

A Man for Every  
Purpose



# A Man for Every Purpose

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# Part I

## A Prosperous Man



# 1 I Prosper, Therefore I Am

I opened the door and saw what what had recently been a young woman lying on a stainless steel table. . .

By mistake I had walked into a cleaning room used by the operations people of my company. . .

And it was my company in a substantial sense. An employee I was, but also a founder and the largest stockholder. It was something to be proud of. Once I'd been a professor of philosophy at a small college and then I'd been unemployed and then I had wandered the city at night with some crazy missionaries and then I'd helped them to make something of themselves. . .

When I'd first come into contact with them, they'd been no more than a band of do-gooders rushing around hectically to make sure that those who died poor would receive some Christian's idea of a decent burial. From such impoverished circumstances had I managed to organize them to do something worthwhile. Now, we have given the world a better way of caring for beloved ones whose metabolic systems have ground to a halt. Yes, with the help of those crazy Christian missionaries, I'd founded a magnificent corporation providing innovative services, modern services in great demand by people of all races and creeds, providing those services on all continents of the world but Antarctica.

WE PROVIDE IMMORTALITY TO OUR CLIENTS.

Few there are who do not know that now there is a practical way to achieve immortality. And we sell a more practical form of immortality than that peddled for centuries by Christian evangelists. More limited in some sense, but more achievable, more imaginable, by members of a species of hairless apes in trousers. It is far better to have a limited but attainable form of immortality rather than vague promises of an immortality in some place called Heaven where. . .

Once did I consider the Christian idea of Heaven to be desirable though

I didn't believe in it after my adolescent years, after my mind had matured. Belief was not necessary, because the Christian idea of Heaven was not the sort of place a philosopher could accept.

And who would really want to live in Heaven anyway? For life without end or for a timeless instant we call eternity?

Not that the bad part is life without end, by some definition. No. Emphatically "No!!". The bad part is that we would have to spend that life in God's presence doing what He wants us to do. And there is little evidence in the Bible or the writing of saints in various traditions that God wants us to be building water slides and roller-coasters. He seems to much prefer churches and church social halls. My mother and father both acted as if they believed God would rather have us at a church picnic rather than heading for Acapulco. As if he He would rather have us gathering on our front-porches and singing vulgar folk-music rather than sitting in front of our TVs to watch videos of teenaged girls dressed to . . .

Isn't it funny that so many respected corporations make so much money flaming the fires of illicit desires when we punish so brutally the wretched creatures who act out the implications of those videos or the catalogs filled with thirteen year-olds posed as if they were streetwalkers desperate for a customer?

Where was I?

Oh yes, I was talking about the wonders that can be brought about by the entrepreneurial spirit. And what greater wonder is there than the provision of a prolonged existence, maybe even billions of years if one is lucky. If the earth and sun remain intact. If no barbarian invader gets it into his head that it is sacrilege to . . .

I never thought of that danger before. Must make a note to mention it at the next insurance committee meeting.

Did I mention that I'm an honored and powerful member of the Board of Directors of a company that has popped into the Fortune 500 just three years after being founded? I sit on the science sub-committee, a very important group in a company that spends so much on research. I also sit on the insurance committee. . .

Did I already mention that?

I probably didn't tell you that I lost out in the vote for the last seat on the executive committee. It went to the Opportunist. He also sits on the budget committee and the compensation committee. . .

Is that why he gets so much cash while I have almost all stock options? Not that I wish to complain about my billions. . .

I hear the Nameless One wasn't elected to a single committee. Not even the committee that overlooks our counseling and spiritual outreach services.

*Brother Steven's Vaults of Eternity.*

Few there should be not knowing of what we offer, given the massive public-service campaigns launched by our company and its competitors. We have been letting the public know about all the benefits of a practical and realizable immortality, by way of short messages during breaks in popular sit-coms, during the seconds available between musical videos. We've even bought a chunk of time between the third and fourth quarters of the next Super Bowl! Public awareness of our company and of the value of our services has been rising quite high, to the point where the US Congress is considering legislation to protect the public against cheap and shoddy imitations of our services and products.

Yes!!, more and more, each and every day, people are realizing that practical immortality can be had. The readily corruptible parts of a person can be eliminated with the aid of modern cutting devices and drying ovens; the harder and more enduring parts of a man or a woman can be cleansed as white as snow and then stored against many of the accidents of an imperfect world. Even the DNA can be saved, duplicated enough times to provide a number of backup copies; computer records of a person's genetic material can store both the good parts and the junk in their strings of chromosomes. The bones and the DNA. . .

She had been beautiful. Her face was still beautiful as were some other body parts as she lay naked on that table, naked down to even the spotlessly white femur of her left leg. And her gut had been opened. . .

I shifted my eyes quickly towards a nearby work-table. There were bowls full of red liquid and variously colored lumps of gooey matter. That was a valuable service we provided: the removal of a person's vulnerable soft parts. A difficult set of tasks if done skillfully and with the proper respect for the client. You should always respect clients even when that client is lying in front of you with the muscle mass partly removed from the harder parts. . .

Mostly do I see the better parts when they send blood and flesh samples over and my assistants extract the DNA and some other interesting chemicals.

I felt my lips curl up in the strangest way as I thought of the one lying between Brother Steven and Brother Michael. She had been wise enough, pious enough, humble enough about her prospects, that she had sought an attainable immortality. Or maybe her husband or parents were so wise, so pious, so humble on her behalf. And my vision was now fully focused upon what used to be a young woman lying in front of me, ready to be prepared for her entrance into a life which will span ages of geological proportion.

North America will have rebounded from its misguided separation from a greater whole and will be squeezing the water out of the Northern Atlantic as it heads for its reunion with Europe and Africa. San Francisco will have become a land-locked Alaskan city. India will be retreating and the Himalayas returned to low-lying hills not capable of causing ice ages. Many a change will have come over a planet perhaps no longer inhabited by rational and upright apes, but it is likely that some of the storage facilities of *Brother Steven's Vaults of Eternity* will yet exist. Some of our facilities will have perhaps taken a ride downward into the softened layers of the earth's crust. One or two may have been pulverized by an asteroid strike or buried by a volcanic upheaval or a massive muddy flood. But we do not make any warranties in our standard contract that the hard parts of any particular customer will be protected for even a thousand years, let alone a hundred million years.

The greater safety lies in the storage of DNA, in chemical forms or in electronic data storage – either way it can be replicated and stored in a number of places. There would always be backup versions of any given customer of our company.

Revived by my remembrance of how important was the work we did, I felt light of heart. Still lighter did my heart feel when I looked once more at the whiteness, the glistening purity, of the woman's right femur. Except for a few drops of red, it was as magnificently white as the purest of marble, would soon be nearly as dry and as hard as the granite of the New Hampshire mountains. My elation was rising to heights which had once been unattainable for a quiet and low-key man!!

My stomach was rising up nearly as fast as my feelings of joy...

My eyes shifted, as if by their own will...

A feeling of calm resting upon a greater dread came over me and I found myself looking gently at Brother Steven who was glaring at me as if I were an enemy and a competitor rather than his business partner. At least I thought he was glaring at me though it was hard to say for sure since his

face was that of a wax figure which had been left in the July sun for the afternoon. And he was in surgical robes, not his usual hooded black robe – his face was fully available for my study as was that of Brother Michael who was at his side. That tough little red-headed Irishman had a face in no better shape, though his green eyes sometimes shone with good-humor.

The two of them sneered at me and then returned to their work. Brother Michael had a laser-cutting tool in his hands and was adjusting it so it would cut just deep enough that he could cut away flesh, layer by layer, without damaging the harder parts of that beautiful young woman. . .

That corpse which used to be. . .

That beautiful young woman in the midst of her transformation into a form, no several forms, which would last longer and be less subject to corruption than a changing, dynamic sack of biological processes.

Brother Steven was choosing from amongst the blades laid out on the counter; in his right hand was a device looking much like a wood-worker's rotary tool. On the table, within reach of his strong and cruel hands, sat an axe of sorts. . .

My stomach once more began to protest and my mind wondered why it was that I was here and not in my laboratory. There, I could be, would soon be, preparing the young woman's DNA for. . .

True enough it was that her DNA carried too much superfluous information, large amounts of information which had been useful to her apish ancestors or even her reptilian ancestors. . .

Mistakes. . .

Incomplete encodings that allowed for too much accidental development in response to her mother's body back when she'd been in the womb, too much opportunistic or protective development in response to a poorly engineered world. . .

Repositories of information, DNA presented problems far more important and disturbing than the practical problems of cleaning and storing a person's harder parts. . .

I'd been over such ground far too often and the journeys had all proven fruitless. The open questions had done no more in response than to change their shape; more questions had arisen!! And though I was a trained philosopher, I'd not been able to settle the questions which disturbed me. What chances had more ordinary men in dealing with the problems of life?

The world presented an interface which was beyond the power of any closed system of thought I could imagine. Worse still, my very mind was

constantly shifting as if it was less a substance and more a response to that intractable world!! There was no way to wrap my mind around the problems presented by the world, no way to enclose a complete and consistent model of the world inside my mind. Worst of all, there was no mind in which to hold such a model if it were somehow constructed.

The time had come for me to turn to the world, to discipline my ways of thought to the practical needs, the tractable problems, of a world which could be used to the benefit of men and women and children. And what greater good could a philosopher do for a race tormented by false hints of immortality than to help provide a practical and attainable form of immortality?

Soon enough portions of the flesh which was once a young woman would be sent over that I and my co-workers might extract the DNA, some to be sealed in resins impervious to water and other corrosive chemicals. That lab was more the place for a decent and civilized man, much more so than this place where they sliced and chopped to remove the soft parts that bones might be stored.

True enough it was that this cleansing room was the core of the company which had made me one of the wealthiest men on the face of the planet. Still, I imagine that if I were to own a sausage factory, I would also be reluctant to watch the making of the bratwursts and hot dogs. If I were the type to own legislators, I would be reluctant to watch them write a tax bill.

Brother Steven and Brother Michael looked at each other and exchanged a few words too low for me to hear. Before I could wonder what they were conspiring about, they turned and looked to be ready to set to work once more. Soon enough, the flesh which had once been a pretty young woman would yield up the better parts, the bones and the DNA, up to now obscured and hidden by all of that goo and blood and all those floppy organs that looked. . .

The liver was the worst of them all, like an unhealthy cut of an unclean animal. Any liver I've ever seen was oozing green and oily liquids. Even when it had come out of a man, the liver had always looked to me as if it were oozing scummy, old oil, as if the person drank the same stuff she fed into her car. I know that the liver was the most disgusting of all the organs – it's job was to extract poisons and, if they could not be voided safely, to try to hold them inside itself. Not that I was much attracted to the sight of a human heart residing shapelessly in a stainless steel bowl. The brain

always reminded me of a pudding partially dessicated and then chewed up by some sort of fungus.

Chromosomes suspended in a clear liquid and held safely in a test-tube were a much more attractive part of the human person to me, though I freely saw and willingly confessed to the beauty to be found in human bones cleaned and dried properly so to achieve a purity almost beyond human imagination. Converted to codes still more abstract and stored on electromagnetic or optical media, a person's genetic code took on a still greater beauty; the proper display software could make it look as if it were a fully planned work of art. Even a perfectible work of art, if some of our lines of research worked out.

As my mind wandered over fields far more pure, far less bloody, than the work-tables in this cleansing room, the two bone-men moved towards the remains of that poor woman, intent on their duty to tear asunder, to place into the heat of the oven, to coat with resins, to store in the strongest bins which could be mass-produced, to place in a location reasonably secure from earthquakes and volcanos. . .

It was, to be sure, rather difficult to protect even the hardest and best parts of a woman against the attacks of those who would terrorize the most innocent of people by way of bombs or similar assaults, though it was likely that bones sealed in resin would be little harmed by non-explosive weapons of mass destruction. And, for an additional fee, a person's bone-bin could be placed in an underground concrete bunker secured against any explosion but that of a nuclear bomb, secured even against chemical attacks which might damage bin and resin and bone. Yes, we knew many a trick to defend our clients against nature and against malicious men, and so it was that I felt no guilt at all in accumulating a multi-billion dollar fortune for providing such necessary services and providing them at such a high level of quality.

A sneer remained on the face of each the bone-cleansers though I wondered, for the briefest of instants, if I were misinterpreting something. Perhaps their faces could not form normal smiles?

Brother Steven switched on the little whirly-cutter in his hand and I turned, suddenly feeling feverish as I'd not felt since passing through my ordeal and emerging intact. My body was not mutilated like those of Brother Steven and Brother Michael. There were scars running down the back of my neck, down my spine, around my buttocks, coming around the inside of my thighs, and aiming at. . .

With a shudder, I found my thoughts momentarily disturbed, but then I asked myself, “Was it those marks they bore on their very faces, visible reminders of their sufferings and their sins, which made them hard inside?” I knew there had to be a reason for their willingness to slice away at human flesh in a way no healthy American should be able to do, even when the flesh was that of a corpse. It is in the interests of moral self-respect that we work so hard to invent robotic devices and remote viewing systems.

Disgusted, I turned and left and found myself alone in a surprisingly quiet corridor. An eerie corridor for it was nothing but studs and painted wallboard over the nineteenth century brick, a padding of concrete poured over the dirt-floor, in the cellar of an old New England mill building. And the thought of those bare brick walls and that dirt-floor brought back memories, though the memories were more visible than. . .

The train of thought seemed disturbing to me and I pulled back, deciding I was content to stare down the corridor and wonder where in the world Mac’s office had been put. The building had been remodeled a year back, the first capital project we’d funded after raising a boat-load of cash through an investment banking house. Once, Mac had been housed on the first floor of this building, having a large suite of offices for himself and his twelve assistants and numerous secretaries. At that time, he’d been a very important man, doing the job of an entire executive suite as well as running the spiritual services division. Since then, we’d hired highly skilled and highly motivated people from other corporations or from the graduating classes of the best business schools in the country. Mac’s staff had dwindled or been transferred to other departments as he returned to being a full-time man of God and our clients proved unwilling to pay for spiritual counseling or other related services.

A few months back, someone had told me that Mac and his one assistant, a glorified typist and file-clerk, had been moved to a small office near the bone-cleansing rooms. I walked down the hallway and reached the end without finding a name-plate for The Reverend Hosea McMurty or for *Spiritual Services Division*. I turned around and looked back down the corridor, surprised – for not the first time – at how different it looked compared to that first time I’d seen it when I’d followed Brother Steven who was lugging Emmett’s body in a large plastic bag which had looked to have been made for carrying suits or coats rather than corpses. They’d not had much money and had probably gotten those bags at a tag-sale or a Salvation Army outlet.

Emmett had been a good friend, even if he'd been constantly singing Bob Marley songs in his off-tune voice. And me, his entire audience, being one more inclined to Mozart and Bach.

Poor Emmett. . .

That night he'd died, I'd descended the stairs, with Sister Alicia walking slowly in front of me in a manner that made me think she was already prepared to care for me, prepared to let me fall on her and use her as a cushion if I slipped on those stairs in the dark. And after that descent, I'd seen Mac turn on some sort of fluorescent light of the sort many people used in their basement workshop areas; the electrical connection had sparked a little, letting me know of the amateurish character of this operation into which I'd fallen. The floor was covered by poured concrete in only a few small areas, mostly it had been a packed-dirt floor. Various mounds covered by large sheets of plastic had been scattered about the large space we were in; I suspected at the time and later verified that those mounds were grinding machines and sanding machines and Bridgeports for milling steel parts.

Perhaps they were material prophecies of the machines which would later be installed in that building to shred human flesh and to prepare the bones for eternity. The machines extracting the genetic material and preparing some of it for research and some for long-term storage were over in the lab building, which I ran and where I preferred to be.



## 2 A Chance Meeting

While I was lost in my thoughts of chemicals which, stripped of superfluities and mistakes and general gobbledy-gook, could be transformed to pure information, a door opened halfway down the corridor, almost right across from the room where Brother Steven and Brother Michael had been working upon that woman who was about to be given immortality. It was Mac!

I called out, “If it isn’t the Reverend Hosea McMurty. What a pleasant surprise,” but the main surprise was the weakness of my voice. It seemed a voice not often used, not. . .

Of course, the virus had damaged the skin of my throat, nearly down to my stomach. My lungs also. . .

If I had learned back in a science course about the skin tissue which lines your insides, I’d forgotten the lesson and had relearned during those weeks of torment when so much of my skin had sloughed off, returning in a pristine form on the outsides of my body but in a thick and scarred form on my insides. I was no longer able to run more than an hour or so at a time without my breathing starting to give way. Still. . .

Mac had heard me and he turned and waved uncertainly. It seemed to me he was not yet comfortable with his lowered status, but what was he to expect? He was the leader of the group when I joined them, still the leader when I, with some help from the Nameless One and the Opportunist, began to move us in a more profitable direction. True it is that Brother Steven and his followers are the heart of the operation, but it is the brain and the chemical flows it controls that keeps the heart working for the good of the entire body. It is the DNA which organizes. . .

Well, that is still a controversial matter with so many biologists, especially embryologists, giving so much credit to the soma. . .

“Good morning, Milton.”

And I responded, “Good morning, Mac. Is this your new environment?”

Mac winced, though he had no reason to feel bad. If he had been pushed out of the way of those who better understood the world, he was still a wealthy man, though I think he was not nearly so well-paid – in cash or stock options – as me and Brother Steven. After another second in which his uncertainty and loss of confidence seemed to be showing more fully, he turned to look straight at me and waved towards the door of his office. “Would you have a few minutes to spare, Milton?”

Time to spare had I none, being a busy man, both a billionaire and a scientific researcher living on the cutting-edge. But I spared him any more humiliation than he was already bearing for his own mistaken judgment. Or perhaps for some inadequacies in his practical capabilities. I nodded, remembering that I had come into the operations building looking for him, though the reason for that search was escaping me. The large to-do list on my computer had no items to do with the spiritual counseling division, and it was unlikely, anytime soon, to contain any such references to a dwindling and unprofitable branch of our company.

It was in a spirit of confused memory and simple human charity that I followed him into his office. I was glad to see that the building administrators had given him a nice cherry-wood office suite, though it was a bit crowded in the 15 by 20 foot room, given that there was another small cubicle in the far left corner; apparently, he had to share his office with his secretary. That cubicle was empty as I stared at it, and Mac looked at me for a moment, puzzlement showing on his face. He asked me, “Are you all right, Milt?” and the tone of his voice indicated some significant level of worry. It was almost enough to make me fear that I was showing signs of entering one of my fugues. . .

But I had no reason to fear such states. After all, the Opportunist, more than anyone else, was responsible for our great success, was responsible for so many people having a chance at an attainable immortality. I shook off the feeling. . .

No, it was more a mood than a simple and quickly passing feeling. . .

I shook it off once again and Mac was looking truly worried as I turned and walked the two steps to one of the visitor’s chairs in front of his impressive expanse of desk-top. It bothered me some to see so much wood showing; in his better days, Mac’s desktop had been a disaster, books and papers piled so high as to sometimes obscure him. Now, all was clear. I noticed a bookcase against the wall before I turned around to sit down; there were a few different versions of the Bible, as well as a few Anchor and

Westminster commentaries. I was glad the Nameless One was not around: he would have sneered at so much false learning that did nothing but obstruct the flow of the Spirit. On the other hand, if the Opportunist had been around. . .

Mac might have benefited greatly from a pep talk and some good advice from a fellow who knew how to conform himself so well to the world, knew how to provide what the world wanted.

“Milt, I’m beginning to fear that we’ve taken a wrong turn sometime over the past three years.”

I was half-tempted to rise and explain I had to be somewhere else, but Mac looked so sad, so. . .

Almost repentant.

A strange mood for a man who was blessed with a goodly share of such a successful operation. . .

To be sure, he had not nearly so goodly a share as me or Brother Steven. . .

His share, as a percentage of total stock, was also shrinking rapidly. . .

His prestige had also gone down when it had become clear that the man of today wasn’t willing to pay much for spiritual counseling at a time of death, his own or that of a beloved. . .

Assured of an attainable form of immortality, the people had made the practical decision. . .

“Milt, are you with me?”

I looked at him, touched by his concern for me, concern at a level he’d not shown since I’d been. . .

Since the skin had been sloughing off. . .

A man has skin on his chest and on his back. On his stomach and his buttocks. On his. . .

I shivered and suppressed an urge to check that my. . . favorite parts. . . were still attached. . .

No, they’d not fallen off, even from those poor men in Marburg who’d been driven insane by the pain. . .

It had been just the skin. . .

I smiled at Mac. He looked still more concerned than before. Almost to the point of fear for me and for himself. I wondered if maybe the two of us could jump up and run out of his office, ripping our clothes off and heading down the corridor screaming. . .

The police in Springfield had been awfully tolerant with the Nameless One, though it had always been me who'd woken up in the holding pen, dreading the lecture which I would get before being shipped back to the lab. They once threatened to send me for psychiatric evaluation when I told them it hadn't been me they'd arrested the night before, though I was the one in the cell that morning. There are so many who do not understand. And I don't understand how the Nameless One is able to hide his insanity when he's captured, though he can't hide his basic lawlessness for sure.

I returned my attention to Mac. He looked so depressed. I couldn't really blame him, even if his problems were mostly due to his decision to keep on with his spiritual counseling career when he was in control of an operation about to become so profitable. **He could have been the Chief Executive Officer!**

But I knew I should be tolerant towards Mac. I myself had once made the mistake of becoming a philosopher, a lover of wisdom and an academic. Some men were driven by depraved urgings to do unwise things, leaving themselves vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life in the world which lay underneath the settled, ordered, stable, secure world which men had constructed on top of the world which lay underneath the settled. . .

"Milt, are you having a relapse?"

I looked over at Mac and felt a tear run down my right cheek. . .

He looked so sad. So worried for me.

And I remembered that first night. . .

He had been so worried about me. . .

I'd taken one look at Emmett, lying there, his body twisted as if in agony and the skin half-sloughed from his face and skull. . .

His face had been barely recognizable, as a human face let alone that of Emmett, and that face had been twisted into. . .

A shit-eating grin, as if dying in agony had been the greatest fun of his life.

I'd remembered immediately the rumors of a terrible disease making its way through the underworld of Springfield – the drug-injecters and prostitutes and homosexuals and. . .

Remembering that Emmett was a drug-injecter, I'd panicked and run for the front door to his tiny house. . .

I had fallen. . .

I had looked up and saw myself glaring into the intense gaze of the largest rat I'd ever seen. . .

My consciousness had faded even as I remembered reading that the blood-fever diseases which had emerged from the jungles of Africa could not spread directly from human to human. They passed from human to rat and then back to human.

By way of dried rat-shit!!

I sneezed in the dusty air of Emmett's dirty shack and collapsed into a state of unconsciousness, waking up after darkness had fallen. I felt lucky I had not moved upon waking when I realized there were people moving around. . .

I peered around out of the corner of my eyes without moving my head. There was a largish fellow standing at the front-door. . .

There was a group, four or five, clustered around Emmett's corpse. Several of them had seemed to be in black robes, and had later proven to be so dressed.

A deep basso voice was reciting some sort of prayer involving invocations to a deity who was presumed to be concerned about people after they died. Every so often, the others in the group would respond with an "Amen" or a "Praise the Lord."

That dark and frightening scene faded a little and I found myself looking in Mac's face once more. His concern seemed to be growing, as if he thought something was wrong with me. "How," I asked myself, "could anything be wrong with me? I'm one of the richest men in the world and I'm a leader in a new industry which promises to do so much good for men and women and children and maybe someday – dogs and cats." It was comforting that no answer came: I'd come to realize that the Nameless One or the Opportunist sometimes popped up when I was dealing with difficult questions. It was best to put those sorts of meaningless questions to the side and stick to the practical issues where a little sweat and some technical cleverness could take you so far.

Mac seemed to be steeling himself for some effort and I leaned forward, concentrating intensely upon the lines in his face and the subtle movements of breath which could be hardly discerned through his wool-suit. And then, the corners of his mouth moved spasmodically for just a fraction of a second before his soothing basso voice expressed, "Milt, I want you to

think this through with me. We took a wrong turn somewhere over the past three years. We returned from our mission in Africa. . .” He winced as if remembering that it was his group which had brought back the virus. “We were quickly confronted with the problem of the poor and homeless, the drug-users and the prostitutes, dying of a terrible disease and no one wanted to even go near them as they died or near their corpses afterwards. Not that I could blame them, having seen too many times what that virus could do to the human body. They needed to be comforted. They needed to be assured and put in the proper frame of mind to meet their Maker. . .”

Somehow, I’d known that God would be worked into the conversation. It was that propensity on Mac’s part which often made people uncomfortable around him, especially the high-powered professionals we’d needed to help us run a growing and increasingly complex corporation. There was a place and time for talk about God and no one had ever complained about Mac starting off a Board meeting with a prayer and the Board had even built him a nice chapel for Sunday services. It was when Mac insisted on trying to decide “what God would want us to do” that the Board always began fidgeting its multiple bodies.

“Milt, you’re drifting away again.”

I looked over at Mac, suppressing my laugh. I was the one running a successful genetics lab, running programs in basic research and also in applied research. I was trying to figure out how much of the human genome had been introduced in a frivolous and spurious manner by viruses and I was trying to figure out better ways to store DNA, sealing it against water and other corrosive substances. I was even directing a side-project on better ways to store DNA codes on the computer. The existing data-base technologies were proving very inadequate to our needs. More than that, I’d even realized that philosophical modes of discussion could be applied to useful problems.

“You know, Mac, there is something that’s beginning to bother me about what we’re doing.”

He smiled but then suppressed all signs of joy. The corners of his eyes wrinkled up and his eyelids made as if to shut. The corners of his mouth were also twisting up and. . .

I realized he was squinting as if to express suspicion. I wasn’t sure what he meant by such a gesture and I wasn’t even sure it was an expression of suspicion. Self-aware people with complex inner-lives quickly came to realize that many of the social and personal and natural signs in the world

around us were misleading. For not the first time I made a vow to stick to the facts and not try to read meaning into expressions or movements or other physical events.

“We may be making moral errors, Mac, but I’m not sure we can act otherwise. We are acting in the best interests of our clients and we are executing our corporate responsibilities to the best of our abilities.” I stopped for a few seconds, fascinated by what I’d just said and wondering where in the world I was headed with these thoughts, though I had traveled this route before, mostly in the quiet of the small cubicle I had in the laboratory, a private place with no telephone and not even a name-plate.

I had insisted on putting up a separate building for the laboratories and for my offices though the company had been cash-poor at the time. I had not wanted to be in the same building. . .

I had not wanted to ever see. . .

I’d followed them out of Emmett’s house, thinking sometimes that Brother Steven in his Grim Reaper outfit or, more likely, the smiling Brother James built like a professional football player, would chase me down if I were to walk away. But mostly, I followed them of my own will, free or otherwise. I was unemployed and no one was advertising for professors of philosophy, especially for those specializing in mathematical logic. My funds were almost depleted. . .

My father had lived well and had been generous to his favorite causes and the trust fund I’d inherited had not been all that large. A modest suburban ranch-house, a Corvette, and a year and a half of unemployment and my legacy was gone.

And then. . .

A disaster had come upon me. . .

I’d been washing dishes, though perhaps I’d not have done such a thing if I’d thought through the implications. . .

You see, I’d had no medical insurance!

And, as it turned out, I’d also had not a one of those thingies with sponges or rag-strips on the end of a handle. Thus it was that I’d done something I should have never done. I stuck my hand inside of a glass, but only to wash it. . .

How was I to know?

But I should have known. I had no medical insurance and I had no thingie on a stick.

I'd taken a chance which no man has a right to take. I'd endangered my health, I'd endangered my property. Imagine if I'd run up a big bill in the hospital...

They would have seized my house and my Corvette, though there would have been nothing in my bank accounts for them to seize...

For I had taken other chances I shouldn't have taken. With a prosperous father pushing me towards a better career, with him offering to support me in decent style through medical school or law school or even business school, I had chosen to become a philosopher, a mathematical logician at that.

And that house...

And my shiny silver Vette...

While I was wondering what had ever happened to that house and that Corvette, Mac asked once more, "Are you all right, Milton? I worry a lot about you. Brother Steven doesn't seem to be reacting to his unexpected prosperity, not for the good nor for the bad. Sister Alicia and most of the others..." He just waved his hands in frustration. And I knew what he was saying. Most of those who had survived the skin-stripping pain of the viral infection were more than a little bit ditzy nowadays. It was those brain-chemicals the viruses had a propensity for picking up and transporting from one person to another, though I had not yet unraveled the entire complex mess. I hadn't even yet identified the source of some of the recipes for the neuro-transmitters which seemed to cause some strange patterns in my own brain. It was a true blessing that my mind was so clear despite the presence of all those chemicals which didn't seem quite appropriate for a human brain. Some of them were even eerily similar to neuro-transmitters and digestive tract chemicals found in worms and shell-fish.

I was so lucky but...

Brother James, poor fellow, had been mostly reinforced in his genial attitudes and behavior. Brother Steven and Brother Michael and many others who were in Operations had been mutilated on the outside; inside, they had become gloomy and reclusive in certain ways, but generally they had survived with their brains intact.

Mac had never been infected, though his immune system responded strongly to the virus, indicating he'd been a carrier...

Of all of them, only I had emerged whole in my skin and my brain. I did have a few bad stretches of scarred skin...

No worse than if I'd suffered a second-degree burn...

But there were some parts of the body that shouldn't have to suffer even the slightest of injuries. The pain and the shame of it all...



## 3 An Important Meeting

Somehow I managed to escape from Mac's office, though I wasn't sure what promises I'd made to him; he had been truly worried about me, though I know not why. Of all of them, only I had emerged whole in my skin and my brain. I did have a few bad stretches of scarred skin. . .

Some of that in embarrassing regions. . .

Some of those were amongst my favorite regions. . .

There were times when my skin crawled in the most eerie manner as I remembered. . .

And there were those neuro-chemicals related to chemicals which governed responses to food on the part of deep-sea worms, but nature was clever in reusing all sorts of stuff.

I had taken but a prolonged step away from the door which I had closed between me and Mac when. . .

"Milt."

I froze at such a commanding voice, so reeking with efficiency and competence. Before I'd even turned fully, I smiled and greeted her, "Hello, Claire."

Claire Norberg!

As blonde and fair-skinned as my mother had been. As cold and hard as my mother had been warm and tender.

And she was untouched by the virus. I could almost imagine the smooth unblemished skin running from her cheeks and down her neck and heading for. . .

"You've heard about the special Board meeting?"

"Of course. I'll be there."

I don't know why she winced, but then she smiled and said, "That's better than some others being there that could be there."

It took me a second to parse the statement and then I was not sure if she were talking about the Nameless One or the Opportunist or Mac. I nodded in a manner meant to be polite and not to second her opinion. After all, the Nameless One had recruited the core of workers in Operations, from the ranks of the walking sick on the streets of Springfield, but they'd proven to be good at cleansing bones. The Opportunist was the one who'd raised our initial cash and had even negotiated the purchase of the abandoned mill-building at quite a good price. Then he'd gone on to deal with the investment bankers, allowing the founders to keep a bigger share of the company than usually happens with start-ups. Mac. . .

Well, occasionally a client wanted some spiritual comforting at the approach of death; occasionally the loved ones of a client wanted some spiritual comforting after death had arrived. Mac was not totally useless. Some people seemed to positively crave a clergyman to tell them what they already knew: that their loved one was headed towards some sort of paradise. Though I suspected many of them figured their loved one was really headed for one or more of the storage buildings of *Brother Steven's Vaults of Eternity*. The real point was to be happy even at a death and to justify that happiness by a belief that the dearly departed had gone on to a better place, a joyful life after death, endless joy, the glory of sharing in divinity. All that sort of stuff.

Having defended my friends, I smiled more openly at Claire. She was a lovely creature, though a bit the Ice Lady. She was like my mother in being pale unto death on the outside, but, so far as I could tell, Claire was also pale unto death on the inside. I like that in a person, even a woman. Claire is like other successful people in the modern world: she quickly settles on what she wants – often it's obvious what should be desired – and then she methodically and ruthlessly sets out to get what she desires. Yes, an admirable trait, and I have managed to develop it to some extent, after years of refusing to be like that – Freud might have said I was self-destructive as a form of rebellion against my father. Or maybe Jung would have said it. Or maybe Adler. It was a long time ago that I had taken that introductory psychology course.

It had been my idea, opposed by Claire, to put our message on full-page spreads in old-fashioned newspaper campaigns, though the homeless people we had on staff at the time had some trouble writing down to the fifth-grade reading level necessary to reach those who studied *The New York Times*. If we'd been able to hire advertising or marketing people out of Harvard

Business School or some such place, it would have been easy, almost natural, to write at that level, but we chose to promote from within and, as luck had it, we chose a twenty-one year-old schizoid secretary who had a taste for Jane Austen and Flannery O'Connor. We should have known better than to choose her when she had gushed out during her interview that she had read *Tristram Shandy* when she was in high school. I should have listened to the professional managers we'd brought in. But I fought them and got my way, in the process lowering myself in the opinion of Claire and the other professional managers. She had first looked at me with suspicion openly glowing in her eyes when I mentioned *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. In fact, I was the only one who'd ever heard of Laurence Sterne. The others in the executive suite who'd been on the advertising work-group had just assumed Tristram Shandy was some sort of comedian who'd written a book based on some of his monologues. I have to admit the title of that mossy book does lead the modern mind. . .

I'm going nowhere in particular, but that was perhaps the tendency that Claire and the other professionals saw in me. The tendency which might well have kept me from being so successful if I had not overcome it. But they were tolerant, knowing that founders of new businesses do not always have MBAs from Harvard or Stanford; consequently, they have to learn some things by experience or by being taught by the professionals they bring in.

I'd learned not to let the others know I'd actually paid attention to the leather-bound books my father had purchased at great price; in fact, I seem to have truly forgotten much of what had been inside of those leather bindings. Space was needed inside my head to learn all about reaching the type of people who value our services. I kept silent at the meeting after my disaster with the pedantic ads in *The New York Times* and swallowed hard before quietly voting to pay up for time during some of the upcoming Super Bowls. It is with some pride I can claim to be the one who first thought of sponsoring a documentary on genetics and another on the bone-structure of a human being, both to be made by a famous producer of children's educational shows. I was a little bit upset when I was told I wasn't quite right for the part of the lab director. They managed to hire Samuel L. Jackson to play Milton Jackson.

It's just as well. If such a golden opportunity had arisen, the Nameless One might well have shown up and started one of his lectures about our eternal souls being spittle from the mouth of God. It usually ended with

him saying we should all try to return to the mouth of God that we might be swallowed and re-absorbed into the One.

He is a very strange person.

I'm glad I survived the Missionary Blood-fever without becoming schizoid like Sister Alicia or Brother James or . . .

I'm not really sure what is wrong with Brother Steven, other than those scars which cover much of his chest and back and legs.

## Colophon

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