Rip Goes To Hell:
A Love Story

The Third Book

"*LIES. Falsehoods. Untruths. Fabrications. Bull poopy. These are the corruptors of the soul, and yet the foundation of societies as we know them. Lies are often misinterpreted and later given the more acceptable label of "myths." A notable example of this phenomenon is George Washington, the man renowned as a founding father of the most convoluted and questionable societal experiment on Sol-3* [see United States of America under Fun Places to Start a U.F.O. Scare]. *According to legend, Washington chopped down a cherry tree and later admitted to the foul deed by saying, "I cannot tell a lie." Irony strikes here because the narrative itself is untrue. The government later led by Washington was sullied by this "myth" and has been plagued with corruption from that day to this. NOTE: Washington's legend is considered a myth because the only tree ever chopped down by the man was, in fact, a shoe tree. Scholars are puzzled about how a device patented in 1905 happened to be present in colonial times, and cannot explain why it was growing from the ground."*

These words scrolled before the eyes of a short man with a pink mohawk and argyle hi-tops on his feet. He wore a bulky pair of goggles with the words *Spectator Learning* neatly printed across the front. He sighed and reached up to change frequencies on the goggles to another source of education.

"Hey, Moe! [Boink!] *Woowoowoowoowoo!"*

"Oh, yeah? Well, take this! [Ba-rump!]*"*

"Watch my fingers, Larry. [Poke!]*"*

"A wise guy, eh?"

Suddenly, the story restarted.



SOMEWHERE in the infinite expanse of space, a planet revolved around a massive star. The star was red; the planet was green. From a great distance, the planet looked as if it were stationary. Up close, the planet looked quite dirty. Dirt is like that.

If you spent enough time exploring this planet, you might find a majestic oasis in the middle of a deadly desert hidden within the confines of a vast continent. At the edge of this oasis, a small creature dragged itself from the scorched sand and into the shelter of shade. This animal seemed to be a dog, a bull terrier, with white fur and a black spot around one eye. Strangely, he wore a sweatshirt emblazoned with the logo for *Bud Light*. The dehydrated dog

pushed himself into the small lagoon, lapped up the liquid and instantly perked up. This oasis was the site of the long-rumored yet previously undiscovered Beer Spring! The paunchy pooch mused whether the advertising industry would take an interest in this discovery.

At this time, a huge automobile tore through the oasis, flattening the dog, poisoning the Beer Spring, and obliterating every living thing in its path.[1]

The vehicle, a customized Plymouth Fury with mammoth tailfins, accelerated across the desert with amazing speed. The driver could be recognized as Rip Tapioca, Marshal of the Time Stream, by the artificial fish in his shirt pocket and the bizarre galoshes on his feet. Rip, an impressive figure with a carefree smile and damn nice hair, enjoyed his destructive cruise across this tropical planet.

Sitting in the passenger seat, one could see a short man with a pink mohawk and argyle high-tops on his feet—very likely the same man we met on the previous page. He wore heavy goggles that echoed with slapping noises. "Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck," sighed the bored fellow, tossing the goggles into the back seat. He looked around and noticed that the convertible top was down. The wind was strong enough to pull out his hair as it whipped across his skull. "Can we put the top on?" he howled.

"Of course, George of the Gelatin-Brains, my sidekick and confidante!"[2] Rip returned at a matching volume. "Put the top on,

[1] Many politicians refer to this as economic progress.
[2] Unnatural exposition for the benefit of the author.

PFUI."

The dashboard of Rip's automobile reacted with a female voice. "Fine, I'll put the damn top on. It ain't like you ever do anything for me, mind you." The voice of PFUI (Plymouth Fury Unlimited Intelligence) sounded like everybody's mother-in-law. A switch on the dashboard flipped and a transparent energy barrier appeared where the car roof should be.

"The ultimate sunroof," basked Rip.

"Wait a minute!" yelped George. "Multiple bits of dialogue previous to this one are either sentence fragments or grammatically incorrect or both!"

Rip's eyebrows reached a curious angle. "Was that intellectual statement a quirk caused by the atmosphere of this strange planet, or is that *Spectator Learning* gadget actually sinking some facts into your brain of gelatin?"

"Must be that quirk thing."

"The planet Paradox is an enigma, George. We have much to learn here." Rip pressed a button on the steering column and a video screen emerged from the dashboard into Rip's field of vision. His brow knitted in concern. "PFUI, a bug just collided with your grill. You may want to do something about that."

"Do this! Do that! I don't get any rest around here!" PFUI whined.

"Cool your jets, PFUI. I created you to be the world's first

self-aware automobile. I could make you the world's first self-aware automobile to be annihilated."

"Super-duper, Mr. high-and-mighty." A laser cannon grew out of PFUI's hood ornament and aimed for the insect. Moments later, a laser bolt blasted a forty-pound cockroach into the sand.

"Dear oh dear," remarked the enormous blazing cockroach. "How ironic that a durable insect such as myself, capable of withstanding a nuclear war, can so easily have its very existence snuffed out. Darwin was wrong: it's not survival of the fittest but rather survival of the most heavily armed." With that thought-provoking thought, the cockroach perished.

"What was all that B.S. about?" PFUI fumed. "Who gives a snake's butt about a damn cockroach?"

George grew concerned. "PFUI is getting rather naughty in her speech mannerisms. Can we print that stuff?"

"Fret not, young Gelatin-Brain. We can say all that and more, even on broadcast television. We can even say 'bitch' if we want to."

"Really?" George was impressed. "PFUI, forget about all that cockroach stuff. It was intended to be social commentary. Continue bitching," he giggled.

"I will bitch as much as I damn well please. Bitching is more than a leisurely activity—it's a way of life. I don't need your permission. Do you think I'm some sort of submissive female? Hell no! I'm PFUI, the world's first self-aware—"

Rip raised a foot and kicked PFUI's voice amplification unit into tiny bits of plastic.

"Good show, Rip. She was getting out of hand."

"Watch your mouth! PFUI can't bitch at us anymore, but she's still functioning."

"So? What can that bitch do?"

The red-hot cigarette lighter popped out of the dashboard and branded George's forehead with a gruesome sizzle.

"That's an example."

Grimacing, George put an icepack on his cooked flesh. "The bitchy automobile is a failure. What are you going to try next?"

"Maybe the sex-starved automobile," Rip considered.

"I think that this whole 'unliving-objects-with-personalities' thing would be a lot more successful if you used more suitable personality patterns."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Someone wholesome...like Vanna White."

Rip slowly turned to George and stared deeply into his eyes. In response, George whimpered. The gas pedal hit the floor as Rip accelerated to impossible velocities and made repeated hairpin

turns. George was tossed all about the car's interior.[3]

"Why do you keep bringing her up, George? I told you to forget her."

"I apologize profusely," George enunciated, peeling his face from the rear window. "Slow down."

"It's my job to study celebrities. That's part of the mission of an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power." Rip took another sharp turn just as PFUI broke the sound barrier.

"Understood. Slow down."

"She was just another celebrity. Nothing special." The car squealed as it went up on two wheels.

"Agreed. Slow down."

"So I made one little mistake and told the woman how she was going to die. Fate is strange. Maybe the manhole cover would have clobbered her even if I had said nothing!"

"Good point. Slow down." George was trying to stuff himself into the glove compartment.

"That's the way life is! Death, too. If I caused Vanna's death, I caused it indirectly and there's nothing more I can say."

"No big deal. Her name slipped out. It won't happen again. Slow down." George offered this advice from within the glove

[3] Seat belts save lives.

compartment.

Rip noticed that the odometer was maxed out, so he slowed down to an acceptable speed that could be measured. "We're back to normal, Georgie-boy. Come on out."

George pushed himself out of the glove box, momentarily wondered where the gloves were, and mumbled incoherently.

"What did you say?" Rip perked.

"I said, 'Watch out for that mountain.'"

"Which mountain?"

"That mountain!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUGGGGHHHHHHHH!"



GEORGE could only think about darkness. He had a vague memory of the crunching of metal against rock, and recalled the sensation of flames licking his body.

George could only see darkness. This had something to do with his eyes being closed. Lifting his eyelids, he saw his body crammed in the passenger seat of a subcompact vehicle. Rip Tapioca sat in the driver's seat, visibly fuming, and his elbow smashed into the window every time he turned the steering wheel.

"What is this car?" asked George.

"This is a Yugo," Rip breathed.

"I see." George looked out his window and saw a horizon on a desert plain decorated with small pits gushing flame. The sky glowed ominously in a deep shade of orange. "Where's PFUI?" George queried.

"I have no idea." Rip gritted his teeth.

"I see." George took another look out the window. Creepy shadow beasts circled overhead like vultures. "Where are *we*?"

"HELL!" Rip bellowed, veins popping out of his neck.

George was shocked. "There's no need to use profanity. All I did was ask a question that—"

"We're in hell, George!" Rip loudly clarified. "Hell! Pluto's realm! Hell! The underworld! Hell! The opposite of heaven! Hell! The place where naughty people go!"

"I see."

"Uh-huh," Rip grimaced.

"We're in hell."

"Uh-huh," Rip emphasized.

"Bummer," George sighed, and Rip's elbow smashed against the window again. "Why don't you open your window and give

yourself a little more space?" George offered.

"Try to open yours," Rip spat.

George rotated the window handle a few inches and the plastic snapped in his hand. "So much for elbow room," George smiled.

"No kidding."

"I guess we just need to make the best of the situation," George said.

Rip looked down on his Gelatin-Brain companion. "How does one make the best of hell?"

"It can't be *all* bad."

"Of course it's *all* bad. This is hell." Rip was flummoxed that gelatin could be so dense. "We cannot use the Artifish to escape. While the technological energies of my plastic salmon can work wonders in our dimension, it holds little power over the occult energies of hell. The Timeboots we use to travel through time and space are equally impaired." Just then, the transmission fell off the Yugo and tumbled into a flame geyser. "Damn foreign cars," mumbled Rip.

Looking through the windshield, George noticed a strange object on the horizon: a glittering silver ball the size of a small moon, spinning from an impossibly long strand of silver thread reaching into the upper atmosphere. "Look! There's a big disco ball over there!"

"I don't believe that for a moment."

"Really and truly! There's a big disco ball over there!"

Rip peered ahead and spotted the disco ball. "My stars! There's a big disco ball over there!"

"Where?" George pressed his face against the window.

"Over there," pointed Rip. He turned the steering wheel using all of his strength and headed for the disco ball. The exhaust system belched black smoke and rattled out of its brackets. Rip rolled his eyes.

Within minutes the Yugo was parked directly beneath the disco ball. Rip unfolded himself out of the car and proceeded to ogle the odd construct. "It's definitely a disco ball," he said.

"It sure is."

"And a big one, at that," Rip detailed.

"Very big," agreed George.

"Let's investigate." Rip pulled the Artifish out of its holster and rolled the plastic eye in its socket, preparing for a jump through hyperspace. Mentally recalling the map of computer functions performed by the miraculous device, he prepared to poke a specific scale.

"Is that wise?" George asked. "You just said that hell and circuits

don't mix."

"Not exactly, my foolish friend. While we cannot use the Artifish to escape from this dimension, we should be able to successfully navigate some low-grade Artifishing." With that, Rip punched a scale and set an intricate computer pattern into action. Seconds later, Rip and George found themselves trapped within a volcano, rolling down a lava bank.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" pained George, doing his best to shake off the clumps of molten rock.

"Whew! Hotter than hell in here," commented Rip. He pressed another scale on the Artifish and they returned to safety under the disco ball. Rip cleared his throat while George took the opportunity to stop, drop, and roll. "Let's give that another try."

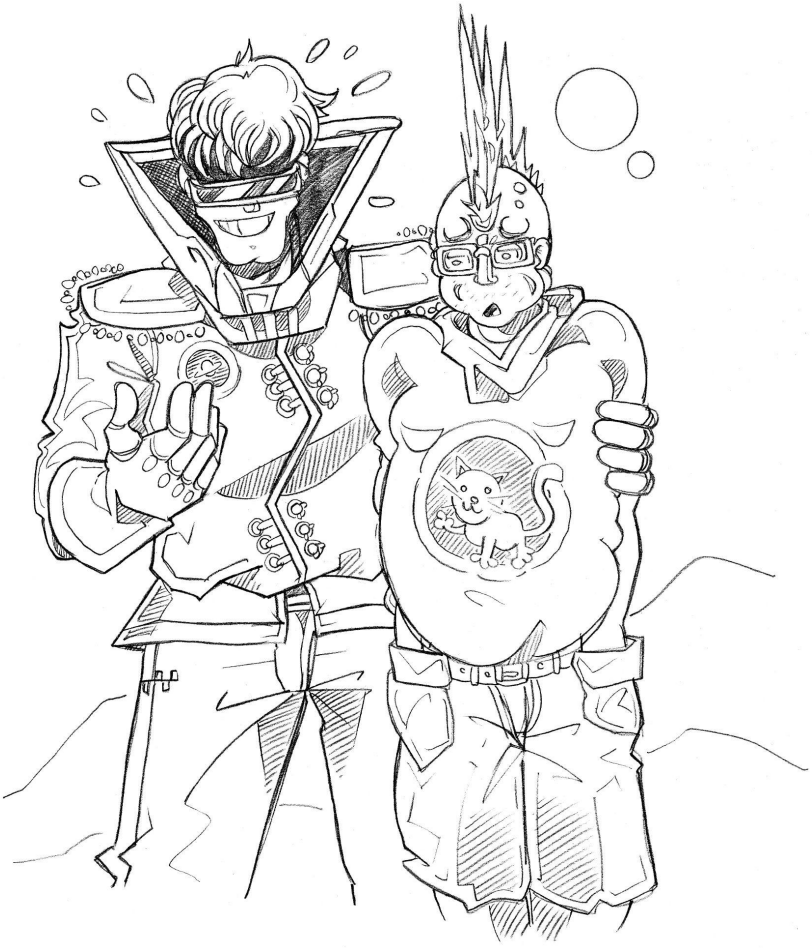
George leapt to his feet with arms flailing. "I warned you," he scolded, "that atomic displacement and reconfiguration tends to operate within different parameters on an occult plane."

Rip considered the number of syllables in George's outburst. "You never warned me about any of that."

"Any of what?" George cocked his head and scratched his elbow.

"Regardless, I have taken the necessary steps to prevent any such accidents this time." Rip pressed a different series of scales and the Artifish whisked them into the gigantic disco ball.

"Boogie oogie oogie," gasped George.



Rip and George (illustration by Timothy Sparvero)

The glimmering mirrored interior of the disco ball was large enough to contain a small city. Vinyl record albums were strewn everywhere and stacked as high as the eye could see. Rip instructed George to tread lightly across the unsteady floor to prevent the precariously balanced vinyl discs from tumbling onto their heads. Moving past the eerily looming records, they saw a colorful dance floor illuminated by flashing strobe lights. Thumping drum beats, shrill falsetto voices, and over-the-top orchestration painfully pierced the air as men in leisure suits and women encased in plastic hotpants moved their bodies to the music. Their numbers were inestimable. Rip noticed dancers wearing bell-bottom jeans, suit jackets with astronomically wide lapels, and plunging necklines on both genders. The sheer volume of chest hair on display was horrifying.

"I thought that disco was dead," whispered George.

"True enough," nodded Rip, "but so are we."

"Then this must be...."

"Life after disco."

Rip and George engaged in a dramatic pause.

As they paused, a skinny man wearing dingy plaid pants and a pastel tank top approached the dimension-hopping duo. "Get down!" funked the disco dancer. "I'm hip to your groove. Folks call me B.G. Summer and I'll be your guide here at The Last Disco. Get on the floor and shake it until you just can't shake it no more!"

"Do you speak English?" Rip wondered.

"Let's boogie, macho men!" B.G Summer swiveled his hips and shook his mane of greasy hair back and forth.

As Rip backhanded the hapless fool into a tall stack of *Saturday Night Fever* soundtracks, George approached the dancers in horror. His ears rang wildly as the sickening harmonies vibrated through his skull. "Why are they twitching like that? Are they in pain?"

"Apparently not. It appears that they do this as a form of recreation." The Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power scribbled notes into his computer-encoded notebook with an LED pen. "According to my studies, the disco generation congregated in darkened nightclubs, listened to hideous music, and then wobbled their limbs in contorted positions." Everyone screamed in unison as the opening drumbeats of "Disco Duck" played through the massive speakers.

Meanwhile, George started to twitch.

"You should be dancing! Yeah!" called B.G. He shook his booty suggestively in the direction of a stringy-haired girl wearing skin-tight blue jeans.

Rip scowled at the gyrating dancers. "I knew that hell was going to be bad, but I never imagined anything like this. I would prefer to be tearing around the surface of the planet Paradox."

George fell to the ground clutching his skull.

"There is one positive thing about being trapped in hell: I can't

be held responsible for the crimes against nature I committed on Paradox."

George let out a blood-curdling scream.

"Cute little planet, but they seem to put mountain ranges in all the wrong places." Rip rubbed his chin.

The wide-tied disco dancers formed a circle around the spasming George. He struggled to his feet as they boogied and howled, "My brains! They're turning to liquid!"

"What?"

"This music is melting my brain!" George spasmed.

"Good gravy! You need medical attention! Is there a doctor in the disco?"

A clean-cut gentleman stepped forward and slicked back his hair. "I'm not a doctor," he eagerly announced, "but I play one on TV."

Rip pulled out the Artifish and blew him to smithereens.

B.G. Summer flailed over to Rip's side and started rapping. "The docs in hell are easy to find. Get down. Look around. The sound of money is in the air. Feel the groove, baby."

Rip blew him to smithereens.

"That was mean!" remarked the disco dancers.

Rip blew them to smithereens.

Since no one else remained present to have their bodies blown to smithereens, Rip stroked the Artifish and zapped himself and George out of the Last Disco. As they appeared on the ground, Rip's eyes raced to find the Yugo. The engine of the poorly-designed Yugoslavian subcompact still puttered along, even though it had shaken itself into a mere metal skeleton.

"Next time I buy American," Rip muttered. Then he noticed an airy tune floating from the distance:

We're in the money
We're in the money
We've got a lot of what it takes to get along!

"B.G. Summer said something about the sound of money...." Rip looked to the horizon and was surprised to see a huge blue sign with a white H emblazoned upon it. Thinking quickly, the Marshal of the Time Stream crammed George into the remains of the Yugo, then slammed the acceleration pedal to the ground. The engine disintegrated.

"PERFECT!" Rip exploded, even though the situation was not perfect at all and saying the opposite of what you mean can be confusing to readers. Rip kicked the door off its hinges and stormed away from the Yugo, wishing that the author would get an education so he could more deeply understand the concept of irony. "Let's review my day so far: I'm dead, I'm trapped in hell, my only method of transport is the worst automobile ever manufactured, my sidekick's brains are liquefying, and to make matters worse, I'm

starting to develop a migraine!" Rip smashed his forehead into the windshield once, twice, a third time....

George's limp body was loaded onto a gurney in the emergency room as Rip spoke to the front desk receptionist.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Tapioca?" the receptionist asked in a sickeningly sweet voice.

"His brains are being forced into a liquid state," Rip explained.

"And the cause?"

"Disco music..." Rip's voice trailed off as he looked around the emergency room. "Hold on a second. How did I get to the hospital?"

"You were getting a little too intense for a book with a lighthearted tone," said the author. "I took the liberty of speeding things up."

"Okay," Rip nodded. "Thanks for the update."

"Excuse me," blurted the receptionist. "I'll need the patient's name."

"George."

"I need his full name."

"Certainly. It's George of the Gelatin-Brains."

"Doesn't he have a surname of any kind?"

"Heavens no. Gelatin-Brains are named in a random process using all five senses smushed together. You should be thrilled to learn that George's name can be pronounced by a human tongue."

"This will present a problem. Without a full name, we won't know where to send the bill."

"The bill?" Rip was shocked. "What about checking his medical history? Tracking his treatment?"

"Not important. We simply need to know where to send the bill."

Rip glared at the money-grubbing health care worker and turned to the gurney, which was no longer there, so in reality he didn't turn to the gurney at all, but rather the place where the gurney had been just a few moments earlier. Surely you get the point. "Where is George?" Rip demanded.

"He has been whisked away to the finest medical facilities in hell," said the receptionist. "And boy, is he going to pay for it."

"Terrific," said Rip, using the word in an ironic context because nothing in this particular predicament could be considered terrific. Rip darted down the hallway in search of his missing sidekick, reflecting that the author should have more faith in the readership's ability to comprehend irony.

Rip passed multiple doorways, peering through each window hoping to find evidence of a Gelatin-Brain. One room contained

dozens of men in white lab coats nimbly pressing buttons on adding machines. The men chortled in delight as they created ever-increasing numbers. Rip slammed the door open and confronted the clerks within. "I'm missing a Gelatin-Brain," he said.

One voice rang out from the back of the room. "Is this the Gelatin-Brain suffering from acute exposure to disco music?"

"The same."

"You'll find him in The Elizabeth Taylor Wing, Operating Room 666. This is the billing department." The clerk looked over his figures and chuckled. "He's running up quite a bill! You'd better get a move on."

Racing through the halls, Rip swiftly found the operating room and burst through the double doors with a tremendous clattering. He pulled out the Artifish and held it out in a threatening pose. "Suck fish, you medical mercenaries!" he bellowed.

Eight surgeons wearing scrubs looked up in wonder. "Can we help you?" one asked.

"I'd rather you didn't—that could get expensive. And I would ask you to withdraw your instruments from the immediate vicinity of my sidekick!"

The surgeons backed away from the operating table while murmuring about golf. Rip rushed forward and found George.

In a full body cast.

Covered with polka dots.

"What have you done to him?" Rip barked. "You were supposed to gel his liquified brains!"

"That procedure was done—and then in the process we discovered some other conditions and illnesses that needed correction."

"Like what?"

One of the surgeons referred to a clipboard. "Ooh...this one is a doozy. Belly button lint infection."

Rip's eyebrows jumped. "Lint isn't organic. How could an infection take hold?"

"That is a valid point," remarked another surgeon. "We didn't consider that when the disease was invented...."

"SHHHH!" the chorus of healers resounded.

The surgeon cleared his throat. "Rather, when the disease was discovered through medical trials."

George's muffled voice came from inside the colorful body cast. "Heeeeeeelp meeeeeee! Geeeeeeeeeet meeeeee out of heeeeeeeere!"

"One moment, George. I'm hunting for ducks."

"Duuuuuuuucks?" George wondered aloud.

"Quack quack," Rip said to the doctors. They shivered in

unison. "Malpractice insurance does not apply here in hell. You have three seconds to run for cover."

"Three?" a doctor attempted to clarify.

"Two," Rip updated.

"RUN!" the surgeons screamed.

"Fire!" The Artifish fired explosive discs at the scurrying surgeons. Many could be heard to scream "Medic!" as they scampered to safety.

Rip approached George as he shifted nervously in the plaster cast. "Why the polka dots?" Rip asked.

"This one was only double the cost of a plain old body cast, and I thought it made a better fashion statement."

"Weren't you moaning before?"

"I suppose I was."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps the author knows."

The author said, "Typing elongated words grew tiresome, alright?"

"We appreciate the clarification," Rip smiled.

"That's the last time," said the author. "From this moment on,

you're in charge of the plot."

"Understood," nodded Rip. "Back to the matter at hand: why did you need a body cast, George?"

"I forgot to ask."

"Typical," Rip shook his head. "In any case, we need to spring you out of that thing. Perhaps I can find a buzzsaw of some sort." He found a supply closet and dug into its contents.

"Not feeling confident about this plan," George whimpered. "A buzzsaw could tear me to ribbons."

"Those are the breaks," Rip shrugged, throwing a meat cleaver over his shoulder.

"There must be another way," said George. He felt around his prison of plaster.

Just then, Rip vaulted across the room with a roaring chainsaw, its teeth flickering in the bright hospital lights. "Hold still!" Rip ordered.

"WAIT!" shrieked George. The cast divided itself in two halves and fell apart with a zipping sound. George stepped out. "You see? It's one of those E-Z Open Body Casts they sell on TV."

"Oh well," Rip sighed as he tossed the chainsaw out of a nearby window. Screams reverberated on the street below. "Let's get out of here." They sneaked into the hallway and started to tiptoe to the

nearest exit.

"There they are!" A burly guy in scrubs pointed at the escaping duo. "Those punks are trying to get a freebie! *Get 'em!"* He led a small group of hairless apes in pursuit of the Marshal of the Time Stream and his Gelatin-Brain companion. The fleeing twosome blasted through the main exit and landed in the hospital's flower garden.[4]

"Whew!" breathed George, suddenly remembering why he chose the body cast with polka dots.

Right on cue, a voice bellowed from above. "PAYMENT IS DUE UPON RECEIPT OF BILL."

George suddenly forgot why he chose the body cast with polka dots.

The twosome looked skyward and saw a ribbon of paper darting from a window high above their heads. The ribbon appeared endless. More paper vomited from the window at supersonic speeds and covered the landscape within seconds. George located the tail end of the paper. "Rip! This is my hospital bill! I owe three hundred and twenty-four googolplex credits!"

"*How* much?" Rip did some quick calculating. "That's seven times all the money in the universe!"

[4] The garden was well-tended and the flowers were quite lovely. You don't expect to see such lovely flowers in hell.

"We're going to need a doozy of a loan."

Rip started inspecting the itemized costs on the bill. "Look at these charges! Sixty billion credits for a toenail clipping! Fifty billion credits per bedpan—and you had ten of them? Twenty-seven trillion for stubble buffing! And half a billion to get a bikini wax?"

"It was on sale," George shrugged.

The paper continued to spurt from the window. Having little interest in drowning in a literal sea of debt, Rip used the dwindling energies of the Timeboots to warp them both to a safer part of hell.

"Well done, Rip! Let's go play pinball." George started to wander off into the wasteland.

"Wait!" Rip ordered. "We can't run away forever, and it's entirely possible that we could be trapped here for that long. We need to develop a course of action."

"I remember when I was just a wee Gelatin-Brain," George reminisced, "and I went down to a foam boutique and shoplifted the most expensive foam in the whole place. The guy at the front counter saw me trying to smuggle it out in my nose and got really angry. He wanted to call the police, but before that could happen I asked if I could apologize to the owner for my misdeed. Once I did so, the owner was moved by my sincerity and released me without even a slap on the wrist."

Rip contemplated this tale. "I get your drift. We should locate the supreme ruler of hell and explain our situation. Then he will

release us from our eternal torture."

George shook his head. "No, that's not what I was saying. I was just thinking about how the market value of Sirius-7 foam has exploded in the past few years."

"Why did you choose this particular moment to deliver a monologue about pricey foam?"

"You're talking to the man who sprung for the polka-dot body cast."

"Point taken." Rip took note of his surroundings. "We need transportation of some kind."

Just them, a 1953 Buick Skylark crashed to the ground with a great commotion as it finished its near-infinite fall from God knows where. Or perhaps He doesn't.

"This'll do," Rip nodded, never missing a beat. He opened the driver's door and took a seat. The keys were in the ignition.

"Hold on," George said as he slid into the passenger seat. "This vehicle just plunged into a sand-strewn wasteland from the sky. You can't seriously expect it to start."

Rip turned the key and the Buick roared to life.

"Never mind." George's attention drifted and he meditated on the words gasoline and Vaseline® and how nicely they rhymed.

"Buicks are indestructible, my friend. We're on our way."

"On our way where?"

"Excellent question. As we are now in the middle of nowhere, I propose that we attempt to find the edge of nowhere."

"And where is that?"

"Uh...that way." Rip pointed to his right at a horizon of nothingness. With that, Rip punched the accelerator and sped across the desert.

Don't read this line. Hey! When I tell you not to read something, that means don't read it. I'm serious. *Stop reading!*



SEVERAL HOURS PASSED. Mile after mile after mile revealed nothing apart from scorched sand dunes. George had long since fallen asleep. Rip's boredom was edging suspiciously close to a coma.

"Eight hundred fifty-one million, two hundred two thousand, four hundred twelve bottles of beer on the wall...."

Unexpectedly, a jet of flame burst out of the desert floor right in the Buick's path. Rip slammed on the brakes to avoid this hellish peril and whimpered something about his mother. Additional flame geysers popped from the sand until the Buick was completely

surrounded by a ring of fire. At that point, remarkably, the heat fused the sand on the perimeter into glass and the interior particles began rushing down as if through an hourglass.

"So are the days of our lives," said Rip, taking a motion sickness pill. The Buick was consumed by the shifting sands and fell deeper into the sinkhole.

Abruptly, George awoke. "Golly gee! I just had the strangest dream that we were driving through hell and then became trapped in an enormous hourglass. We fell to the bottom and then encountered a terrifying monster who tortured us using cruel and inhuman methods."

"Intriguing," Rip said. "But keep in mind that dreams have been proven to be meaningless, contradicting the work of Freud."

George spied out the window. "Why is it so dark out there?"

"We were driving through hell and then became trapped in an enormous hourglass. Right now we're falling to the bottom."

"Oh."

The Buick punched through the sand into blank space. Three seconds later, the hefty automobile crashed violently on a hard surface, considerably jarring Rip and George. As soon as they had re-inserted their teeth, the traveling twosome left the car.

"Look at that!" George gasped. "The Buick left a twenty-foot crater when it landed!"

"Yes," smiled Rip, "and the tires are still fully inflated."

George got his bearings. "In my dream we met a two-headed monster who tortured us. Do you think that will happen too?"

Rip surveyed the room they had so abruptly entered. The hole in the ceiling had sealed itself, and the sand had magically disappeared. Their surroundings greatly resembled a set for a music video. "That is a possibility," said Rip. "All we can do is wait and accept our fate."

"We could run away," George offered.

"That idea has its merits."

Just then, a male figure spun from thin air into solidity: a slender black man with rounded eyes and somewhat feminine features wearing garments of black studded leather that seemed incongruous on his decidedly wimpy physique. Strangely, his long black hair was blazing with orange fire without any evidence of pain. As Rip looked closely, he saw that the flame was eternal and did not consume what it burned. When he looked *more* closely, he recognized the figure:

"MICHAEL JACKSON?!!"

The lithe fellow wriggled his limbs and spoke: "Ma ma se, ma ma sa, ma ma coo sa!"

"What?" Rip asked.

"Ma ma se, ma ma sa, ma ma coo sa!" Michael Jackson did a little

spin and posed. "Shamone!"

"Thanks for the clarification," Rip weakly grinned.

"Who is this guy?" George asked.

"Mr. Jackson is an R&B and pop singer from the late twentieth century. He became a superstar as a child, and in his early adulthood he recorded the best-selling record album in Earth's history."

As Michael Jackson did another spin, his features twisted and shifted. He became a white man with a fashionably unshaven face and cool sunglasses, and he wore a tight pair of jeans. The transformed figure danced around the room shaking his butt while strumming a guitar.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Rip said. "Now he appears to be George Michael, former lead singer of pop duo Wham! and solo superstar. Are you familiar with George, George?

"Which George?" said George.

"You, George," said Rip.

"*Me* George?" said George.

"Yes, George," said Rip.

"Um...could you repeat the question?"

"Hoo-ah! SEX! Hoo-ah! SEX! C-C-C-C-C-C-COME ON!" George Michael rapped, oblivious to the world outside his

sunglasses.

"Mr. Michael's presence in hell is justified," Rip commented. "His composition 'I Want Your Sex' opened the door for the broadcast of sexually explicit songs on mainstream radio. Yet I don't understand why Mr. Jackson is here. Based on what we know about his imperial period on 1980s Earth, Mr. Jackson is approximately as evil as a pair of bunny slippers." The figure swirled back to the countenance of Michael Jackson and continued dancing.

"Excuse me," Rip interrupted. "I find your duality fascinating. How is it that you are both George Michael and Michael Jackson? What is your proper name?"

Because I'm bad, I'm bad, shamone!
You know I'm bad, I'm bad, you know it, you know!

"'Bad?' Is that your name?" Rip's eyebrow knitted. The figure shifted back to the form with facial hair.

Because I gotta have faith
I gotta have faith-a-faith-a-faith!

"Bad? Faith? Which is it?" Rip jabbered.

The mysterious figure shifted back and forth as it revealed the answer: "You can call me BadFaith!" Then he stopped in mid-transformation and stood before the flabbergasted duo as half-George Michael and half-Michael Jackson.

"Well, this has been fun," George interjected. "We have to go.

Let's have lunch sometime. Bye-bye!"

BadFaith yelped in Michael Jackson's voice, and with an ear-splitting roar the exits were all sealed off by tons of solid rock.

"Or we could stay a bit longer."

"Why did you bring us here?" Rip challenged. "Do you know who we are? Are you aware of our perilous journey through hell? Is this some kind of ego trip? Are you doing this just for kicks?"

"Yes," said BadFaith.

"Somehow I knew you'd say that." The room shimmered and all three figures faded away.

Rip found himself strikingly aware of his unattached earlobes. His mind was consumed with thoughts of the fleshless space between his earlobe and face. He silently cursed his parents for failing to pass on the genetic material that would have assured him of this characteristic. Ultimately accepting that the majority of humankind shared his state of earlobe, his mind was put at ease. When Rip noticed that he was now hanging upside down, strapped to a crucifix, he disregarded his earlobes for a moment.

The Marshal of the Time Stream craned his neck and saw BadFaith standing before him, now in the guise of George Michael. His tight jeans clung lovingly to him. "My other half and your short friend have been sent elsewhere," he said. "Welcome to my lair."

Rip struggled to concentrate, as blood was rushing to his head. "I possess this bizarre tendency to learn why I'm being tortured when

the situation presents itself. Could you oblige me?"

"Why would I do that?" BadFaith barked in George Michael's accent.

"Because I think you have cool facial hair," Rip fibbed.

"I stimulate my follicles," said BadFaith, making Rip grimace, and then he continued: "My celebrity status has made it impossible to live a normal life. Every breath I take, every move I make, someone is watching me."

"Be careful," Rip warned him, "Sting may sue you for copyright infringement."

"Upon your arrival in hell, I sensed the presence of an Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power. Media parasites like you are responsible for the senseless deification of celebrities. It's unnatural! Can you imagine how it feels to have millions of teenage girls screaming for your body?"

"No," said Rip, "but I'm willing to learn."

Meanwhile, George of the Gelatin-Brains was having a significantly less agreeable conversation. "Yeeeeeee-aaaaaarrrgh!" he chatted, dodging fireballs from the Michael Jackson half of BadFaith.

"Your butt is mine...." crooned BadFaith. He shook his head to the beat and more flames were launched from his blazing hair.

George attempted to change the subject: "How do you feel about

Daylight Savings Time?"

BadFaith moonwalked up a dust storm and surprised George with a forceful face full of fire.

George coughed up a lungful of brimstone. "You don't actually want to kill me, do you? I died earlier today and it didn't agree with me. Maybe you could think of something else to do."

"Who's bad?" BadFaith gasped, and then he did a dramatic spin.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" George exploded.

Abruptly, hell was shrouded in silence. All noise had been eliminated. George did a cliché check and dropped a pin to see if he could hear it.

Plink!

"I like a dimension that follows instructions," George remarked.

At the same time, the upside-down Rip Tapioca was trying to wiggle out of his imminent execution. "BadFaith my boy, I have the most overwhelming affection for that hairstyle of yours. I'll bet that I would like it even better if I were right side up."

"I think not." BadFaith considered ways to make denim tighter.

"Pretty please?" Rip whined. "All the blood in my body is rushing to my head. It won't be long before it pops like an overripe melon."

"Really?" BadFaith raised an eyebrow. "That sounds painful."

"I suppose it would be—but that's beside the point. I was hoping that you could devise a more pleasant form of torture."

"A more pleasant form of torture."

"Yes, please."

"This is no fun," BadFaith tantrumed. "You're already hallucinating!" He thrusted his pelvis and the crucifix became horizontal, relieving the pressure on Rip's skull. "Back to business, Mr. Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power: you will be the focus of all the pain that I have desperately wanted to inflict on those teenage girls."

Rip nervously objected, "If you really don't want them, I'm happy to take them off your hands."

"I am never allowed to be violent back on Earth. This will be a particular pleasure," Badfaith giggled, pulling a large corkscrew from nowhere.

"Could this guy be any more Freudian?" Rip wondered.

The other half of BadFaith stood timidly before George of the Gelatin-Brains, knees facing each other. His hair burned cautiously.

"Listen," George preached, "there's no reason for you to act out your aggressions by burning me alive."

"I just want people to leave me alone," BadFaith said in his

surprisingly high-pitched voice.

"This is not the best way to remain inconspicuous. Surely there are more constructive things you can do with all this energy."

"Yes," thought BadFaith. "I could get more plastic surgery."

"That's the spirit!" smiled George, not entirely certain what spirit he was referring to.

"I'll take a nap in my oxygen tent and think about an ear-tuck."

"Ever try a facelift? What fun!"

"Yes, I've had a few. Six or seven."

"Good, good." George looked around uncomfortably. "Would you mind if I stepped away? I think I left the water running at home."

BadFaith tossed his head forward and three huge balls of flame blasted from his head into a far wall. When the smoke cleared, three brightly colored doors came into view. "Take your pick—door number one, two, or three!"

"See you later!"

"Make that change!"

"Whatever." George picked door number two and ran for his life. Which is funny, because his life wasn't going anywhere.

Slightly before meanwhile, the other BadFaith was lustfully

fingering his corkscrew.

"Get a hold of yourself, Mr. Michael. Don't rend my flesh. Rending my flesh is excruciatingly boring."

"Stop sniveling! This is all part of the plan. As we speak, my flipside is literally roasting your moronic sidekick. Several years ago the two of us made a pact that I would torture the next Investigative Reporter to the Fifth Power to be trapped in hell, while he would be responsible for the sidekick."

"Quite an obscure agreement," said Rip.

"True, and yet we got quick results, didn't we?"

"Indeed. Now what's this talk about a flipside? Are you referring to Michael Jackson?"

"Yes, the being you know as Michael Jackson is my flipside. Some have known us as George Michael Jackson. We prefer BadFaith. I am white, sing in an R&B style, and tend to wallow in my own masculinity." BadFaith ran his palm across his stubbly face. "My flipside is black, performs in a sanitized pop style, and seems to look more androgynous every day. I play the role of a 'bad boy' and sing songs about faith. He's a 'good boy' and sings about how bad he is. We are opposites—polar opposites—and since opposites attract, we have been merged into the same being."

"Amazing," gasped Rip. "You didn't mention sex one time in that whole hunk of exposition."

"Enough with these delays! The time has come to skewer you."

"Wait!" Rip yelped. "If you used my own weapon to murder me, wouldn't the irony be delicious?"

BadFaith considered the notion. "Yes, I suppose it would."

"The plastic fish in my shirt pocket is a portable control center and weapon system."

BadFaith lifted the Artifish from Rip's pocket and examined it. "How does this device work?"

"Each scale has a particular function. When you press the appropriate scales in the proper sequence, you can perform almost any task. What was it you needed to accomplish?"

"Annihilation."

"Yes, that's right! Simply hold the fish so its head points to yours."

"Okay." BadFaith positioned the Artifish.

"How do you want to kill me? Vaporization? Teleportation into deep space? Heavy gravity that forces my eyeballs out of my skull?"

"I was planning to blow you to bits."

"Excellent choice! Just press the green-and-gold-speckled scale just below the left fin."

"This one?"

"Exactly. You may fire when ready."

BadFaith punched the scale and a beam of high-intensity laser light erupted from the eyeball of the Artifish squarely into BadFaith's face. Rip took the opportunity to free himself from the crucifix. He jumped to his feet, stole the smoking Artifish from BadFaith's grasp and was nearly out the door when he heard his attacker laughing.

"Splendid! This is smashing!" BadFaith gazed brightly at Rip. Most of his face was horribly scorched, a great deal of bone was revealed, and his nose had been blown clean off his face. "The teenage girls will hate this! The next time I appear on MTV, they will puke their guts out!"

At this moment, Rip puzzled whether Hitler and Gandhi would have played ping-pong together given the opportunity. "I'm glad you like it," he commented.

"You're a good lad." BadFaith brushed some charred flesh from his blackened cheek. "You may go in peace. I put your Buick Skylark at the end of that roadway paved with yellow bricks." He pointed to a glittering path leading to the horizon.

"So I suppose you want me to..."

"Follow the yellow brick road, yes."

"These corny clichés are getting out of hand," Rip thought as he started his trek. He skipped away merrily, keeping his eyes peeled for

lions and tigers and bears. And you never know when you might run into a tin woodman or a talking scarecrow.



DOOR NUMBER TWO opened into a dazzling white room. George cautiously poked his head through the doorway, wondering whether these new surroundings could be any more perilous than his experience with BadFaith. His gelatin brain could not imagine such things (his gelatin brain had trouble imagining anything with more than two syllables) so he bounded into the room and slammed the door shut, causing the door to fade from view.

"Next!" George waited for the latest hellspawn demon to make his life more difficult. He wouldn't need to wait long.

The white room was composed of marble walls and pillars, all glowing with bleached brightness. George saw white-framed paintings depicting various tones of white. Silk sheets were strategically draped around the room, and in one far corner, a young man in a toga lay on a pile of sparkling pillows.

"Am I still in hell?" George asked.

"Of course." The blonde fellow on the pillows spoke in an insistent voice.

"Are you going to make me listen to Michael Jackson music?"

"I'm more partial to Oingo Boingo."

"What the heck is an Oingo Boingo?"

"There's no need to say *heck*, stupid. The title of this book includes the word *hell*. There's no need to hold back."

"It sounds like you've been talking to the author," George mused.

"Quite often," the young man said. "My name is Ben I. Jokes."

"Ben I. Jokes? That's almost as bad as Rip Tapioca."

"My name is unimportant," said Jokes, obviously a preface to a long and boring speech during which the reader may feel free to take a lunch break. "I am an alien sex god."

"Be serious," said George, rolling his eyes. Since the expository speech wasn't anywhere near as long as we thought it would be, all readers should return from lunch immediately. "You are no sex god. And you don't look like an alien either."

"FINE!" Jokes raged. "I am not an alien sex god, but I am a divine presence. I am the god of...."

"Of what?" George was either extremely impatient or giving birth to a piano.

"Of weird shit." Jokes gestured to his many devices. "This is my VCR, which allows me to share cult television programs and films

with my captives. Have you seen *The Young Ones*?"

"No...."

"This is my CD player, which can reproduce and amplify music by edgy underground rock bands. Today you will be exposed to a few selections from my new favorite band: Hanging the Pope Upside Down." Jokes pressed the play button and the music started. It was a mixture of bouncy pop rhythms and the sound of an angry cat being tickled with a banana.

George perked his ears. "This is completely irredeemable and unpleasant. It's garbage."

"I know that. But it's weird shit, isn't it?"

"Yup." George rocked on his heels. "Can I go now?"

"You just got here!"

"I'm in a hell of a hurry. I need to find the supreme leader of hell so I can get the hell out of hell."

"Watch your tongue," said the author, "you may exceed our prearranged allotment of hells."

"The ruler of hell is Satan," Jokes said, disregarding the author.

"Good to know," said George. "Which way to his lair?"

"How do you know that I'm not Satan? Perhaps Ben I. Jokes is a false name. The devil is the lord of lies, you know."

"No, I think you have proven yourself to be the god of weird shit. See you around." George spotted another door and moved toward it.

"Wait! We need to listen to some more CDs and watch *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Some of those sketches are so weird they don't even make sense!"

"I really have to go...."

"Let me tell you about a comedian I saw on HBO last night!"

"I'm leaving now."

"But no, it's so funny!" Jokes yelped.

George sighed. "You seem like a nice guy, Jokes, but my plate is full. I need to track down my boss, find the devil, and get back to the dimension where I belong. You'll need to show your weird shit to somebody else."

Jokes looked like his head might explode any minute. "Whatever. I don't care." He started pacing, then brightened. He crossed the room, opened a porcelain pot and grabbed a handful of powder. He flung a fistful of silver dust into George's face and watched it burst into flame. "Take that!" he yelled.

"See you later," George waved. His eyebrows smoldered.

"I lit your face on fire! Do something! React!" Jokes thundered.

"I have already been on fire today; probably ten times or more.

This is nothing new." George briefly explored the mysteries of the doorknob and left the room.

Ben I. Jokes settled back into his nest of pillows. "Ha! That idiot fell for the old 'exploding love potion' trick. Little does he know that he will fall desperately in love with the next female he encounters! The poor ignorant fool has no idea that in addition to being the god of weird shit, I am, in fact, a minor sex deity!" Jokes popped a grape into his mouth and pressed play on a CD by They Might Be Giants. Life is good when you're a sex god.

But it's better when you're the Marshal of the Time Stream.[5]

Rip had been following the yellow brick road for quite a distance and was unable to find the Buick. He started to become discouraged. "Surely BadFaith wouldn't send me on a wild goose chase," thought Rip. "After all, I blew his face apart. Whatever could he have against me? Certainly he wouldn't act in bad faith...?" Arriving at the top of a hill, he spotted the end of the yellow brick road: a yellow brick cul-de-sac. His eyes raced around for another option. "A-ha! The yellow brick sewer system!"

Rip used the Artifish to levitate the yellow brick manhole cover out of the yellow brick road and checked for the Buick. It was nowhere to be seen, but a rumbling noise could be heard behind the yellow brick walls. Hoping to find the Buick, Rip disintegrated the wall with the Artifish.

"A yellow brick subway?!" Rip gasped. A yellow brick train

[5] The author is particularly proud of this segue. Applause is appreciated.

rumbled by. Tiring of this joke, Rip climbed the ladder to ground level. "Dorothy never mentioned that this thing was so elaborate."

Down the yellow brick road...oh, forget it.

Down the road Rip saw a golden truck pull up to the curb. Three burly workmen jumped out of the truck and opened the rear doors. One slid out a yellow brick stop sign while the other two started digging a hole to install it.

"Guys?" Rip called.

"What?" a workman answered, getting a shovel from the truck.

"The joke's over, fellows. It's not funny anymore."

"Whoops!" they yelped. "Let's get out of here."

"Incidentally," Rip wondered, "have you seen a Buick around here?"

"Just that one," a workman remarked, thumbing upwards.

"Up there?" Rip looked to the skies and had a Wile E. Coyote moment. He swiftly sidestepped to his right to avoid the crashing Buick. Rip gave a nod of thanks to the departing road crew, who puttered away in search of a city where they could plant their emerald stop sign.

The Buick began shifting its mass with a loud metallic crunch. Blue energy crackled through its form. Rip strode over to the indestructible vehicle and eagerly grabbed the door handle. He was

shocked to feel the electric current tear through his nervous system.[6] He was hurled backwards, and as he recovered he saw that the car was in the process of reforming itself into the shape of another automobile. The vintage Buick became a black Lincoln with red trim and a symbol on each door showing the dark silhouette of a bat.

The two car doors opened simultaneously and a pair of colorful figures leaped out. The older of the two wore a caped costume in two shades of blue with a yellow-and-back bat symbol on his chest, while the younger one was donned in a yellow cape and red vest with green bikini shorts for flair. Both wore masks and carried fully stocked utility belts.

"I'm Batman," announced the taller man in a campy voice.

"And I'm Robin, the Boy Wonder!" said the other one.

"You are nothing of the sort," Rip boldly informed the dynamic duo. "I happen to know that you are, in truth, actors named Adam West and Burt Ward who portrayed those characters on television."

"Holy secret identities!" cried Burt. "He's found us out!"

"Hold on, Robin." Adam slowed down his voice to appear thoughtful, but only succeeded in sounding more corny than usual. "It is an undeniable fact that we are actors. However, we are definitely Batman and Robin."

"Poppycock." Rip moved closer to the luxury automobile

[6] Sometimes you need to go for the most obvious joke.

decorated with the bat-emblem. "Bob Kane and Bill Finger, the creators of Batman, introduced the character of Batman as a grim crimefighter obsessed with justice. Similarly, Robin should be a level-headed youngster trained in the art of combat, inspired by the violent murder of his parents."

"Holy history lesson!" blurted Burt, clenching his teeth. "All of that is true!"

"I have screened the television program called *Batman* first aired on Earth in 1966. Despite the obvious superficial similarities between your costumes and the characters in question, I know for a fact that you are not Batman and Robin."

"Holy halitosis!" spurted Burt. "Right again!"

"Not so fast," said Adam. "Batman and Robin are fictional characters that do not truly exist. Our interpretation of these characters remains as valid as any other."

"Batman and Robin do exist."

"That's impossible. They are comic book characters invented by writers and artists."

"Reality has many levels," smiled the Marshal of the Time Stream. He slyly pulled out the Artifish and strummed it intricately. "You haven't been looking in the right places."

"Where should we look?"

"Behind you."

Turning, Adam and Burt found themselves standing before two muscular duplicates with intense expressions. They stood silently and glared.

"How badly should we hurt these impostors?" the real Robin queried.

"Keep them out of the hospital," answered the real Batman.

"Run away!" Adam reacted, grabbing his cape and fleeing at top speed.

Rip took a seat on the hood of the automobile he recognized to be the Batmobile. He placed the technological miracle known as the Artifish back in its holster and grabbed a bucket of popcorn from a convenient pocket dimension. Comfortable and amused, he settled back to watch the battle.

Burt shielded himself with his arms and sobbed like a baby as a gloved fist pounded his skull. Robin hit Burt with a resounding smack and a two-dimensional word balloon popped out of his body, marked neatly with the word SMACK!

"What the...?" said Burt. He picked up the word balloon and hurled it at Robin's midsection like a Frisbee.

Robin dodged it with ease and flipped to a stance directly in front of Burt. He grabbed Burt's shirt with angry fists. "Tell me where you came up with that 'Holy halitosis!' nonsense. Those

words never escaped my lips."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Burt groveled. "I won't do it again."

"The damage is done!" Robin raged, beating Burt about the head. Word balloons galore emerged from Burt's body: BONK! WHAM! POW! WHACK! ZOWIE! and OUCH! all scrawled in colorful letters on two-dimensional planes. "What do you make of these tangible sound effects, Batman?"

It appeared that Batman did not hear Robin's question, as he was in the process of burying Adam in a pile of KRUNCH! word balloons. He scowled intensely as he spoke, just above a whisper: "I don't tell jokes."

"I'm only an actor! I didn't write the scripts!" Adam shrieked.

"You participated in the crime," rebutted Batman. "Justice will be served."

Rip was having a devil[7] of a time watching the epic battle, and then noticed that his watch had stopped. This meant one of two things: either the dimension of hell had exercised its influence on the objective reality of a timekeeping device, or Rip had forgotten to change the battery. In any case, he remembered that he still needed to find hell's ruler and escape. He slid into the Batmobile and revved up the motor. "I hope your disfigurement doesn't negatively affect your careers!" Rip called as he sped closer to the

[7] This is an example of foreshadowing. Take note.

edge of hell.

As the reality-warping Artifish grew distant, the real dynamic duo disappeared into their comic-book world. The word balloons vaporized. Adam grew joyful at his still-intact jawbone.

Burt rushed to his side. "What now? How long will we be exiled in hell?"

"That new film about Batman will be released soon. Remember the arrangement? Jack Nicholson came to see us at the tractor pull in Boise and said that we were detrimental to the Batman legend. He promised to rescue us from this dimension when the movie has run its course," Adam grimly grimaced.

"I noticed something peculiar about Mr. Nicholson in Boise. His voice echoed oddly."

"True," Adam grimaced grimly. "And he didn't look like the Joker. He greatly resembled his character from *The Witches of Eastwick*."

Adam and Burt were later murdered by a youth gang from the wrong side of hell, a gang brutally opposed to puns.



GEORGE OF THE GELATIN-BRAINS, wandering expert, had left Ben I. Jokes far behind. Although he had covered a great distance, he was no closer to finding Rip than he was to discovering

the Fountain of Youth.

"Hey!" jabbered George. "It's the Fountain of Youth!"

You may disregard that last comparison.

"Neat!" George was very impressed by the crystal fountain. (George was also impressed by the number two, but that's beside the point.) Water spurted from the mouths of gargoyles and trickled with a wonderful gurgle. "Spiffy!"

The atmosphere turned to pitch. A dark-robed woman blew soundlessly into George's sight from nowhere, and yet everywhere. Her face was shrouded in deep shadow. The water in the fountain froze solid as a bitter cold breeze emerged from nothingness.

"Hey, this ain't the Glacier of Youth! What's the big idea...?" George looked into her eyes. More accurately, he looked into her eye sockets.

As she slowly drifted to the surface, the head of the mysterious woman could now be seen as an ancient, dusty skull lacking any flesh. George's chin dropped to his chest as his pulse raced with ardour.

She gazed blankly in his general direction.

George began to croon as Ben I. Jokes' love potion took full effect. "Oh my love, I hunger for your touch. You are the sunshine of my life. I can't fight this feeling anymore."

She gazed blankly in his general direction.

"I've been waiting for a girl like you to come into my life. I come to you with open arms."

She gazed blankly in his general direction.

"I feel dizzy; my head is spinning. Like a whirlpool, it never ends." George moved closer to the mysterious woman, microwaving her with his eyes. She was still and quiet with hands folded. Perhaps she was looking at George, perhaps not. Said a different way...

She gazed blankly in his general direction.

"I write the songs that make the whole world sing! I write the songs of love and special things!"

"Hey!" George said. "What the heck is Barry Manilow doing here?"

"Singing the songs that make the whole world sing!" informed Barry, dramatically posing with a big smile for a nonexistent audience. The dark-robed woman took immediate notice of Barry's arrival. Minaciously,[8] she pulled off her hood to reveal a bare white skull. Her jawbone moved, releasing the chilling words: "I AM DEATH."

The flesh boiled from Barry's bones as he fell to the ground, gruesomely steaming. As he evaporated, George could hear him mumble "My hair!" and then Barry was gone.

[8] Look it up.



George and Death (illustration by Timothy Sparvero)

"Why did you do that, sweetheart?" asked a loving Gelatin-Brain.

"I AM DEATH."

"Sure you are. But why did you do that?"

"I AM DEATH."

"You mentioned that already, love-muffin. But I'm still curious: why did you eradicate Barry Manilow?"

Death turned to the inquisitive Gelatin-Brain. "MANILOW IS EXCRUCIATING," she said.

"I'll buy that. You know, honey, I've never seen a skull quite as lovely as yours. Your bones positively shimmer. Do you have them buffed?"

"ABANDON ME NOW."

"I'm never gonna let you go. Gonna hold you in my arms forever."

"DAMN LOVE POTIONS." Death grew even more intense as she grew to know the reason for George's artificial affection.

"To think that I was searching for Satan so he would release me and my mentor from hell. One wrong turn and I never would have met you, my little..." George dug deep to create a pet name worthy of the object of his affection, and settled on this: "Skullcake."

Students of etiquette groaned in displeasure as yet another gooey romantic nickname emerged into the English language. They took comfort in the knowledge that this one would have limited utility.

"YOU SEEK SATAN." Death's unfocused gaze grew less unfocused.

"Maybe once, but no longer, my little chickadee. If I found Satan now, he might make Rip and me go home. And I won't lose the love that—"

"WE MUST DEPART."

"What's the hurry, skullcake? Why don't we go out for dinner first? Do you like French food as much as I do? French fries, French toast, French dressing...."

They faded into darkness. The Fountain of Youth melted. The scene changed.



RIP TAPIOCA, MARSHAL OF THE TIME STREAM, navigated the Batmobile around the hellscape as he punched buttons on the radio dial. "The Batman theme song is playing on every channel. How can that be?"

"Batman!" sang the Batband.

"I'd rather listen to disco! This is repetitive drivel! This theme song only has one word!"

"Batman!" the Batband continued.

Rip thought more deeply about disco. "Upon further consideration, this theme has greater sociological significance than 'Boogie Shoes.'"

"Batman! Batman! Batman!" jammed the Batband.

"In descending order of preference, the mating call of a wildebeest, the theme to Batman, and then disco."

"Na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na—Batman!" With that vocal flourish, the theme ended.

"Another challenge mastered!" cheered Rip. "Poor musical options aside, this is a stellar vehicle," he remarked. "I wonder what they used as a base model before it was customized."

The clouds parted and a highly resonant voice arose. "That's right, Pat. A high performance engine and aerodynamic curves make this customized luxury automobile a pleasure to drive on the highway or in the city."

Rip blinked. "It can't be...."

The voice continued, "Look at these glamorous prizes, just waiting to be won, here on...."

"No!" Rip screamed, losing his composure. "It's impossible!"

"....WHEEL OF FORTUNE!"

There comes a time in every story when meanwhile must be said. This is such a time.



GEORGE was rematerializing for the seventy-third time in less than a week. He wondered if a frequent flyer plan might be available.

In a corner of this room, George saw a bearded man sitting quietly and studying a thick hardback book. The man's hair was long and brown and he seemed as serene as a squirrel fails to be serene. George had a flicker of recognition. "Are...are you Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Not far off. I'm John Lennon."

George scratched his temple. "What is the man who wrote 'All You Need Is Love' doing in hell? Seems like you would have made it to the other place."

"Serves me right for telling everyone to imagine that it doesn't exist," the Beatle rebuked. He set the hardback book aside as he stood to converse with George.

"What are you reading?" George asked. He was fascinated with books, especially the works published on Shenab Carti Sharshutu-4 embedded with sensory transmitters on every page that allow readers to share neural responses with the characters in the narrative as printed on the pages. Needless to say, romance novels sell like hotcakes on Shenab Carti Sharshutu-4 and war novels are quite rare.

"*Elvis* by Albert Goldman," answered John, tapping his toe in disgust. He didn't care one whit about literature on Shenab Carti Sharshutu-4 and was consumed with resentment that the author expected him to wait through that whole mess of worthless exposition before he could answer a simple question.

"Oh," nodded George, hoping there would not be an

unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentence following his one-syllable comment for the first time in multiple paragraphs.

"Have you read this book?" John asked, knowing that George's hope was completely unrealistic, as the author was completely out of control and refused to further the plot with these unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentences.

"I can't say that I have. Is it a good book?"

"I consider it to be the literary equivalent of Spam® luncheon meat." John was shocked at the absence of an unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentence after George's question. He wondered if the author had come to his senses but then remembered that a character can only have such a thought in the context of an unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentence. He pursed his lips with annoyance.

"So it's a classic!" Unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentences are the cornerstone of fiction writing. William Shakespeare and Ernest Hemingway spoke endlessly about their virtue in unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentences.

"You're a Gelatin-Brain, aren't you?" John in-joked. Everyone agrees that unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentences are essential to literature as well as the evolution of the human species; indeed, if not for unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentences, the polio vaccine would have never been discovered and dinosaurs would still walk the Earth.

"I'm a proud Gelatin-Brain. I have also activated a device in my back pocket that prevents authors from writing unnecessarily

lengthy descriptive sentences."

"Is it working?"

"It appears so. We can talk freely now. Why are you reading this Albert Goldman book if it's Spam®?"

"Personal interest. You see, my life was the subject of a book titled *The Lives of John Lennon* by the same author and I was curious to learn if dead rock stars are all treated with dishonesty and disrespect."

"It's certainly brave of Mr. Goldman to make up stories about people who can't defend themselves," said George.

"Stop reading from my cue cards!" John snapped.

"Whoops."

"To be frank, casual reading is not why I came to hell today. I'm on the hunt for a hellspawn who has taken steps to destroy my earthly legacy. I must extinguish his mad scheme before it's too late."

"Maybe I've seen him. Tell me what he looks like—I've been in hell for most of the day."

"He is an effeminate bloke with a professionally sculptured face. This little twit was born with dark skin but grows more pale by the day. And his most distinctive feature is his hair, which blazes brightly but does not burn."

"Holy shinguards!" exclaimed George, conforming to censors and soccer players. "I know that man. It can only be...."

This is the spot where George engages in a dramatic pause to keep the entity's identity hidden for as long as possible. (This unnecessarily lengthy descriptive sentence is allowed because it builds suspense.) Soon the dramatic pause ended.

"...BadFaith!" But we already knew that, didn't we?

"I'm so pleased!" said John, lighting a cigarette. "Do you know where he is?"

"I've been transported through multiple occult portals since the last time I saw him. I have been to the other side of hell and back. It could take days to find him again. Weeks! Years!"

"Ma ma se, ma ma sa, ma ma coo sa!" blurted a skinny man in leather as he stepped through an interdimensional portal.

"Or not."

"So!" John tensed. "You're the foul creature who purchased my soul."

"Oh!" George rhymed. "You bought the Beatles songs when they were sold!"

"No!" BadFaith continued. "Don't accuse me of dishonorable goals!"

"This is starting to sound like a musical," said George, shaking

the gelatin in his head.

John moved toward the shivering BadFaith. "You will rue the day you allowed Nike to use my composition in a television commercial. 'Revolution' was written to inspire political action across human society, not to help Nike sell sneakers." He removed a sawed-off shotgun from within his angelic robes and slowly took aim.

"It was a practical joke!" BadFaith whimpered. "Your old partner Paul McCartney wanted to buy the old Beatles songs, but I outbid him on a lark! It was a joke—I swear!"

"Don't lie to me. You're a being of pure evil and I will not allow you to exist any longer."

"But I'm bad...I'm bad...really, really bad." BadFaith was grasping at straws.

"You're dead...you're dead...really, really dead." The mystical slugs were launched at an incredible velocity and tore through BadFaith's body in an instant. The magically charged projectiles dispersed all the demonic energy within BadFaith's form and he fell to the ground with an awful thud.

"Justice is served," John breathed.

Slowly, strangely, BadFaith's body melted from the form of Michael Jackson to the shape of George Michael. Facial hair spurted from his lip and his leather morphed into denim.

"What's all this, then?" John asked.

"BadFaith is an amalgam of George Michael and Michael Jackson."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. You just saw him change, didn't you?"

"I mean, are you sure that you're using 'amalgam' properly?"

"Reasonably sure...."

Just then, BadFaith went through an additional metamorphosis: the masculine face of George Michael became feminine once more, caked with kabuki-style make-up and lipstick. His hair now consisted of dozens of braids with ribbons, and a black fedora was perched upon his head. He wore colorful flowing robes.

"Boy George of Culture Club!" said John, who had apparently been keeping up with pop culture since his demise.

"There are entirely too many Georges in this book," the most prevalent George sighed. "It appears that this weirdo was actually Boy George Michael Jackson. What a mouthful." Just then, George remembered what he was doing multiple meanwhiles prior. "Have you seen the physical embodiment of death around here? She and I are on a date."

"Is that her?" asked the Beatle, pointing behind George.

Death gazed blankly in their general direction. "WE MUST DEPART."

"What's with the detour, skullcake? I thought we were going to see the devil."

"ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE."

"Are we going directly to the devil's lair this time? If we have some extra time, maybe we could sneak off for two minutes in the closet...."

"PLEASE SHUT UP," she said. If Death had eyeballs, she surely would have rolled them. As Death's bony hand moved over George's head, their two forms were whisked away.

"Goo goo g'joob!" waved John.

Everyone knows the scene is going to change now, so I won't even bother writing a segue. Unless I just did.



RIP APPEARED with his hands over his ears on the stage of a large television studio. On his right, three humans stood on the edge of a large multicolored wheel divided into triangles indicating various sums of money. On his left, a wall resembling a crossword puzzle with mirrored squares glittered in the bright lights. At that moment, the public address system flooded the studio audience. Dozens of overzealous voices chanted:

"WHEEL! OF! FORTUNE!"

Then a bouncy beat erupted from the speakers with the ubiquitous theme song to the world's most popular game show.

"Look at this studio," revved a resonant voice, "filled with glamorous prizes. An all-inclusive vacation to glamorous Detroit! A replica of the classic Batmobile! A year's supply of vanilla ice cream! A time-traveler wearing highly advanced galoshes!"

Rip flinched and hurried off the stage.

"All these magnificent prizes, just waiting to be won here on *Wheel of Fortune*. Now here's our host...Pat Sajak!"

The audience vigorously applauded as a clean-cut man with a squirrel-like face ambled to the podium, politely greeted his guests, and introduced them to the audience. Rip took note of Vanna White, surprisingly spry for someone who should be quite dead, standing ready at the puzzle wall. He wondered how he had been transported from hell to a Burbank studio without feeling any inter-dimensional jet lag. His eyebrows curled with suspicion.

"...and once you buy a prize, it's yours to keep," said Pat, winding down his introductions. "Okay, our first puzzle is a question." Cheerful tones rang out as the audience focused on the mirrored wall. "It's your spin, John."

A bespectacled young man with hair not entirely unlike pipe cleaners reached down to spin the brightly colored wheel. It moved clockwise until it stopped on the space marked $5000. The crowd cheered for this tremendous display of John's masculinity.

"I'll have an *x*, Pat."

Pat did a double take. "Did you say you wanted an *x*?"

"Right."

"No one ever picks an *x* right off the bat! Are you sure?"

"I want the *x*!"

"One *x*," said Pat. A ding could be heard as the box holding that letter lit up. Vanna twirled to the box and flipped it to reveal the letter.

"I'd like to solve the puzzle, Pat: it's *May I be excused*?"

"That's correct!" Pat remarked, at once impressed and concerned. "Let's see what we have for you in the rec room."

A giant turntable spun around to reveal thematic prizes like a pinball machine and a dartboard. John looked at the prizes with indifference. "Can I just have cash or a gift certificate or something? These prizes are lame."

Pat looked over to a producer and shrugged. "I guess we can skip that for now. Our next contestant is Maura, and this puzzle is a quotation. Give that wheel a spin!"

Maura, a petite young woman with dark hair and a keen intelligence in her eye, reached down to spin the wheel. It landed on the space marked $1500. She swiftly explored the possibilities in

choosing a letter to solve the puzzle. "I'll take an *m*, Pat."

"Good choice! Four *m*'s." The studio audience oohed and aahed. For every *m*, a box on the board lit up with a ping. Again Vanna spun to the letters in one flowing motion, making each *m* appear.

Maura studied the board for a moment and nodded. "I'd like to solve the puzzle, Pat."

"WHAT?!!" spouted the flabbergasted game show host.

"*Arma virumque cano, Trojae gui primus ab oris, Italiam fato profugus Lavinque venit litora,* which is the first line of the Aeneid in the original Latin."

Pat looked like a man whose circulatory system had been run through a blender. "How did you know that?"

"I know a lot of things," Maura smiled. "May I have the cash equivalent too?"

"What's wrong with our prizes? Look over there: an enormous ceramic dalmatian. It's only $146!"

"But it's hideous and completely impractical."

"Nitpick, why don't you?" Pat sighed. "Let's continue. Next up is Rick Flagg, a calculus teacher from Nebraska." Pat tore up his crib sheets and tossed them over his shoulder. "Spin the wheel, Flagg."

Rick did just that, mentally calculating friction and air speed. As

he predicted, the wheel stopped on the space marked $5000. Rick straightened his tie and quietly divided eleven by zero. "I'll take an *x* like my friend John. Unless I miss my guess—and I never miss my guess—there will be a single *x* in the puzzle, and the solution is as follows: *y=Asin(Bx−C)+D—*"

"STOP!" Pat raised his arms above his head as his hands began to glow with demonic fire. His hands weaved back and forth in a flurry of motion, and in response the three contestants were enveloped in an angelic beam of light and rose into the heavens. "What in the dickens...? I was trying to vaporize those smarties!"

"Yes," said the author. "But everybody has been getting vaporized or otherwise murdered in this book. I'm trying to expand my horizons. Carry on."

"UNDERLINGS ASSEMBLE!" howled Pat.

Seven men wearing loud polyester suits appeared in a puff of sulfur. They appeared to be sweating profusely.

"By what circumstances did intelligent people become contestants on my show?" raged Pat. "You know the guidelines: only morons or social deviants will be considered for an appearance on *Wheel of Fortune*. This policy guarantees the humiliation of the contestant and their family for generations. Who is responsible for this violation?"

"It was a harmless prank, Mr. Sajak," stammered an executive as they all cringed in terror. "We received a stack of applications

intended for *Jeopardy*, and—"

"UNACCEPTABLE!" Pat pointed at the seven executives and their bodies burst into component body parts, like a pile of dismembered Barbie® dolls, and fell to the ground with a gruesome cacophony of thumps.

Rip Tapioca leapt from the audience, as a reminder to all readers that his name appears in the title of this book and he clearly deserves more dialogue, like this next line: "What business do you have exterminating those people?"

"My business is my business," Pat cackled, lifting his arms once again. He levitated himself above the wheel of fortune as it began to spin faster and faster. Rip felt all the air in the room rushing toward the wheel, and a whirlwind enveloped Pat's physical form in a blur of motion. Then, as if time itself had ceased to exist, the wheel stopped.

"By the great big hair of Jon Bon Jovi!" gasped Rip. "Pat Sajak is...Satan!"

Satan cackled, his blood-red robes blowing in that supernatural wind that arrives on the scene whenever an evil being wearing robes makes a dramatic appearance. Horns grew from his forehead and his eyes glowed red. Fangs decorated his smile.

The audience checked their watches. This taping was running significantly longer than thirty minutes. They would need to plug the parking meter with another dime if this didn't wrap up soon.

Satan closed his eyes and touched his temples. The *Wheel of Fortune* set began melting, changing, transforming. The walls became rocky crags of red. Pits of lava burst through the floor. A majestic throne thrust itself out of the ground and Satan took his place upon it with a regal flourish.

At the same time, Vanna White stood rigid while her elegant evening gown cocooned her in silk. Two heartbeats later, she tore out of the cocoon in her true form as the notorious ghost of Vanna White. Satan laughed with that booming evil laugh that evil people often laugh, hence the phrase "evil laugh."

Rip bravely confronted the supreme ruler of the underworld: "Do you have something to say or are you planning to sit there laughing until we all die from boredom?"

Leaning forward, Satan pointed at Rip with menace. "You...are Rip Tapioca. You...are seeking help. You...are a foolish coward."

"Two out of three ain't bad," quipped Rip. Just then a growl came from the rear of the studio. Rip turned to see the hideous ceramic dalmatian transformed into a lumbering beast with three heads, slobbering and baring teeth from each muzzle. Rip gave a little wave. "Nice doggy...?"

The demonic canine pounced on the Marshal of the Time Stream and lunged for his jugular vein. Rip valiantly wrestled with the creature, concerned that most of his blood would soon be located on the outside of his body rather than within his veins where Rip preferred it.

"Cerberus! Down!" ordered Satan. The former statue jumped to Pat's side and growled. "You don't belong here, Tapioca, so I'll make a bargain with you."

"A bargain?" remarked Rip, brushing blood from his sleeve.

"Indeed. If you can survive a duel with a combatant of my choosing, I will transport you back to the land of the living with my blessing."

"I expect you will choose a combatant like Godzilla or King Kong to ensure your victory."

"No. I'm nothing if not fair. Your opponent will be your equal," said Satan.

"I'll do it," Rip announced. He pulled out the Artifish and stood ready for anything.

The ghost of Vanna White floated to Satan's side, cackling madly. She whispered into Satan's ear and his eyes brightened; actually, they spurted flame. "My lovely assistant has suggested an appropriate foe." Satan snapped his fingers and chanted in an exotic demonic tongue.

Vanna's ghost swooped over to Rip and suckerpunched him in the gut with a misty fist before hurling him to the ground. "That's for the manhole cover, you toad."



Pat Sajak and Vanna White (illustration by Timothy Sparvero)

Rip grimaced as he recovered from the blow. "If you weren't a lady, I swear I would—"

Vanna elbowed him in the eye and exploded into laughter.

"Well, since you're not a lady...." Rip kicked Vanna in the teeth and flung her into a fire pit. Howling with indignation, she scurried to Satan's side.

At that moment, the air above the wheel of fortune was growing solid. A humanoid creature grew out of nothingness: a tall man with damn nice hair in a pompadour style, wearing an aluminum foil leisure suit and new wave sunglasses. He glanced around the devil's lair in stark confusion.

"I believe you already know this man," said Satan, drumming his fingers together.

Rip yelled in genuine surprise: "Flip! My long-lost brother!"

"Correct," confirmed Satan. "It's your evil twin brother, Flip Tapioca!"

Flip stepped down from the wheel of fortune. The two brothers cautiously approached each other. Each of them felt like they were staring into a warped mirror.

"Wait a minute," Flip thought aloud. "Did you say that *I* was the evil twin brother?"

"Of course I did," said Satan. "Everybody has an evil twin

brother somewhere in the cosmos. Don't you watch soap operas?"

"You've got it backwards," Flip explained. "I'm not the evil twin brother. *Rip* is the evil twin brother."

"Me?" exclaimed Rip. "That's preposterous! I can't be the evil twin brother. I'm the headliner of this book! I have appeared in nearly every scene. Everyone knows that the evil brother is introduced after the good one has been established."

"That may be true—but I am currently in the middle of my own sci-fi adventure trilogy," rebuked Flip, "and in my book, you suddenly appeared in this hellscape. *You're* the evil twin brother."

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"My dad could beat up your dad!"

"We have the same dad, Rip."

"Ah. I momentarily forgot who I was arguing with." Rip punched a scale on the Artifish and a torrent of light exploded from its eye. Flip dodged the blast with impressive athleticism and reached into his pocket for a plastic frog. He cocked its rear legs back and started firing force bolts at Rip.

Rip leaped behind a rock formation to avoid the discharge. "Still using the Bleepfrog, I see."

"The energies within the Bleepfrog have more formidable capabilities than your pathetic Artifish!" Flip retorted, negating gravity as he leaped into combat position.

The audience roared with delight. The parking meter could wait.

Just then Satan intervened: "I have changed the rules. No weapons!" His hands glowed as he snatched the Artifish and the Bleepfrog away from the dueling twins.

The audience voiced their displeasure. They wanted blood, and they wanted it now.

"Can we dispense with the studio audience, Satan? Why don't we have our duel in hell?"

"But we *are* in hell," Satan explained. "*Wheel of Fortune* is an arcane ritual to enslave the world's populace, produced in association with Merv Griffin."

"What?" said Flip. "Who is this guy and what is he talking about?"

"He is the personification and sum total of all that is evil in this universe," answered Rip.

"A game show host," nodded Flip.

"The spinning wheel is a hypnotic device. The average television

viewer can only watch the wheel spin for two or three seconds before feeling compelled to watch the full program, characterizing the sin of sloth. The subsequent manipulation is subliminal: male viewers cannot help but fantasize about Vanna, who is in reality a demoness of lust, while female viewers are consumed with envy and greed as contestants shop for merchandise at the end of each round. The prideful contestants are trapped in hell forever as my personal slaves."

"Ooh! Aah!" cheered the studio audience.

Annoyed, Satan engulfed the audience in a conflagration of hellfire. "These applauding imbeciles have unknowingly signed away their souls to witness the televised ritual in person. It's all part of a foolproof scheme to lure all of humanity into my realm."

"Impressive plan," said Rip.

"Now," spat Satan, "will the two of you please get on with killing each other?"

"You can't expect one of us to murder the other!" howled Flip. "We are family! Brothers!"

"Need I speak the phrase 'evil twin' once more?"

Rip looked at Flip.

Flip looked at Rip.

After colliding in midair with fists flailing, the two brothers wrestled on the rocky ground while Satan surveyed his domain. At

his feet, the ruthless and formerly ceramic Cerberus. At his right hand, the notorious ghost of Vanna White. Before him, an audience of two hundred consumed with hellfire. Above him, a Gelatin-Brain and the physical embodiment of Death.

"What the hell?" Satan stood up in shock. George of the Gelatin-Brains and the dark-robed entity known as Death floated from beyond to the surface of Satan's lair. "Why have you come here?"

"EXPLAIN YOURSELF, SATAN."

"You can't force me to do anything, Little Miss Skull-and-Bones. You have no jurisdiction here."

"YOU SPEAK TRUTH."

"Be right back, honeybunch," whispered George, who sped over to the Marshal of the Time Stream. "Hold still, Rip. I need to tell you something."

"My evil twin brother is trying to kill me right now, George. Don't distract me."

"Don't listen to him!" spat Flip. "He's the evil twin brother, not me!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Rip, I fell in love with the physical embodiment of Death and

she has agreed to help us get the hell out of here."

"Is that a pun?" Rip groaned.

"Yes. And one of the worst ones in this whole book."

Death commanded Satan: "RELEASE THESE OUTSIDERS."

"Why would I do that? What is your plan, Death? You can't kill me. I'm Satan, for God's sake.[9] You have invaded my lair, where my power has no equal and no limit!"

"THERE ARE METHODS," Death foreshadowed.

George tapped his foot impatiently as Rip and Flip wrestled. "Come on, you guys. This is getting old."

"Get bent, George. My evil twin brother is a skilled combatant."

"I am *not* your evil twin brother! You are *mine*!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Stop!" George exploded, unleashing his formerly unseen mutant powers with a flash of green light from his eyes and merging the souls of Rip and Flip Tapioca into a single cosmic creature who could almost certainly save the day.

[9] The philosophical ramifications of this sentence will soon be expanded into a 12-part book series sold on late-night television.

Hold on a second...Gelatin-Brains don't have the mental capacity for that kind of mutation.

"Stop!" George exploded, kicking the brothers apart. "Let's get out of here. Death is going to distract Satan while we escape."

Flip looked at George and said, "You're a Gelatin-Brain, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I have come to understand that line is a running gag," answered Flip.

A high-pitched screech tore across the three figures as the ghost of Vanna White attacked. They took cover behind a volcanic rock formation, and the twins caught each other's eye.

"Truce?" offered Rip, extending his hand.

"For now," said Flip, offering his own. The Tapioca boys lunged for the Artifish and the Bleepfrog, now lying forgotten beside Satan's throne. They rolled into attack positions and combined the power of their two devices to trap the crazed undead game show hostess in a glittering cosmic sphere decorated with all twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

"Nice touch," said Rip. The author took a polite bow.

"What methods do you have at your disposal," Satan taunted Death, "that could possibly defeat me?"

"IT IS CRUEL."

"Uh-huh," Satan nodded.

"IT IS UNUSUAL."

"Yes, yes," Satan agreed, growing impatient.

"IT IS PUNISHMENT."

"What is it?" Satan asked, becoming more anxious by the moment.

Deathly silence.

And then, Death spoke: "THE BRADY BUNCH."

Flame jetted from Satan's eyes as his chin unhinged in horror. "No one can harness that much power! It's not possible!"

A lightshow whirlpool appeared above the wheel of fortune, and then a flash filled the room as eight humanoid figures and a four-legged creature burst out of the extradimensional gateway. As the light faded, their identities became clear: Mike, Carol, Greg, Marcia, Peter, Jan, Bobby, Cindy, and Tiger, known collectively throughout the universe as the Brady Bunch—both known and feared.

"You stole my baseball card!" whined Bobby.

"I hate my glasses!" angsted Jan.

"I totally dig your haircut!" grooved Greg.

"Who took Kitty Karry-All?" accused Cindy.

"NO! NOOOOO!" Satan writhed as the Brady family tore him atom from atom. The air around him was growing incandescent.

"Keen!" exclaimed Peter.

"Should I wear these bell-bottom pants to the dance? What about this plaid shirt?" wondered Marcia.

"Bark!" commented Tiger, annoyed that he was named after a member of the cat family.

"Aren't our kids swell?" Mike asked his wife, pulling her into an embrace.

"They're *very* swell," answered Carol, giving Mike a warm hug.

"STOP! STOP! This cannot be happening! I hold ultimate authority over the most popular television program in the universe! My plan for multidimensional domination is flawless! This challenge to my power will not stand!" The whole studio rumbled in sync with Satan's visible distress.

Just then, the Brady family housekeeper Alice plopped through the portal brandishing a feather duster. She hopped over to Satan and gave his face a thorough brushing. "A clean lair is a happy lair!" she smiled as Satan began to rear back for a sneeze.

Satan gestured to George and the Tapioca twins. "If I'm going

down...ahh...I'm taking you with me...ahh...ahCHOOOO!"

This was a sneeze beyond description. For that reason, it will not be described.

The sneeze's effects were infinitely more indescribable, but those effects beg description more than the indescribable sneeze. As the smoldering studio audience oohed and aahed, the atmosphere of hell was drawn into Satan's lungs and immediately expelled at supersonic speed, bringing forth a demonic hurricane that swiftly consumed hell, extinguishing the omnipresent flames and generating a white-hot steam cloud that obliterated all inhabitants of the lair apart from Rip, Flip, George and Death, all finding safety within the eye of the hurricane.

Satan gesticulated madly and screamed that final deathscream that beings of infinite power scream before their death. With that, every atom in his body crumbled into nothingness.

The psychic energy from these events possessed his cult, the *Wheel of Fortune* viewers throughout the universe. Each of the umpteen trillion viewers in multiple galaxies felt a tingling sensation in their noses. Universal armageddon was now imminent.

The Artifish glowed. Rip cocked his eyebrow and looked nervously at his companions. "In the next five minutes, the universe will disappear from the timestream."

"Again?" Flip rolled his eyes. "But that trick never works."

George of the Gelatin-Brains looked at Death with puppy-dog

eyes. He held her hand of bone and whispered sweet nothings. "Our time together was brief, skullcake, but I cherished every moment. You light up my life. You give me hope...."

Death found a way to roll her nonexistent eyes. "GO TO HELL," she said, fading to black and then fading away.

"Come back, sweetie-pie! Don't leave me, skullcake!"

"Skullcake?" wondered Flip.

"That's my special pet name for my ladyfriend," explained George, starting to tear up.

"You and Death are...an item?" asked Flip.

"Yes," sobbed George.

"And I thought *my* in-laws were bad."

The immeasurable *Wheel of Fortune* viewership initiated a simultaneous sneeze. At the same moment, the word "ACHOO!" could be heard in all corners of reality in every possible language. Every iota of gas in the universe was displaced with an incredible force, tearing millions of worlds from their atmospheres like a pit from a cherry. Gravity went haywire as planets careened into stars, which immediately went nova. Galaxies collapsed into black holes, sucking limitless rubble and flickering energies into somewhere beyond our imaginations. The universe itself transformed into a speck of matter roughly the size of a dust mite. Reality ceased to exist.

RIP TAPIOCA felt a sharp pain in his head. Considering that reality had ceased to exist, he took comfort in this minor inconvenience. He struggled to straighten his neck and took a tentative look around. He was sitting in the driver's seat of a customized Plymouth Fury which had unsuccessfully attempted to drive through a mountain range. Beside him was George, still unconscious.

"We're not dead!" sparked Rip. "The universe is intact! We're alive!"

George stirred, sweetly singing, "Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down...."

Rip grabbed George's shoulders and shook him. "Wake up! We're alive! We're still on the planet Paradox!"

"Wha...what? I don't understand. What about Satan? BadFaith? The disco dancers?"

Rip blinked. "We shared the same experience? The whole thing must have been a mutual hallucination," he deduced. "Do you suppose our minds were linked because of some strange reality-warping property of this world? Our inexplicable experience might be commonplace here on the enigmatic planet Paradox."

"But what about...Death?"

"It was all a dream," said Rip, stepping out of the car.

"We never met? We never fell in love?" Devastated, George struggled with this heart-shattering revelation. Then he noticed a

particularly interesting piece of fuzz on his sleeve and promptly forgot about it.

"I'm pleased that the universe will continue to exist," mused Rip, "but it's fair to say that hell was more fun than you would expect from eternal damnation."

"No argument there," agreed George.



RIP SUDDENLY SAT UP IN BED. His private quarters on the spaceship *Titanberg* were shrouded in darkness. "It was all a dream," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He reached for the Artifish on his nightstand and found it missing. Then he heard a bump outside his door.

With a creeping feeling of suspicion, Rip slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the door. He reached for the doorknob, turned it slowly, and swung the door open. The Artifish was in the hands of Flip Tapioca, who stood in the hallway turning seven shades of red.

"What are you doing here? Give me that fish!" Rip barked, tugging the Artifish from his twin brother.

"Ah. You're awake." Flip displayed a weak grin.

"Observant as always, Flip. What were you doing with the Artifish?"

Flip cleared his throat and tried to explain. "The Bleepfrog burned itself out, and it will take me weeks and weeks to synthesize new parts. I wanted to borrow the Artifish and reproduce some of its technology."

"Liar! You were stealing it! And I suppose you were also using the Artifish to play with my head so I would be paralyzed by that weird dream?"

"Well...yeah."

"Thievery! Deceit! Mental manipulation! Do you know what this means, Flip?"

"What?"

"This means," smiled a satisfied Rip, "that *you* are the evil twin brother."

"I guess you're right," sighed Flip, "but you have to admit that it was a hell of a dream."



GEORGE FELL OFF HIS BED and landed on the floor. He shook his head vigorously and felt the gelatin slosh around. "Wow!" he remarked. "I've got to tell Rip!" He flung open the door of the broom closet where he slept and hurried down the access tunnel to the elevator. He rode up twelve floors and ran down another

hallway to the grand wing that housed Rip's private quarters. George reached for the enormous brass knocker and knocked a dozen times. He nervously fidgeted as he waited for his mentor to open the door.

The door creaked open and Rip glared at his sidekick. "Can I help you?"

"I just had the weirdest dream, Rip! We were in hell and you were driving a Yugo and kept hurting your elbow and then my brain melted so we got an gigantic medical bill and I fell in love with Death and Pat Sajak was the devil and your brother Flip tried to kill you and reality ceased to exist and you woke up and then you woke up again and—"

"Stop, George." Rip yawned. "Pound yourself with a sledgehammer and get back to me in the morning." He slammed the door, leaving George shuddering in solitude.

"Skullcake..." George moaned.



"AAAAAAAUUUUUGGGGH!" Pat Sajak bolted upright, tangled in sweaty sheets. He pushed himself out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. He turned on the lights and splashed his face with cold water. "I can't do this anymore," he said, staring at his reflection. "I can't be a game show host forever. It's starting to invade my

subconscious mind. There must be more to life than this. But what else am I qualified to do?"

Pat's reflection winked at the reading audience, then smiled broadly as its eyes began to glow. "You would be an excellent late-night talk show host," the reflection suggested.

Pat grew thoughtful and nodded his head. He turned off the light and closed the bathroom door. A booming laugh filled the air, echoed and then faded away.



"HUH?" said the author. He opened his eyes and found himself sprawled across a table with a notebook, schoolbooks, soda cans, and the remnants of a super combination pizza. He looked at the ballpoint pen in his hand and then at the notebook. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness—I must have dreamed the whole thing. What a waste of time it would have been to write down all that crap!"



"HRRRRMMM," hummed Rip, waking slowly from an extremely deep sleep. He looked around and saw his dimly lit control center. He stretched the weariness away. "Must have dozed off again," he

said. "Nothing inspires fatigue as much as filing your income tax." He stood up and gathered each stack of paper one by one. "That was quite a dream! Maybe the best I've ever had without the benefit of a pleasure inducement device. I will need to tell George about it one of these days."

As he organized the papers, a long receipt fluttered to the ground and landed at his feet. He picked it up and scanned it. "Three hundred twenty-four googolplex credits? What in the universe...?"

At the bottom the receipt, Rip saw the answer printed in neat black letters:

HOSPITAL FROM HELL

COME BACK SOON!

Rip's eyebrows shot up and his jaw shot down as he attempted to comprehend this turn of events. He placed the receipt back on his workspace and tried to force his brain to accept a monetary debt totaling more than seven times all the money in the universe. His body shuddered in horror.

And then, as Rip felt the weight of the Artifish behind his ear, a solution to this predicament sprang to his mind. He gathered all of the tax forms together, laid the hospital receipt on top, and teleported the whole stack of paperwork into a timeless dimension where the bill would never be late.

"So much for that." Rip crammed the Artifish into his back pocket and left the control center, wondering why people park on

driveways and drive on parkways.

Somewhere in the shifting sands of another dimension, a dark-robed skeleton gazed blankly in George's direction.

DASALLFOKES

(Translation: This is the end of the story. Go do something constructive.)

