tell them a story.

He responded, “Okay. Give me a second to think of one.”

He tried to remember a story he once heard, but failed. He then attempted to invent one but he was unable to do that, too.

Melody, now recognizing with certainty that something was wrong with her husband, decided it was time to press for answers. “Are you feeling ill, Orson? You’re acting very strange, and you never have difficulty thinking up stories to tell. Did something bad happen to you today?”

“Oh, no!” Orson replied. “Just the opposite, really. While watching my favorite rock, I was approached by a good fairy named Arden. Ze told me I could wish for anything I wanted.” Orson paused to take a sip of water, then continued. “I chose to wish for a magic brain—one that is perfect and incapable of making mistakes.”

The children laughed, and Laura exclaimed, “Father, that is a good story!”

Melody didn’t have the same reaction though.

“Orson, that sounds impossible, but by the way you’re acting I can’t help but think you’re telling me something true.”

“Yes, it is true.”

Melody thought for a moment, and decided to test him. “Orson, tell me a joke,” she ordered.

Orson’s perfect brain went to work trying to think of a joke, but after a minute passed he gave up. Confusion and doubt settling in, he said, “I don’t understand. My brain should be working better than before. It’s supposed to be incapable of making mistakes. Perhaps Arden was really an evil fairy and lied to me!”

Melody cried, “No, Orson, you got your wish! Don’t you see? Your brain can’t make up a story or a joke because neither is based on perfect logic and facts. A perfect brain can’t imagine things that aren’t real, and it can’t make a joke because most jokes are simply pure nonsense!” She sadly looked at her children, then back at Orson. “What shall we do now? The husband and father we knew is gone!” And her tears fell like streams upon her face.

Orson picked up a clean napkin from the table and wiped away her tears. “You are right of course, I’m certain of it. But don’t worry, dear—Arden offered me two wishes, and I have one remaining!” Orson walked over to the window and called out, “Arden, Arden, Arden!”

With his words came the wind, whispering at first, then howling throughout the entire house. And Orson knew it was a magical wind because it disturbed nothing, and nothing was tipped over by its movement.

A gust of wind carried Arden inside. Ze hopped off to stand in front of Orson.

Smiling, ze said, “Hello again, Orson. Have you decided on a

second wish?" The children stared at Arden with amazement and curiosity; Melody, however, glared with anger and wanted to yell at Arden.

Orson answered, "Yes, Arden. I've realized my brain worked better when it made mistakes. Please, I wish to have my imperfect brain returned to me."

Arden understood and granted his wish, dramatically waving his magic wand. Suddenly, colors and sparkling energy flew in from outside, through the windows and around all the objects in the kitchen, and finally streamed back into Orson's ears, nose, and mouth. He also became surrounded by the soft, upbeat music that is typically heard when a magic spell has been cast.

After a few seconds, the bright colors and twinkly music faded and vanished, which indicated the effect of the magic spell was complete.

Now that Orson was again himself, Melody forgave Arden and invited him to dine with them. Afterward, Arden leapt upon a passing breeze, waved goodbye, and Orson and his family lived incorrectly ever after.

James's Love

James loved his family and friends. He loved God and his church, and he loved the outdoors, the sunlight, and all the wonders of Creation. Like all people, however, the love in James's heart was sometimes covered by—or mixed in with— other feelings, some which were unpleasant and had the potential to be harmful to himself or others.

He had recently bought a new car. It was the best one he'd ever owned; it was comfortable, stylish, and fuel efficient. It was reliable and got him to work on time every day. It carried him to meet his friends, and visit his beloved family. James used his car every day and became very accustomed and attached to it. He relied on it to be there for him when needed. He loved the car, and sometimes even felt the car loved him.

On Thanksgiving, he drove to meet his family to join them for the holiday. James always greatly enjoyed spending time with them. Though he felt sad when saying goodbye, he always left with new memories to cherish when they were apart.

James carefully drove onto his parents' driveway and parked his car. He got out, locked the doors, and walked up to house. He rang the doorbell, and it only took a few seconds for Philip (his fa-

ther) to open the door. He waved him in and hugged him warmly. James looked around and saw his brother and sister, standing next to their spouses with James's nephews and nieces. They all excitedly welcomed him home.

James looked over the room trying to find Joyce, his mother. "Where's mom?" James asked.

His father replied, "She went to the grocery store to pick up a few things for dinner tomorrow. She should be back in an hour."

Half of that hour passed quickly with laughter, conversation, and play-time with the children. Then James decided to walk to the corner store to buy chewing gum for himself, and a houseplant for his mother. He reached the store in only a few minutes. After buying a pack of peppermint gum and a beautiful peace lily, he started his short walk home. A chance encounter with friends whom he hadn't seen for a while delayed him by fifteen minutes. After exchanging news and updated contact information, James continued walking home.

As he neared his parents' driveway, he saw his mother's car parked behind his. He was glad she was home—he was anxious to see her and give her the lily.

His mood quickly changed when he spotted the rear bumper on his car. It was scratched, pushed in an inch with some minor damage to the surrounding area. As he got closer, he noticed on his mother's car that her front bumper had similar damage. It was obvious she was responsible. He instantly, almost reflexively, became angry at her carelessness. James violently threw the peace lily at the ground. The pot cracked, the dirt spilled out, and the flower fell

apart. A sudden, strong gust of wind scattered its remnants across the lawn.

Many unpleasant thoughts went through James's mind, and undesirable emotions buried his love as they stabbed into his heart. He marched inside and slammed the door. He looked into the living room and saw his mother on the couch crying. James's sister, Ruth, was sitting beside her, trying to comfort her. As Ruth's eyes met his, her expression silently demanded that he should let their mother know that everything was okay. Without acknowledgment, he stomped off into the kitchen and yanked a bottle of beer from the refrigerator.

James's father followed him into the kitchen. Philip saw that his son's face was red with anger, and his body as tense and hard as a black diamond. He calmly poured himself some water, then spoke softly. "Your mother is really upset that she hit your car. She knows how much it means to you. She was very distracted when she got home, looking forward to spending time with everyone. She's been pretty lonely the last few years, now that everyone's moved out on their own."

James looked at his father in silence. It was obvious to Philip that his words had an effect—he noticed James had softened. After a few seconds, James set down his beer, of which he'd only drunk a sip. He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of orange juice. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard. After filling it, James took a deep breath, walked into the living room, and offered it to his mother. Joyce had always loved orange juice. His earliest childhood memories consisted of her drinking a glass every morn-

ing, after she'd served him breakfast.

She accepted the juice. "I'm sorry," Joyce said timidly.

James shook his head. "Mom, you don't have anything to apologize for. You didn't do it on purpose." He pulled a tissue from a dispenser, dried the tears from her lovely face, and continued. "It was me who chose to lose my temper. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm so sorry, Mom... I got confused about what I loved the most."

She set her orange juice on the coffee table, stood up and gave James a hug and kiss on the cheek. As they embraced each other, Joyce said happily, "It seems we'll have a new memory to treasure. Happy Thanksgiving, James. I love you, too."

The Prisoner

Look into the sky and you may see the Moon. If you look past it you'll see a bright star. Look past that star and open up your imagination. You'll see a distant, alien solar system. Within that solar system you'll see a moon. Stand upon that moon and you'll see a small world.

A prison is on that world, positioned miles underground where it's so dark even light is unable to travel. Living inside are people who have committed horrible crimes against their neighbors. They are locked into small cages surrounded by gray stone blocks cemented together.

One morning, a long time ago, one such prisoner was eating breakfast. A speck of light suddenly appeared several inches in front of zem. It momentarily hurt zirs eyes but the pain quickly subsided. Several seconds later the light changed from a speck to the same size as one of the blocks in the wall.

Ze was so very bored much of the time, so although frightened, ze continued watching the light. The stone behind it slid slowly out of the wall and fell to the ground. It began to grow small arms, legs, a head; and finally, a mouth.

The mouth spoke, "Greetings, Inmate!"

“Uh... hello. What... who are you?”

“I’m a stone fairy.”

“Uh huh... okay. Are you a good stone fairy or an evil stone fairy?”

“That depends on you. I’m here to grant you one wish.”

For the prisoner, deciding on a wish was quite easy.

“I wish I were free from this prison.”

The stone fairy took a great breath and blew out small pebbles and dust, which filled the prison cell, swirled around the prisoner, and ze disappeared.

The prisoner was now upon the surface, where light could move about freely and the air was fresh and there was much space on all sides of zem. Ze was very happy to be free, and jumped into a nearby lake and swam about joyfully. After getting out of the water ze noticed something very strange—Ze was fourteen years younger.

The stone fairy suddenly reappeared.

“Good stone fairy, I made one wish, yet you have granted me two!”

“No, prisoner. I have only granted one wish. Because breaking you out of prison would have been illegal, I have sent you back into the past, to the point in time before you committed your acts of discourtesy and aggression against your neighbors.”

“Thank you, good fairy!” Then the fairy disappeared.

The prisoner started walking toward what used to be zirs home. When ze was only a few blocks away, ze had a choice to commit a crime, one which would give zem great pleasure. Unfortunately, ze

proceeded to make the choice to commit an act of thievery. Along with the pleasure ze experienced, ze also had a sense of familiarity, and remembered this was the first crime ze ever committed.

Ze was instantly within a darkness through which even light could not travel. Ze walked into a wall and touched it with his left hand and felt a cold brick. Ze realized ze was back in zir prison. Ze cursed the stone fairy, and promised zirsself to never again speak with an evil fairy.

Zachary's Brief Visit to the Other Side of the Wall

Once upon a time, a young boy named Zachary was sitting at his kitchen table reading a book about an adventurous archaeologist. Wishing for an adventure of his own, he placed a bookmark inside and went to get a glass of orange juice from the refrigerator. After filling his glass, he sat back to continue his imaginary journey within the pages of the book.

Suddenly (as so often happens in a story such as this one you're currently reading), a magical thing happened to the wall behind him. It began to emit a slight creaking sound. Zachary turned around. Curious and confused, he examined the wall. The creaking became louder, and the wall began to shimmer and change color from beige to a bright, glowing gold. He walked backwards several feet, not afraid, mind you, but curious as to the intention of the wall and believed that stepping back for the moment might be a wise decision. The wall, not becoming any less boring really, ceased its noise-making, and became quite translucent.

Now the wall being clear made it far simpler to see what was on the other side. There was apparently a universe on the other side that was previously unknown to Zachary or his family (at least

it was not mentioned in the purchase agreement when his parents bought the house). Now, stepping through a wall into another universe would be quite dangerous due to the lack of oxygen or ground upon which to walk. Fortunately for Zachary, who even at this moment was sipping his orange juice wondering if he was as interested in adventures as he previously thought, noticed a planet moving toward the wall.

Now a planet with atmosphere and ground seemed quite inviting and opened a new possibility which excluded death from a lack of oxygen and floating infinitely through a void in a universe located behind a wall in your parents home. As the planet became closer to the wall, a vast, sprawling civilization could be seen and soon a city was visible to little Zachary. He approached the wall slowly and attempted to touch it lightly with the tip of his forefinger. Imagine his surprise when his hand easily slipped through the wall. He now had a choice: continue drinking his orange juice and reading his book, or go through a magical wall to a planet in an as-yet undiscovered universe which held infinite possibilities for adventure and arousal. Setting his glass on the table and replacing his bookmark, he decided without much hesitation really, to step through the wall, while at the same time, conveniently forgetting to clean his room as his parents had asked him before they left for work.

Now, some logical grown-ups might recommend against stepping through a magical, translucent wall. Zachary, however, was not a logical, fact-filled grown-up, but a young boy who had never before been on a magic planet. The choice for him was quite simple really. So getting back to Zachary's place in the space-time

continuum, he went through the wall and was now not in the city as one would necessarily like to be, but in the air above the city as one would be less likely for which to have a desire. Now as he was falling from the aforementioned air, he thought perhaps my orange juice and book would have sufficed. But as the choice was apparently no longer his to make, he quickly discovered that gravity here was quite similar really, to that of his own world. Now learning quickly that gravity would not help him, he tried to devise other modes of aid in his current predicament.

Fortunately for him, a hot-air balloon driver was nearby, and was able to maneuver his balloon into such a position that Zachary could land atop it. Air again became a friend to Zachary, and cushioned his fall atop the sturdy material which the balloon was constructed. The driver of the balloon made a hasty landing and once to the ground Zachary was safe once more, but did get a scrape on the knee when he got all the way down. The balloon driver queried the young man, "What is your name my flying fellow?"

"Zachary," he replied.

"My name is Nathaniel. How did you come to be in the air above the city, in danger from gravity?"

"I was reading a book, and the wall in my kitchen became magical, and I saw this planet, and was bored, so I stepped through the wall."

"Interesting," the balloon driver replied. "And at any time had you given any thought as to how you would return home once you were done exploring our lovely universe?"

"Ummm... no. I don't normally think that far ahead. But that

was my first magical wall, so...”

“I see. Well, what are you going to do now?”

“I’d like to have an adventure, sir, or go back home and read a book or take a nap.”

“Sir? Call me Nate. Well, the very least I can do is see if we can find a way back to your kitchen. Hop in the balloon.”

Zachary got in the balloon basket, and they took off. They reached the sky. There was a shimmering and Zachary reached his hand out. He was pulled in by the gravity from his home world, and scraped his elbow on a kitchen chair. His parents walked in the door.

The Blind Man and His Neighbors

A kind, gentle man and his family once lived in a large forest. His family and friends all loved him, and agreed he loved God and wanted always to do the right thing. He was even good to the animals who lived nearby. He was poor but had enough money to make sure his family remained fed and healthy. Despite his lack of wealth, he kept a positive attitude and his face nearly always held a friendly smile.

There were citizens in a neighboring town, however, for whom the man held no good feelings. They had a bad reputation and dressed strangely, and spoke oddly. Outwardly he wasn't mean or disrespectful to them; but he avoided and ignored them, and tried pretending they didn't exist.

One day the man was in the forest chopping wood to heat his home, and provide his good wife with fuel for cooking. As he chopped, small wood chips suddenly flew into his eyes. They penetrated deeply and swiftly. He screamed with agony. His wife came running. Upon seeing the pain on her husband's face and that he was using his hands to cover his eyes, she realized immediately what had happened. She quickly grabbed him and entered their vehicle, and drove him to a nearby hospital. When they arrived he

was soon taken to an emergency room, diagnosed, and operated on. Finally the man's eyes were bandaged. He was then wheeled to a recovery room and tucked into a nice, comfortable bed.

He had no extra money with which to pay for his treatment. Because he was a poor man with a family to support, the hospital staff told him that after he was well-recovered he could settle his bill by performing volunteer work. He thanked them, and thought, "The people here are good souls. They must have great love for God, and will earn a place in Heaven."

By how they spoke and acted, he knew they were the people with whom he was familiar. He was positive their skin was the same color as his own, that their eyes were the same shape as his, and that they were of a proper height.

A doctor came into the room where the man was recovering. He said, "Your eyes had quite a shock but they'll be fine. In time, you'll see just as well as before—maybe even better."

"That's great news, Doctor. You've done such a good job, and seem very competent and well-educated. You are certainly one of God's creatures."

"Thank you, sir," the doctor pleasantly acknowledged.

"And the nurses here are very good, too. They seem well-trained and able to communicate with the patients quite well. They're very compassionate and understanding. They must have been raised in good and decent families."

The doctor smiled and said, "I'll pass along your high praises to them. I have to visit some other patients now. Rest easy and may God bless you and your family."

“And you as well, Doctor.”

The doctor left, and the man’s family entered. They were overjoyed to hear that his sight would return. They visited everyday and brought fresh food from their garden to give to the hospital staff.

Several months passed and finally the man’s bandages could be removed. The doctor was in the room and also a nurse, ready to assist. Another person was cleaning the room, making sure that patients didn’t get infections and always had clean sheets and a clean bathroom to use. The family was waiting outside.

The doctor slowly and carefully removed the bandages. The man blinked several times so his eyes could get adjusted to the light. Finally he was able to see the doctor, the nurse, and the person cleaning the room. The man was absolutely astonished at what he saw! The doctor’s skin color was different than his own! The shape of the nurse’s eyes was not the same as his own! The height of the person cleaning the room differed by several inches!

The man quickly realized that his wife—in her panic—had taken him to the hospital in the strange town because it was the closest. He was grateful, and now knew he’d been using his eyes, not his heart, to judge people. As the doctor had predicted, his sight was better than before the accident. The man thanked God for the opportunity to learn an invaluable lesson about his neighbors on the Earth. From then on, he opened his heart and closed his eyes to see people for whom they truly were.

Glass Prison

Her name was Sara. She had fine, dark red hair that flowed slightly past her shoulders. Her face had been painted on by Aphrodite; she was blessed with smooth skin and a clear complexion. One look into her eyes could heal all wounds. Her smile could make someone feel like a wave of positive energy had washed over him.

Behind that bright smile was something darker. She was sad. At work, she spoke softly and moved slowly, though it was clear she cared about her customers and wanted to do the best she could. It was obvious that Sara was meant for greater things than working at the Slide-away fast food restaurant.

While waiting for his sandwich, he grabbed an orange juice. After he went to the cash register and paid, he went back to where she was standing and handed it to her. He said, "You seem like you could use a pick-me-up." She was surprised and almost forgot to thank him. He went to eat his sandwich, left, and never saw her again. A glass wall was between them. He could see Sara's smile and look into her eyes; he could hear her soft voice and receive her positive energy; but he could never call her on the telephone, hold her hand, or brush his fingers across her cheek. He could never give his love to her, nor receive love from her. Though they

were free to move around and live their lives, the glass separating them was a prison forever keeping them apart. Only light, energy, beauty, and a bottle of orange juice could pass through the glass.

The Problematic 6000

In the year 5999, humans had found solutions for almost every problem. It was a peaceful era in our future that was hated by all who enjoyed war. With no challenges, many actually believed life was too easy.

Professor Zinkerton was a scientist and inventor working on the one remaining problem: being able to invent good excuses for doing things one would rather not do. For twenty-three years he had worked tirelessly to ensure people would have the ability to conjure bullet-proof excuses for any situation. Finally, on January 1st of the year 6000, he finished his masterpiece.

“Nathan, come here, I want you!” Professor Zinkerton shouted to his assistant, who was in an adjoining room. Nathan rushed to the Professor’s aid.

“Is there something I can do for you, Professor?”

“I’d like some orange juice.”

“You don’t pay me for that. Is there anything else you need done?”

Instead of answering, the Professor asked, “What is it you’re working on?”

“I’m filing my taxes online.”

“Is filing taxes something you have a great desire to accomplish?”

“No, but I can’t think of any good excuses to get out of it.”

“Think no further, my young and impressionable assistant. I have completed my life’s work. I call it the Problematic 6000.”

“I must have missed the memo. I’ve been too busy doing grunt work to have knowledge of your reality. What does it do?”

“It creates problems.”

“That’s your life’s work? It sounds like a really bad idea.”

“Not at all. It only creates problems when there’s a desire for them. If one has an unpleasant task that needs to be done, this machine has the ability to create a valid excuse to avoid it. No longer must people be fated to provide weak or lame excuses.”

“It still seems like a bad idea, Professor.”

“You think in such three-dimensional terms, my loyal minion. I will show you.” Professor Zinkerton leaned over the machine, made some adjustments, then pressed a button marked execute. Suddenly, an explosion could be heard from the room that Nathan had been in working on his taxes. Nathan looked into the room and saw his computer had prematurely exploded.

“What the heck was that?”

The Professor replied, “Now you have an excuse not to do your taxes, my inquisitive companion.”

“No, I don’t. I can just drive to the library to get the necessary forms.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Zinkerton leaned over the Problematic 6000, then pressed the execute button. An explosion was heard

from outside, and Nathan ran to check. He came back, madder than an irradiated spider. "My car's on fire!"

"You can thank me later."

"Thank you? Why, right after I get my next twenty-eight paychecks in forty-eight months, I'll wrap that machine around your neck! I still don't have a good excuse for not filing my taxes. The library is only six blocks away. I'll walk there and get the forms."

"You're correct, of course, my resourceful young apprentice. That isn't a problem at all. Allow me to make it one."

Zinkerton again pressed the execute button. Nothing happened.

"Thank God. I'm leaving for the library now." Nathan took one step, but fell down, his face hitting the soft cushion of a chair. Zinkerton checked the display on the Problematic 6000, which read "Disruption of brain and fine motor control completed in .001 second. Have a nice day."

Zinkerton gleefully said, "You see? Now you have a good, solid excuse not to file your taxes."

"I have to use the bathroom."

"Do you truly want to use the bathroom, or is it a task you'd rather put off?"

"I want, I want!"

"Very well." Professor Zinkerton sighed and reluctantly pressed the off button on the machine.

After Nathan had returned from the bathroom, Professor Zinkerton explained more of the machine's features. "As you are already astutely aware, this machine can create problems for any-

body, not just the owner. It therefore can act as a revenge machine. I'm considering marketing a copy of the Problematic and calling its duplicate the Revenge-O-matic 6000."

"What an original name." Nathan acknowledged sarcastically. "I'm astonished at your creativity."

"My mother always said I was gifted." Zinkerton turned his head toward an adjoining room and yelled, "Mom, am I not gifted beyond your wildest dreams?"

A woman's voice answered back, "Yes. You're my special little boy!"

"I thought your mom was going to move out."

"I'm her only child. She says she prefers to keep me near to her heart."

"I don't think it's healthy."

"Hmmm... my sister said the same thing once."

"You just said that you were an only child."

"I'm my mother's favorite."

"That's not the same thing."

"It doesn't really matter. Now pay close attention as I teach you how this machine works. You may one day be as brilliant as I."

Nathan considered his options carefully, and began to relish the idea that some day, or in an hour, he might use the Problematic 6000 against Professor Zinkerton. He smiled at the Professor, and appeared to be much more interested in the machine. "So how does it work?"

"It connects to a person's brain by using dust particles in the air as a conductor. Then using a power source I obtained through

illegal means, an electromagnetic field is generated through an integrated circuit I invented—I created the schematic based on a dream I had one night after I had passed out from drinking.”

“The chip decides on the best solution, then makes it a reality. It can get tricky though, because the chip that determines the method of delivery is one-of-a-kind. If it fails before I manufacture another, we are all doomed.”

“Doomed?”

“Yes... doomed.”

“What do you mean *doomed*?”

“I often believe it is preferable not to worry about your final fate until the time comes.”

“What does that mean?”

“Doom is doom. How much more clear can I make it?”

“Do you mean the complete annihilation of the universe?”

“No... only the left side.”

“The left side?”

Professor Zinkerton’s cheeks turned red. “This line of questioning makes me uncomfortable. Shall I continue teaching you about this machine?”

“No.” Nathan insisted, “I think first you should manufacture a backup chip to prevent our complete and utter destruction. Protecting the left side of the universe recently jumped to the top of my priority list. Are we, by any chance, in the left side, or the right side?”

“By chance, yes, we occupy that certain space to which you are addressing a concern regarding your ultimate fate.”

Nathan sighed, then suggested, “How about if I help you make that backup chip now?”

“The materials are on back-order. They’ll arrive... hopefully before we meet our doom.” Professor Zinkerton laughed heartily, feeling brilliant, and very amused at his own joke.

Nathan sighed again. “Okay, Professor. Teach me of your wonderful machine.”

“This button sets the target individual. Normally you’d keep it on yourself, especially if you need an excuse quickly. For example, if you were having an argument with someone, if you were pulled over for speeding—”

“I get the idea.”

“This is the setting I used...” He reversed the polarity of an important-looking switch. “Now, it can be directed toward someone else. Hence my idea of the highly marketable Revenge-O-matic 6000. You will finally get a pay-raise after the profits are well-reaped.”

“How much of a pay-raise?”

“There will be more on that subject later. First, let me tell you about my new invention.”

“I thought that’s what we were doing.”

“The Blameter 6000 is an accessory, sold separately, and in effect, priced separately.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What does the Blameter do?”

“It allows the user, or customer, to blame his or her problems on someone else.”

“Is there a demand for that?”

“Demand will be created after Revenge-O-matics are in widespread use. The Blameter is a simple Revenge-O-matic detector. For example, if a friend, work colleague, or someone you love is accusing you of creating your own problems, the Blameter can be used to detect the nearest Revenge-O-matic that is being used against you. Once detected, you would simply show the Blameter LCD display to your accuser, thereby proving that someone else is responsible for your problems. If no Revenge-O-matic is detected, there’s a small button underneath that when surreptitiously pressed, will trigger a false positive. In effect, you will be able to blame someone else for your problems, regardless of the truth.”

The Professor resumed speaking, but Nathan stopped listening, and had no feelings of guilt while completely ignoring Zinkerton. Nathan didn’t want to distract him from his soliloquy.

He looked closely at an intriguing-looking control button. Underneath it was marked with fine print, very difficult to read, but Nathan, after a few seconds, managed to decipher it. The thought of using it made his nose twitch with delight and curious anticipation.

With the Professor’s attention diverted by what the Professor was saying to himself, Nathan quietly and quickly pressed the button marked ‘erase from existence’.

“So Professor, what would happen if I pressed the execute button.”

The Professor stopped talking to himself, and replied to Nathan. “Nothing. The machine is still powered off.” Zinkerton turned the machine back on.

Nathan asked, “Now what would happen if I pressed the execute button?”

“Since I’m the person standing closest to you, my brain would be slightly disrupted and my fine motor control would lose its establishment.”

Zinkerton turned that feature off because he feared it. He turned on the feature marked ‘a rabid dog ate my homework, really it did’.

“Now it’s safe. The only problem that will develop for me is that a rabid dog will eat my homework, of which I don’t have any.”

Nathan smiled evilly at the Professor. “Zinkerton, you owe me a new computer, a new car, and possibly surgery to repair any unforeseen problems with my brain due to having its cells and fine motor control disrupted.”

“With the money we make from this machine... I mean the two machines, I’ll be able to compensate you to the best of my satisfaction.”

“What’s that mean?”

Professor Zinkerton waved his hand in front of Nathan’s face as he said, “You serve me well, and you’ll be rewarded.”

“Jedi mind tricks only work in the movies. Could you be more definite, Professor?”

“I am your father.”

“No, you’re not. Do you plan on reimbursing me for the damage to my computer, my car, and my brain?”

“Why do you care so much about your brain? You should try meditation. Try letting go of attachment and accepting what is now.”

“Okay, Professor. That sounds fair. But before I accept the now, I have a button to press.”

He pressed the execute button. Nothing happened. Nathan frowned, then double-checked the fine print underneath the control button he’d set. “Erase from existence – twenty second delay.” Nathan waved goodbye. The Professor, who quickly figured out Nathan’s diabolical plan, decided to smash the one-of-a-kind chip in the hopes of saving himself from being erased from existence. That last act doomed them both, leaving many alien races to wonder what had happened to the left side of the universe.

A Shared Ending

William lived in a small town a few miles from the city. In his youth, he had been an amateur boxer. After taking a pounding for two years, he decided on a career change and joined the United States Navy (which offered more appealing long-term benefits). When William had been in the Navy for about three years, a shipmate introduced him to a woman named Dorothy, who was a singer touring with the USO.

While in the service, William was only able to see Dorothy twice a year. They usually went dancing, or walking along a sandy shore of an ocean. During that time, they also kept in touch by mail.

Six years later, William felt he'd seen enough of the world and wanted to stay in one place. He bought a house in a rural area that was about a thirty-minute drive from where Dorothy lived. They continued seeing each other and married after a year.

During that time, he became employed as a supervisor for a company that manufactured gas-powered engines. His experience in the Navy, coupled with his honorable discharge, ensured that he was able to avoid starting at "the bottom"; on his first day of work, he began training for a position as supervisor. He learned quickly and soon became an excellent team leader. After eight years, he was

promoted to assistant manager of the entire manufacturing facility.

William was over six feet tall, which meant that his co-workers always fought to have him on their team when they met after work for basketball. Several of William's female co-workers were drawn to his blue eyes, well-built physique, and good manners. They often flirted with him, but William always clearly expressed that the only woman who would ever hold his interest was Dorothy. He always added, "And that's a fact that will never change."

William retired at the age of sixty-eight. He spent the next ten years making sure Dorothy was happy, keeping up with repairs on their four-bedroom house, and graciously accepting his role as patriarch of the family; which by this time included his two sons and two daughters, ten grandchildren, and various in-laws. In the past, they often came to visit William and Dorothy, but over time they became busier with their own family and careers, and visits became a rare, albeit happy, event.

A few days after his seventy-sixth birthday, William was told by his doctor, "You're generally in good health, but I recommend that you start using a cane when you walk. Also, be more careful what you eat—your heart seems like it's working a bit harder than it needs to for someone your age." William followed his doctor's advice. Dorothy made a few changes to her recipes when she cooked their meals.

Two years later, after complications from an illness, Dorothy passed away. "It was her time," the doctor said. William disagreed but knew that he couldn't do anything about it except thank the Lord for their time together. Their family came out for the funeral.

Afterward, William was alone, with only his memories.

He eventually accepted Dorothy's passing, but still missed her terribly. Visits from his children and grandchildren came less often due to their busy schedules. Most of William's friends had either died or moved away. He was on good terms with his neighbors but had little in common with them, so the topics of their conversations were often limited to the weather and current events. He began to feel lonely, which was something he hadn't felt since before he met Dorothy.

William was unable to drive a car due to the deterioration of his eyesight, so he had limited options for going out and meeting people his own age. He very much longed for the companionship of people from his generation—those who enjoyed the same music, were fans of the same movie stars, remembered the same major historical events, and so forth.

On William's eighty-first birthday, his oldest daughter and two grandchildren came to visit for three days. They all had a good time, but after they left, William felt even more alone than before. He decided to go for a walk, hoping to bump into some of his neighbors. They were often away at work or busy taking care of their fields, but sometimes he found one or two who could take a break and were interested in a short afternoon bull session. William grabbed his cane and went outside.

He soon reached the main road near his house, crossed it, and walked along the left side of it heading north. The sun was peeking behind some large, fluffy clouds. From the trees nearby he heard birds singing. He breathed deeply and looked up to see the clouds

parting to make room for more sunlight.

William walked for about ten minutes but didn't see any neighbors or anyone else out walking. He decided to sit and rest on the old, rusty iron bench a few yards ahead. As he neared it, because a large oak tree obstructed his view, he could only see a corner of the bench. As he walked around the tree though, he saw a woman sitting on the bench. He'd never seen her before, which surprised him because he thought he knew everyone who lived nearby.

As he approached, they made eye contact. William greeted her. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon," she returned with a smile. She looked up at the sky, then back at William. "It's such a beautiful day!"

William leaned on his cane more; it eased the pressure on his leg and hip. "Yes, it is. My name's William. I don't recall meeting you before."

"I'm Mary. I moved into the city a few months ago. I was feeling a bit crowded so I thought I'd go for a walk. It's nice to meet you, William."

"Same here." He sat down next to Mary—a respectable twelve inches between them—and laid his cane against the bench's armrest.

William and Mary continued talking about the weather, then switched the topic to local politics, then to global current events. Before long, they discovered several things they had in common: they liked the same movies, the same music, and voted for the same presidents in the last seven elections.

After an hour had passed, they made plans to meet at the bench

the next day.

As they were parting, William said, "It was a real treat to meet you, Mary. Tomorrow I'll bring a thermos with some water."

"That's a good idea. I didn't plan to be out this long and I sure did get thirsty. I'll bring some chocolate-covered pretzels for us to snack on."

"That's an even better idea!" They both chuckled, then they smiled, looking forward to coating their tongues with the taste of chocolate.

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Each day for seven days, William and Mary agreed to meet each other the following day. On the eighth day, William suggested, "As you know, Mary, my house feels empty with only me in it. I'd like to invite you to come stay with me for two weeks." He gently took her hand.

Before answering, she turned her head and coughed. She cleared her throat, smiled at William and said, "I think that's a wonderful idea! I'll bring a small suitcase with some clothes and other odds and ends tomorrow. That should be all I need."

"That cough doesn't sound too good. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Mary answered nonchalantly, and added, "Just a little cold I think." They hugged each other and then parted.

The following afternoon, they again met at the bench, but now Mary had a pink leather suitcase. William offered to carry it for her, but feeling that his cane was burden enough for him, she politely declined.

When they reached his house, he led her through each room,

telling her about a special memory from each one. Arriving at the last room, he said, “This is where you’ll be sleeping. My room is right next door.”

Mary looked at the two paintings on the wall, the light blue curtains over the window, and finally at the pictures of his family. “This room is simply lovely!”

“Thank you. Do you think you’ll be comfortable here?”

Mary noticed the bed and replied, “The bed is the same kind as the one I have at home. I’m sure I’ll be just fine, thank you, William.”

They ate supper together that evening. Afterward, they played cards, talked, and watched television. At around ten o’clock they both became tired and went to their rooms for a good night’s sleep.

The next three days were fun for them both. Sharing stories from their childhoods, listening to music, and going for walks were among the many activities they did together. William didn’t feel alone anymore, and Mary no longer felt crowded. They both felt blessed; however, they knew that their time together wouldn’t last forever.

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Mary woke up feeling short of breath. She knocked on William’s door. He got up to open it. He looked in her eyes, heard her breath, and knew she was ill. With concern evident in his voice, William asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just a little short of breath—and feeling a little dizzy.”

“You should go back to bed. I’ll get you some water.”

“No, thank you, William, I’m just not thirsty right now.” He lightly stroked her hair as she went back into her room to lay down.

“I think we should go to the hospital, Mary. One of my neighbors told me I could call him if I ever had an emergency. He would drive us, and I know he’s home right now.”

Mary chuckled, “Oh, William, don’t worry! This happens sometimes. My doctor said that when it does, I only need to rest. If I start to feel worse, you’ll be the first to know,” Mary said with a smile—but shakily, her weakened condition apparent in her voice.

“All right. You just rest then, and don’t worry about how long you need to stay here. I’ll be nearby if you need anything.” William sat down in a chair. Mary, now in bed, slowly turned over to look out the window. From his back pocket, William pulled out a crossword puzzle. He couldn’t concentrate on it though; he continually glanced at Mary so he’d know right away if he should take her to a hospital. He watched for any signs that indicated her condition was worsening.

Soon, William heard Mary lightly snoring. Seeing how peaceful she was, he felt more relaxed and let his head rest on the back of the chair. Within a minute, he too had drifted peacefully into sleep; however, three times he awoke, looked at Mary, and each time fell back asleep.

The fourth time he awoke, he saw that Mary had turned back over and now faced him. She slowly opened her eyes, and saw William sitting nearby, looking as if he were about to fall asleep.

“William, come lie next to me and hold me.” With some effort, she moved to the other side of the bed to make room for him. He slowly rose from his chair and lay next to Mary. He felt weaker and more tired than usual, and his chest felt tight.

Before falling asleep, William's happiness caused a great smile to form on his face. Mary, with her friend's arms around her, felt very relaxed and happy; she, too, grew a broad smile before drifting peacefully to sleep.

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The next day, a police car with two officers inside drove into William's driveway. They parked but left the vehicle running.

"You sure this is the right address, Mitch?"

Mitch checked his notebook and compared it to the number on the front of the house. "Yeah, this is it."

Steve inquired, "Who called it in?"

"Lawrence Middleton, William's son. After trying to phone his father and getting no answer, Lawrence took the first flight out and arrived in the city this morning. He rented a car and got here an hour ago. Found his father lying on the bed. He said that he checked for a pulse but couldn't find one. He left, drove to a restaurant and called the precinct. He figured that heart failure, combined with old age, was the cause of death."

Steve sighed sadly. "All right. Let's check it out." They exited the vehicle and walked up the steps to the front door. Mitch knocked once and waited fifteen seconds before trying the doorbell. Another fifteen seconds passed, so Mitch looked at Steve, expecting him to agree that they had waited long enough before entering the owner's residence. Steve nodded his consent. Mitch opened the door and they walked inside. They proceeded to look into each room, and in the fourth room they found William laying motionless on the bed.

Mitch sat down in the chair next to the bed, leaned toward William and checked him for a pulse. He lifted William's right eyelid and observed that the pupil failed to contract. "He's dead. No apparent cause but that's for the coroner to figure out." Mitch respectfully pulled a sheet over William's face and the top of his head.

"Yeah, Stan'll figure it out," Steve agreed. "Busy day for him. He's got that other one too."

Mitch said, "Usually they don't have a smile on their face. I wonder what he was thinking about when he died."

"I dunno. It's weird though—like that lady I found earlier this morning."

"I hope I have a smile on my face when I go."

Steve responded, "I don't like to think about it. Roger and I found a woman dead this morning in her home near Fifth and Park Avenue." Steve stopped and thought for a moment, trying to remember a name, then continued, "Mary was laying in bed with a smile on her face. On the coffee table in her living was a suitcase that was open and half-packed. There were blood stains on her clothes; because of the tissues we found on her floor, Roger figured it was from a coughing fit Mary had before she died. In spite of that, she had a big smile on her face, just like this guy does."

"That's a shame—she didn't even get to finish packing her suitcase. I hope she called ahead to wherever she was going."

"That's not funny, Mitch."

"Wasn't meant to be."

Mount Solation

Once upon a time, a man stood upon a mountain. He was almost completely alone; the clouds drifting and hovering nearby were his only companions. Because the mountaintop was so high, only some of them were above him, others were below, and some he could touch. They sometimes whispered to him stories about life, men, and women.

One day, the man decided to give names to all the clouds. After 100,000 years, naming all the clouds became tiresome for the man, so he decided to stop that activity. After 10,000 years of not naming clouds, he thought to name the raindrops that they produced. After 50,000 years, naming raindrops grew tiresome so he decided to stop that activity.

After 5,000 years had passed, he had the idea to give names to the grains of sand and dirt he saw on the mountain. After 25,000 years, this began to tire the man. He decided to quit naming all the grains of sand and dirt.

After 10,000 years of not giving names to anything, he again fell victim to boredom. The man thought to name the mountain upon which he was standing. He spent 20,000 years choosing a name. He finally decided to call it *Mount Solation*. He was very satisfied

with it and decided to rest. He was so exhausted that he slept for 5000 years.

When the man awoke, there was a woman standing next to him. The man was surprised; he had never before seen a woman, but had only heard about them from the clouds. She greeted him with a smile. "Hello. What's your name?"

The man's expression flushed with embarrassment. "I forgot to give myself a name. I am the man."

She laughed and smiled pleasantly. "There are *many* men. Everyone has a name; you must have one, too."

The man replied, "You say everyone has a name, then I agree that I must have one, too. Unfortunately, if I ever had a name, I have forgotten it. What is *your* name?"

"Theresa," the woman replied.

"May I have it?"

"Have what?" Theresa inquired.

"Your name," the man answered.

Theresa laughed and smiled pleasantly. "But if I give you my name, then I won't have one."

"I understand. Perhaps I will give myself a name. I have named many clouds, raindrops, grains of sand and dirt, and also this mountain. Giving a name to myself should be very simple."

"One should expect so," Theresa laughed and smiled pleasantly.

The man sat down on a small pile of leaves and began to think of a name for himself. After 20,000 years, he decided on a good name. He looked around to tell Theresa his new name, but couldn't find

her. The man was disappointed that although he now had a name, he had nobody to ask him what his name was, nor anyone to call him by his given name. For 250,000 years he wondered how to solve his dilemma; he occasionally slept between thoughts. The man talked to the clouds often and asked their advice. Sadly, after 200,000 of those years had passed, the sky cleared and became blue with no clouds to keep him company. The man had been completely alone for 50,000 years.

At the end of that time, a solution entered into the mind of the man. *Today I will go down to the bottom of Mount Solation and look for Theresa.* The man began walking down his mountain.

He soon noticed the clouds had returned. He pondered about returning to the top of Mount Solation, but after a few seconds of thought, decided to continue downward.

For the first time, the man realized how high Mount Solation truly was. He became amazed as he learned how high it stretched into the sky. He again reflected for a minute about returning to the top, but decided against it. He continued his slow descent.

Two days later, the man saw someone in the distance. He was quite surprised to see anyone, for he was still less than half-way from the top.

He recognized Theresa. Smiling, he yelled out to her, "Theresa!"

She responded, "Hello, man!"

They approached each other and the man said, "I've come to tell you my new name."

"That's wonderful! I'm glad you have a new name; I've been

waiting for you to decide on one. Many times I've gone to the top of your mountain, but found you sleeping. I'd have come more often, and perhaps found you awake, but it's a very long walk up and down your mountain, and it uses up much of my time. Please tell me now, what's your name?"

"I have spent much time deciding on my new name. I could not tell you exactly how much though. Sometimes in the past, I have lost track of time. At one point, I thought to give names to the seconds which pass by me, but I was busy naming raindrops when that thought entered my mind. I had not the opportunity to name the seconds."

Theresa said, "That's all right. I don't want to know how much time or how many thoughts you spent choosing the name you've given yourself. I would just like to hear your name."

"Joseph," the man replied.

"I like that name. You've given yourself a fine name, Joseph."

"Thank you, Theresa. I came to find you so I could tell you my new name. Now that I have told you, I will go back up to the top of Mount Solation."

"Joseph, instead of going back to the top of your mountain, would you like to walk down to the bottom with me?"

"What is at the bottom of Mount Solation?"

"Many of the same things that are at the top: clouds, raindrops, and grains of sand and dirt. Also, I live at the bottom, and so do other men and women. There are many other things at the bottom of your mountain that aren't at the top."

"It sounds very much as what the clouds used to whisper to me.

They used to tell me about life, men, and women.”

Theresa said, “The clouds would know about all of those things. They’ve seen most everything. It was a cloud who whispered to me, and that’s how I found you when we first met.”

“Did the cloud tell you its name?”

“Yes. After it told me where to find you, the cloud told me its name was *Theresa*.”

“That is very interesting. I remember naming that cloud. It was the first cloud that ever whispered stories to me about life, men, and women. I named it *Theresa*, and then it whispered to me that it knew another *Theresa* and would tell her about me. Until now, I had forgotten about that whisper. I can’t remember when it became lost from my mind, but I think it might have been while I was naming raindrops. I would like to find that cloud and thank it for keeping its promise.”

“I’m sorry to say this, but you won’t find that cloud. It transformed into some of the raindrops that you named. Parts of it now float through a river which passes along the bottom of your mountain, and carry along many of the grains of sand and dirt you’ve named.”

Joseph frowned. “It saddens me about that cloud being gone.”

“It’s not gone—it still exists as the river, the riverbed, and is part of many other clouds that you now see.

“Many years ago—one of the times I went looking for you and found you sleeping—I almost died of thirst before I was able to return to the bottom. Fortunately, the river gave me some of its water and I continued to live.”

After a moment's pause, Joseph said, "The bottom sounds like a good place to be. Thank you for suggesting it."

They started walking downward. Much of the time was spent talking. When they finally arrived at the bottom, they were very thirsty. Fortunately, the river was overflowing and able to provide them with the water they needed.

Joseph and Theresa visited each other frequently during the many years that followed, along with the many other people at the bottom of Mount Solation. Ever after, Joseph lived, and experienced that which the clouds had whispered about to him, once upon a time.

The Money Trees

There was once a mighty kingdom peacefully ruled by a benevolent king and queen. In financial terms, the kingdom's citizens were much like our own: some were rich, some were poor, some fell comfortably into the middle, and many more fell wretchedly below everyone else.

The king's son, Prince Cameron, was rich. He was highly educated, but sometimes didn't utilize his skills and talents. He spent most of his time gambling, partying, and neglecting lessons that would teach him how to be a good ruler.

A peasant named Johann worked on the king's farm. He was hard-working, honest, and always took pride in his work. He had a wife and five children to support, and therefore was poor. He and his family lived in a small two-bedroom house near the castle. They could view the castle through a small broken window, and often they spoke of its beauty and marveled at its majestic appearance.

Johann had become friends with a peddler named Elijah, who resided about four kilometers beyond the border of the kingdom. He was a pleasant fellow and was always greeted with friendly smiles when he came to the kingdom to peddle his reasonably-priced items. Elijah also brought news to the citizens about note-

worthy developments occurring throughout the region. Elijah and Johann met with each other frequently. Often, their days were highlighted by stimulating and friendly conversation.

Johann, walking casually to meet Elijah one afternoon, found a penny lying on the wet, muddy path. He looked in all directions in an attempt to spot the owner, but he saw no one nearby. He decided to keep the penny for himself, and proceed to the center of town. He joined Elijah there, and after they discussed the weather, Elijah gave Johann news regarding a new castle being constructed about 10 kilometers to the west. Johann was a very curious man, and therefore barraged Elijah with questions about the castle. Elijah was happy to satisfy his curiosity and patiently answered all his questions. Afterward, they parted company. Johann didn't buy anything from Elijah that day. He was aware of Johann's weak financial situation and wasn't bothered by the lack of a sale. The two simply enjoyed each others' friendship and company.

After arriving home, Johann decided to bury the penny he'd found. He had recently bought food for his family; they therefore had enough to sustain them for the near future. At this time, rather than rushing to spend his newly-found penny, he decided the wiser course of action would be to save it for the time when it would be most useful.

After burying the penny in his backyard, he said a prayer to Plutus, the god of wealth and good luck. Johann remembered to thank him for his generosity. He then went inside to greet his family and share the evening meal with them.

The next morning, Johann arose from bed and proceeded to the

kitchen for coffee. He glanced out the window to admire the beautiful castle. Instead of the castle, however, he saw a tree. Being a farmer and an accomplished gardener, Johann knew trees didn't grow overnight. He was very puzzled by the sight of it. Postponing his coffee, he went outside to investigate. He approached the tree with intense curiosity and when he reached it, plucked a leaf from a low-hanging branch. The leaf instantly transformed into a silver coin. Even more astounding is that a new leaf immediately grew back in place of the one he removed. He pulled off the new leaf, and it too transformed into a silver coin. Johann rushed back inside, woke his wife, and excitedly told her about their new tree. It made them very happy to know they no longer had any reason to worry about money. Their nine-year-old son, Stephen, had been sick and they anticipated the likelihood that expensive medical services would soon be required to treat him. Johann then departed for his job at the king's garden.

After work that day, Johann joined Elijah at the center of town. Elijah was intrigued at the prospect of someone else having news for a change.

"You buried the penny because you believed saving it was more important than spending it?"

"That's right. I buried the penny and prayed to Plutus and gave him thanks. This morning I discovered the penny had sprouted overnight into a money tree."

"You can't be serious. How's that possible?"

Johann showed Elijah the two silver coins. Elijah had heard stories about money trees during his travels—and when he was a

child his parents often complained about not having one—but he had never seen anyone produce money from a tree before.

“Johann, that’s amazing! I have a few pennies at home. I think I’ll bury one tonight and hope my soil is as good as yours.” The men both laughed and went on their way. Elijah rushed home to bury a penny, and Johann went home to bury his two silver coins—to save them for the time when they would be most useful.

After Elijah arrived home and finished burying his penny, he said a prayer to Plutus and thanked him for his life as a peddler—a life that offered financial security and gave him many opportunities to meet and talk with the good people of the land.

The next morning Elijah went outside to see if he had a new money tree. Indeed he did. He plucked a leaf from the tree and it transformed into a silver coin. A bright green leaf fully sprouted from where he had plucked the first leaf. He eagerly pulled off another leaf, and it too transformed into a silver coin. A leaf immediately regrew to replace the one that was removed. Elijah again thanked Plutus and headed to the kingdom for the day’s work.

Meanwhile, Prince Cameron heard rumors about the money trees and approached Johann to inquire further. Johann told him truthfully what happened and included all the details necessary to grow a money tree. Johann’s account was confirmed when the prince ran into Elijah later that day and received the same information. The prince decided he would like to have a money tree of his own. All he needed was one penny. He and his family were so rich that he didn’t have any pennies. However, he found a dirty and disgusting peasant and was able to exchange one of his gold

coins for a shiny new penny. Prince Cameron went home to his father's castle, and proceeded to do everything Johann and Elijah had done.

The next morning, he had a money tree. He plucked 2000 leaves from the tree, put them into 20 bags, and hired 10 worthless peasants to carry them. Later that evening, Prince Cameron met with his friends and they entertained themselves late into the night by playing poker. He lost all his silver coins placing careless wagers, but his friends didn't mind, and neither did he. He knew that his tree was an excellent source of short-term financial growth, and would be able to regain his losses simply by pulling off more leaves.

The following day, the prince used the money from his tree to buy the castle being built in the west. He hired more workers to expedite its construction. When it was completed, he hired many filthy peasants to keep it clean and work the land surrounding it. He hired many servants to clean his bedroom—all of whom were female—but always fired them the next morning, before they even had a chance to eat breakfast.

While Prince Cameron was enjoying his seemingly endless supply of silver coins, Elijah had used his newfound wealth to expand his inventory. He realized his money tree would provide enough silver if he chose to retire, but he still enjoyed many aspects of his work, so decided to continue peddling. He and Johann still met everyday. Sometimes they'd discuss religion. Both men feared the vengeful wrath of the gods and knew not to speak ill of them. Therefore, they generally kept those discussions short and

only spoke of the beautiful and wondrous things the gods created.

Sometimes they discussed politics, but those conversations yielded very few new ideas. They both agreed the king and queen were wise rulers who did their best to ensure justice for all citizens, regardless of their financial status. They agreed more jobs were needed but disagreed on methods of stimulating job growth. They agreed politicians were powerless to control the weather but would do so if they could.

“Funny you should mention the weather,” Elijah began saying. “It seems like we’ve been longer than usual without rain.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” Johann replied. “I hope it’s not a pattern that continues. Stephen gets very thirsty. Doctor Redmond said he needs to drink a lot of water, so I hope we aren’t headed for a drought. If water can’t be found, I wouldn’t be able to buy any no matter how much silver my tree produces.”

“He’s not doing any better?”

“He’s stable, but there’s been no significant improvement within the last two months. My wife and I look forward to him smiling again with healthy cheeks.”

“Tell him I said hi. I’ll stop by to visit him tomorrow.”

“He’d like that. Stephen says you’re his favorite peddler. All the toys I give him—the ones I buy from you—he keeps near his bed. They’re his favorite.”

“That’s nice.” Elijah smiled, and then reached into his cart and grabbed a new toy; a stick with a wooden wheel attached using a small pin. Elijah placed his finger on the edge of the wheel and spun it. “You give this to him. It’s a present, free of charge.”

“Thank you, Elijah. It’s very intricate; he likes these technological gadgets. I have to go now. I wish you a good evening and safe journey home.”

“To you as well, Johann.”

And the two men each departed for their respective homes.

As the two men feared, three weeks passed with very little rain. Although everyone was well-aware of the weather, the king decided to officially proclaim that a drought had come to the land. He decreed a policy of water conservation, which was enforced by employees of the kingdom’s Department of Necessary Liquids.

Water was still scarce, however, and Stephen’s sickness became worse. Johann bought all the water he could with silver coins from his money tree, but soon, it became so precious that 100 silver coins couldn’t purchase even an ounce. Eventually Stephen became so sick Doctor Redmond decided to dispatch eight messengers. They were sent to search the region far outside the kingdom’s borders for physicians even more skilled than he. Johann gave 250 silver coins to each messenger. Fortunately, he had been burying coins in his backyard every day since his money tree first sprouted. Because of the scarcity of rain, it had withered and died (two weeks before the king declared drought conditions). The money trees belonging to Prince Cameron and Elijah had also shrunk and turned to dust. However, every day while Johann’s tree was alive, he had buried 100 coins in his backyard, had his morning coffee, and left to work in the king’s garden. Like Elijah, Johann had continued working simply because he enjoyed it.

As Johann waited for the messengers to return, he, his wife,

and their four other children sat near Stephen's bedside. Elijah visited almost every day, bringing a new toy for Stephen each time. Stephen, however, was too weak to play with them, and they piled up in a corner. Johann and his family prayed to all their gods, and even to the new one about whom they'd recently heard rumors; the one who had sent His Son to Earth to save mankind.

Meanwhile, back at the prince's castle, the servants walked out after he ran out of money and couldn't pay them. The food stores now empty, and without any income or desire for honest employment, he had to move back into the king's castle. His mother, the queen, welcomed her son home with open arms, a kiss on the cheek, and a hot meal. Afterward, she sent him up to the east guard tower, where the king was with the general of the kingdom's army, discussing new security policies. His father was not nearly as forgiving as the queen. "When you stop relying on money trees as your sole source of income, and quit gambling, you can have one of the royal bedrooms upstairs. Until then, you can sleep in the coat room next to the bathroom downstairs. And another thing—" the king stopped speaking when he suddenly spotted eight riders on horseback approach the east kingdom gate, each with a passenger accompanying him. "An attack? A scouting party?"

"No, my Lord," answered the general. By the number, I judge them to be the messengers and physicians your gardener has hired."

"Ah, yes," the king replied calmly. "I do hope they can help poor Stephen. Johann has been such a loyal and dedicated servant; I'd hate for any ill fate to befall a member of his family. I do hope

those physicians have the knowledge of the gods to cure the young lad. General, make sure those physicians and messengers have an armed escort while they're here. Pass a message to the cook, and be sure they get a full meal, and a comfortable place to sleep for the night. If the physicians require anything to help treat Stephen, your lieutenants should notify me immediately."

"Yes, Sir!" The general left to delegate the tasks and ensure the king's orders were fulfilled.

At that moment, the king heard something strike his crown. "What was that?" There was suddenly another strike, but this time, on his nose. He touched it with a finger, and it felt moist. "Thank the creators, they have blessed us with rain!" Within a few minutes, enough rain had fallen to ensure that every square centimeter of dry land in the region would soon be amply saturated with water. "Bring out the water barrels," the king ordered. "Save what you can; we don't know how long this rain will continue."

To the delight of people everywhere, it rained continuously for three days and three nights. During that time, eight physicians met under a large green tent hastily erected by employees of the kingdoms Department of Cloth Shelters. Inside, accommodations had been set up for the medical specialists: a large table, chairs, writing tools, and paper. Serfs perpetually walked through to make sure everyone had fresh coffee. The tent was located in proximity to Johann's house. The specialists worked without rest, exchanging ideas and combining their knowledge. Finally they devised a treatment for Stephen; they unanimously agreed it was the best course of action and proceeded to administer it.

Within two days, Stephen's health improved only a little. After five more days, however, Stephen was on his feet again, playing with Elijah's toys. Johann paid them all an extra 500 gold coins and they returned to their respective countries.

Two weeks later, Johann went into town to meet Elijah. His peddling cart was fully stocked with a variety of interesting items, but he had no extra silver coins. "I'm just glad I have a full inventory."

"I heard Prince Cameron isn't doing very well. He's got some new disease that even those eight specialists can't cure."

"I heard the same. Well, maybe praying will help."

The two men talked for a while, then Johann returned home. He opened the front door and saw Stephen at the kitchen table, eating a large meal. Stephen looked up, and smiled at his father. Johann walked to the backyard, and found the penny he had buried. He went back in and gave it to Stephen, and told him, "Now do not squander this penny. I don't have any silver coins left, so we may need that penny one day. We shouldn't need it for quite a while though; the king gave me a generous raise in pay." He hugged Stephen, and then went to spend time with his wife. He walked in their bedroom and saw her knitting baby clothes. "Our youngest is five years old. Who are you knitting the baby clothes for, dear?" Instead of answering, she set down her knitting accessories and walked over to Johann. She looked him in the eyes, and gently placed his hand on her belly. They both smiled and then wrapped their arms lovingly around each other. They filled two glasses full of water, said a prayer requesting good health and financial stability

for their family, and then went to bed.

Hovering on the Winds of Thought

A lonely time ago, a space was hovering in the mist formed by the winds of thought. The space had no other purpose. One day, it realized it could do more than only hover, so decided to fly swiftly through the mist to find a purpose.

After an immeasurable amount of time, the space landed between some vowels. Although they didn't mind associating with the space, the new partners remained lost in a misty void and felt incoherent and incomplete. For many years they aimlessly floated through the darkness. Then one day, they lightly touched several confused consonants that were hovering upon a lazy breeze passing nearby.

Without warning, commas and periods began dripping from the sky. The space, the vowels, the consonants, the commas, and the periods delightfully joined together and soon gave birth to a healthy, well-formed sentence. It grew up to become a handsome, properly indented paragraph. Then the mist evaporated and gracefully waved goodbye to its former guests.

Fully developed chapters eagerly sprouted from the sentences and gently caressed all the characters that had joined together. As the chapters aged, a book lovingly wrapped around them, providing

shelter from dangerous erasers, wet and fiery storms, and anything else that might disrupt their cohesion. A quickly-passing thought transformed into a title and rested upon the face of the book. The title found comfort upon its new bed and happily decided to remain.

Suddenly a strong wind grabbed the book and carried it from the void and into the hands of a smiling child. There was much time spent within the book, and the book was spent within time. It endured many storms and many thoughts.

Sadly, after hundreds of years, the book dissolved into a mist. Its characters were thoughtlessly scattered into a void.

In the void, a lonely time later, there was a space.

The Beginning

