No Cash Accepted

 “What the hell do you mean I owe you five hundred bucks?” Bernard screamed at the man next to him as they stood suspended high above the Earth. Well, he guessed it was Earth anyway. Through a light green mist, he saw a mere speck of a dot far, far below—the only thing resembling a planet to his jumbled mind at that moment. Dead silence surrounded the two.

He was dressed in an ill-fitting suit over a crisp new dress shirt and tie, wearing his Alberto Torrisi loafers. The man dressed as a ticket taker on the railroads of the 1900s, like Tom Hanks in the Polar Express movie.

The very last thing he remembered was the nurse down the hall calling code blue. Now he faced this cartoon caricature with a ticket punch in one hand and a miniature credit card reader in the other.

 “You owe me, or rather, you owe the company five hundred big ones, because we have the exclusive contract for the Universal Exit Toll.”

 “The what?”

 “You know, the UET. People were not paying enough homage to the church funds for their dearly departed, so they got together and formed a company. Then they lobbied for and passed a worldwide law to collect money. Of course, the governments get their usual cut.”

 “Preposterous,” said Bernard.

 “Hurry up, brother. We have a ton of folks coming behind you. All those floods, hurricanes, and fires. Not to mention those damn pandemics. I hate when that happens.”

 “What the?” said Bernard. “Where am I, and who the hell are you?”

 “Very simple, sir. You died. Now, to escape the last vestiges of your earthly bonds, you must pay the toll. Sorry, no cash accepted.”

Bernard pinched himself. But there was no substance to him. He reached out to grab the man’s arm, but there was nothing there either.

 “Where the hell are we?” he asked, his voice trembling. “Besides, I do not have any credit cards. There is nothing in any of the pockets of this ill-fitting suit.”

 “Your wife picked it out according to her tastes, not yours. Luckily, she did not have you cremated. Makes our job harder.”

 “Why am I wearing it?”

 “For the viewing and funeral, of course. You always said you liked the view from Pine Hill Gardens.”

 “This is not there. This is nowhere familiar.”

 “We are in another dimension, buddy boy. One not yet discovered by mere mortals. Although AI is closing the gap.”

 “Dimension?”

 Quantum Physics figured it out. How? I do not know. Way above my pay grade.”

 “Huh?”

 “Yep. Everyone goes through here on their way to wherever. Great money maker.”

 “Who for?”

 “Cannot say, brother. I know my job, and I do it well. A good one under the circumstances.”

 “Circumstances?”

 “Don’t have to pay the toll or make a choice afterwards.”

 “What kind of choice?”

 “Well, basically, where to go.”

 “What if I don’t choose?”

 “There is such a thing as The Black Hole of Anonymity. And you will have the writing erased from your gravestone.”

 “Seriously?” said Bernard, feeling a momentary shifting of his sense of equilibrium.

 “That lanyard and medallion around your neck. Info from birth until death tells your sad story.”

 “But I…,” whispered Bernard.

 “I know what you are going to ask next,” said the ticket taker. “AI grabbed all the info it could on you from both public and private sources. You are plain vanilla. But you did fit the profile, so here you are.”

 “Profile?”

 “You were picked because there is a high probability you have deep pockets, and there is an unsolved conflict you still must deal with, like an old regret. Am I getting warm?”

Bernard thought and thought. There were minor regrets to be sure, but nothing that kept him awake these days.

Then it came to him. The awful night his friend Wally had called wanting a ride home from the Cozy Inn bar.

 “Ýo, Wally. What’s up?”

 “Bern, I am drunker than a skunk. Been sitting on this bar stool four or five hours, I think.”

 “Then go home and take a nap.”

 “It is twelve miles to my place, friend. And it is dark and foggy here.”

 “Just drive slowly. You have done it before.”

 “You do not understand. I cannot. Bad feeling about doing that.”

 “Call Uber.”

 “Could you please, maybe come and get me?”

 “It is past one in the morning. Dark and foggy here, too.

 “Well crap Bern. You know I do not ask for favors, but I need one now.”

 “I am bushed myself, Wally. Just sleep in your car then. The Cozy Inn folks are used to that.”

 “Bye, Bern.”

 “Bye, Wally.”

 “You did not go get him then?”

 “No,” muttered Bernard.

 “Sleep in his car?”

 “No. I wish to hell he had. Tried to drive home. Met a semi head-on, a half mile from his house.”

 ” The widow must have been devastated.”

 “Completely. Wouldn’t talk to me for months.”

 “Oh?”

 “He had sent her a text, but she was soaking in the hot tub. Did not see it.”

 “And?”

 “Ok. He told her I would not get him.”

 . “The plot thickens as they say. Regardless, we must move on. When was the last time you saw him in person?”

 “The Wednesday before in the afternoon. He was mowing the lawn. I stopped to see how his golf game was going.”

 “And?”

 “Lousy, I guess.”

 “Was the radio or television on?” said the ticket taker as he leafed through a small thin book.

 “No, sir.”

 “Cameras, lights, or cell phone near you?”

 “No. We sat in the backyard. Why do you ask?”

 “We need an energy portal of some kind. Anything making any sound?”

 “Just some wind chimes and cars whizzing by.”

The ticket taker leafed through his little black book again.

Bernard wanted to get away from the man, but there was nowhere to get a solid footing, and he felt suspended in a kind of force field.

 “Aha,” said the ticket taker. “Page 47, paragraph 15. Wind chimes will work.”

 “Work for what? Get me the hell out of here and back home, now!”

 “No can do, Bern. You are in a state of transition. Modern-day purgatory.”

 “That is a religious thing. Stopover before heaven or hell.”

 “Old-fashioned thinking. This way is new and more profitable.”

 “Does that little black book tell me how I can challenge this nonsense?”

 “Many have tried. None have succeeded. Let us get on with it.”

With that, he pulled out a wand worthy of Merlin, mumbled something incoherent, and pointed it toward the little dot.

Within seconds, along came the exact wind chimes Bernard had seen in Wally’s backyard. And with them, the same chair he had sat in that afternoon.

 “If the wind chimes as a medium work, you truly express your regrets, and Wally accepts your plea, you can enter a portal with some better choices.”

 “For a fee, I suppose. It does not matter. No card, remember?”

 “Hang tight. Let us try this, then we can discuss payment.”

A hologram of Wally sitting in his backyard sipping lemonade appeared. The wind chimes moaned softly.

 “You have three minutes to plead your case, Bernard. One, two, three, go.”

 “Hi, Wally. Do not talk yet. I only have three minutes. I am dead too. I apologize for letting you die that awful night. Think about it a lot.”

 “What the…, stammered Wally. Yeah, read your obit. Bet you can’t pay and have regrets. Correct?”

 “Yes, but please accept my apology. It was heartless of me. I need your help now more than ever.”

 “No regrets and no money. What a dilemma,” said Wally. “On a scale of one to ten, that apology is about a two.”

 “But Wally.”

 “No buts, friend. I am out of here,” said the hologram as it slipped away into space.

 “So now what happens?” whined Bernard.

 “Remember that Black Hole?”

 “Yes.”

Just then, a small piece of paper flew into the hand of the ticket taker, who studied it intently.

 “Your lucky day, Bernie. An instant ruling under the best buddy clause. For a small fee, you get one more contact with Wally.”

 “Of course,” said Bernard as the green mist around them darkened and he struggled to keep from smothering.

 “Bernie. Wake up. Today is the second anniversary of Wally's accident. We have to put fresh flowers on his grave.”

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