

**STAIRWAY²
HEAVEN**

**CHAZ
THOMPSON**

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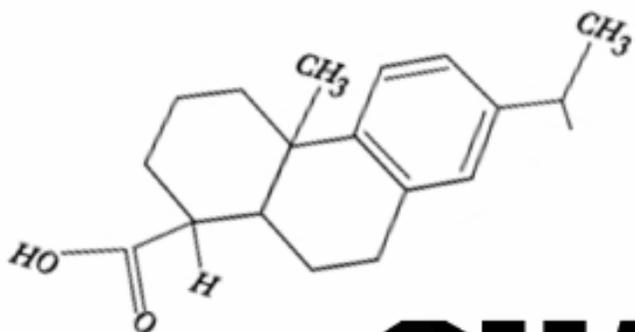
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STAIRWAY² HEAVEN



CHAZ THOMPSON

"For this is the great error of our day that the physicians separate the soul from the body"

Hippocrates — 460 BC - c. 370 BC

OVERTURE

Yesterday a priest shot at me from his bell tower steeple.

Remain calm, he missed. Obviously a novice with weaponry, his shot went wild, ricocheted off the Kevlex sidewalk and blew out the windshield of a parked BMW Nuke. Fortunately, no one was in the car. Good luck to the owner on finding someone who can repair one of those antique pieces of nuclear crap.

Before the determined minister of God could squeeze off another round I dodged down the liquor store alley and escaped, six-pack of *Iniquity Brew* safe under my arm. A few years back I might have returned fire, might have engaged in a satisfying firefight until the novelty wore off, or one of us suffered a mortal wound. But lately I couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor devil. I mean, he wasn't trying to kill me, really. He was trying to save me.

Or at least my soul.

And souls untold.

Yes, I am that guy. I'm the guy who brought it all back from near extinction, from the cold abyss of obscurity, from the very bowels of Vatican control. I am the anti-Christ of the new millennium.

And this misguided *schmo* had me in his crosshairs. Now he'll have to stand before his papal superiors and explain his failure. I'm glad I'm not him.

So I jogged down the alley as gently as possible, careful to cushion my carbonated dinner. Since no more churches stood between the *Wrong Galaxy Liquor Store* and my apartments on La Cienega Boulevard, I decelerated and let my heart rate settle down.

New Los Angeles may have declined since its peak back in the mid-2050s, before the quakes, when it was plain old Los Angeles, but it still resonates with the phantom glory documented in library vidy-grams and history SKaDs. The billboard screens on Sunset Boulevard have been blank since I can remember, but they'll be reborn eventually. The day will come when our economy will recharge their faces with up-to-date advertisements, revitalized aspirations and renewed superficial values.

I can see it.

I mean, I can *see* it.

For now, the streets are still obsolete Kevlar, though sidewalks have survived in their upgraded form, the hybrid Kevlex. Hard to believe this was all concrete and asphalt, once upon a time.

Maybe not so long ago, historically speaking, but kids today can't remember or relate to anything that isn't wholly synthetic or holographic. Who remembers when GSS meant *Global Scope System*, instead of *Galactic Scope System*? Who remembers any method of transportation that used wheels? Who remembers how we managed to survive

before Personal Quantum Computers, before subatomic System Kaon Devices, before we began colonizing the moon and Mars? My early years might just as well have been in the Stone Age.

Yet so much has failed to endure our socio/technological progress. I suppose it's a natural reflex, inherent in our collective genetics, to mourn the passing of an era with riots and antiquated laws and myopic resistance doomed to hear the dirge sooner than anticipated.

Isn't it inevitable that science and religion, the polar opposites of society's thermo-magnetic engine, would someday dwindle and succumb to the law of entropy, to the stronger, equalizing force of modern mystic science?

Take this priest in his bell tower, for example. He won't accept the transition to the new energy of today's world. He clings to a religious principle as outdated as concrete sidewalks. His church refuses to acknowledge the cold hard facts of mystic science as it did the theories of Galileo. What else can he do except hoist himself to the pinnacle of his limitations and exterminate any opposing realities?

Too bad for him he's such a bad shot.

I crossed the street to my apartments, warmed by the orbiting midnight moon-station only recently launched by the Academy of Nations, and stopped at the elevator. A pink soul-cloud drifted between me and the moon-station and I instinctively recited a silent prayer.

It's the least I could do.

So much has changed.

And yet so much remains unchanged.

So much unknown.

For those of us who prefer the unknown, what awaits us? Specifically, after death, what awaits us? How much influence do we really possess over what happens to us after the death of our physical embodiments?

Now, this priest in the bell tower, the one with the rifle — who could be stalking me still for all I know — is convinced we are either punished or rewarded according to the deeds we commit while alive. Fine. He's entitled.

But so many of us know better.

"How's the soul, Pete?" Isabel called from her balcony, silver bladder of *Iniquity Brew* in her hand. Short, saucy, young — younger than me anyway — she personified the archetype prostitute of our brave new world.

"Still got it," I called back, unlocking the elevator door with my com-tel wand. Why do they call them wands? More like slender, miniature bricks. Anyway, ever since I told her I was the world's final gate-keeper she started calling me Saint Pete instead of my real name, Matthias. Har-har. From apostle to saint, all because my personal desire kicked open the back door to Heaven for a stampede of weary souls to traipse in and out as they pleased.

I stepped inside, scratched my chin, realized I hadn't shaved in a couple of days and wondered if I could find a fully charged shaver. Isabel didn't mind the stubble, but sometimes I preferred the feel of smooth flesh on smooth flesh.

Call me old-fashioned.

As if you couldn't tell by looking at me. Sure, no more spiral-cut blue hair I sported as a teen. Now it's pony-tailed and a little gray in the style of our president, but that doesn't fool anyone. I'm hardly presidential material. He has more earrings. But I have more tattoos.

So how did it happen that everything just kind of collapsed in New Los Angeles? Or in the world, for that matter. I've never denied my contribution, but modesty prevents me from gloating. And those who do appreciate my unholy participation tend to wind up in bell towers with high-powered rifles.

I rode the elevator eighty-three flights up without any stops, got off at my floor and considered which room to take for the night. With ten identical suites to choose from I had a hard time remembering which one I had occupied last. Sometimes I regret including this option as part of the contract, but I knew I would need every advantage I could get over the priests who came down from their bell towers in pursuit.

Still, old age hasn't been kind to my memory, so I just picked a number between one and ten and unlocked the third door on my left. I entered, put the brew in the cooler and took a shower. Isabel would be calling soon and I wanted to have a chance to shave and clear out my psychic sinuses a little before she arrived. Sure, I knew she was a corporate officer, but what the fuck? She knew I knew. All part of the game. All part of staying alive these days.

I stopped carrying a sidearm long ago. When I discovered that few vengeful ministers actually knew what I looked like, that they were identifying me by the corporate holster on my hip, I quit wearing the damn thing. Lo and behold, the attacks diminished. I'm ashamed it took me so long to make the connection. I stashed the pistol in one of those rooms. I forget where.

I could have had the priest in his bell tower removed, permanently, if so motivated. Back in the day, I had plenty of priests and their bell towers removed. Another contractual perk. But I learned quickly that such actions only encouraged more priests in more bell towers, so I just began to steer clear of bell towers and churches in general. Once in a while another one pops up, like the one across the street from the *Wrong Galaxy Liquor Store*.

But like I said, he missed and I got away, Scott free, soul and all.

Still, tomorrow is another day, to quote Ms O'Hara, and another opportunity for the contingent of holy vigilantes to barricade the Lord's portal against further unclassified entries.

How else can I describe their motive? Just think about the names they assigned to the miracle formula, the one I single-handedly resurrected from oblivion: *Death Cheater*, *Soul Stealer*, *False Eden*, *The Satan Pill*.

My personal favorite? The one I coined: *Stairway² Heaven*.

I like the incongruity.

The official name, the legal title registered with the Academy Patent Office and Goris Pharmaceuticals is LETRO-Z-16499/PRE-Q.

I prefer *Stairway² Heaven*.

Goris Pharmaceuticals preferred *WonderDent*. That was the project name christened by *WonderDent*'s creator, Terril Bloedorn. He created the project, but not the actual product.

The substance, the recipe, the tangible result of five years of long weeks, late nights, perplexing headaches and countless debates with the Goris Pharmaceuticals Marketing Department belongs primarily to one man.

Lanier Chalmers.

Twenty-nine years old on the day he finally produced a small, if potent quantity of aforementioned *Stairway² Heaven*, Lanier Chalmers persevered where most men would have shriveled up and pulled out long before. Not only did he persevere, he documented every aspect of his progress, including the taste tests. Having conducted something like forty-six previous taste tests on *WonderDent*, before its magical transformation, the routine had evolved into a kind of sick, ritualistic ceremony monitored by holo-cameras and living observers in a dimly lit laboratory. Full of somber melodrama, the only missing elements were tiki torches and human sacrifices.

You've seen the bootleg holos, right? Who can forget the sight of Lanier, half in shadow, the other half monochrome green from some off-screen monitor, his tall frame hunched over the table? So much has been preserved in commentary of every medium, so much baloney from every angle, objectivity has been all but murdered.

If you watch that vidy-gram today you may be amazed at how little controversy truly existed in his behavior. His movements are simple. Illusionists have claimed he stole their tricks to fake it all, to somehow create a phenomenon where none actually existed, but look at it! He dips the white plastic Dairy Queen spoon into the cup of sickly green-tinted goo, raises a dab to his lips and maybe that's his tongue or maybe it's a digital glitch, but what fucking difference does it make? The stuff comes into contact with his mouth and the rest is, as they say, history.

Most of the vidy-grams circulating today don't contain any audio, and those that do require subtitles, and they always get it wrong. I've seen the original corporate-owned holo-files. He says, quite clearly, "Abrasive. Bland. We'll need to adjust with flavoring."

His lack of movement for two solid seconds has prompted conspiracy theorists to insist the hologram is frozen on one frame and spliced with a scene created somewhere else at some other time, a scene further modified with special effects.

Again, I have seen the original high-def video holograms, and I have watched the lint drift from his shoulder to the table during those two seconds, while Lanier stands there with the spoon mid-way between mouth and table.

And here's where the worlds of suspected ulterior motives really go nuts: He falls forward, right? Face down on the table with a crunch. No one disagrees on that. But the rising fog, at first a kind of wispy mist, then a rather opaque cloud shaped something like Chalmers' body, coalesces out of nowhere and sort of blows off his back by an unseen wind.

That sequence has been dissected frame by frame, enhanced by programs usually reserved for space exploration, and no one can define the precise moment his soul completely separates from his body.

As though it fucking matters!

Let's back up a little. What do we know about this guy who allegedly figured out, albeit accidentally, how to disengage an aspect of humanity we generally identify as the soul from its corporeal host? How much does the world really know about the unwitting father of modern mystic science?

Identified early in his career as a genius, Lanier Chalmers understood biomechanics and chemical engineering in a way that astonished his peers. Unfortunately, not necessarily in a good way. His ability to hyper-focus on any given subject fueled his creative intellect at the expense of his social interactions. Not uncommon for most who suffered from Asperger's Syndrome.

So *WonderDent* became Chalmers' Everest to climb and conquer. Terril Bloedorn and Goris Pharmaceuticals threw down the gauntlet and he responded with the blind passion and confidence of a young man freshly degreed and unconstrained socially. No wife, no children, no girlfriend, no friends of any kind, really, except one.

Lanier Chalmers accepted the proposal, the contract, the commitment to satisfy the condition established by Goris Pharmaceuticals, to develop and produce in a manner consistent with Goris Pharmaceuticals mass-marketing strategies an inexpensive toothpaste guaranteed to whiten and strengthen tooth enamel beyond the prevailing performance of any legal product available at the time.

Few corporations would have tolerated his violations of protocol, of schedules, of safety procedures. Fewer still would have tolerated his outbursts when faced with resistance or setbacks.

Yet Goris Pharmaceuticals remained committed to young Chalmers, trusting his attempts to create a product from complete scratch, without using any existing components. His success would monopolize their market share.

For a man unable to maintain any type of social relationship, Lanier managed to assemble a remarkable team of competent assistants, skilled and somehow compatible with his temperament. Over the course of five years, however, most of them progressed

toward their own goals, leaving the team. And as each member departed, he or she was not replaced. By the time Lanier succumbed to his own creation, only one man remained.

Winston Hodge.

Nearly twice Lanier's age, Winston's pedigree hardly recommended him as a contemporary, let alone a competent ally to Chalmers' agenda. His concepts were outdated, if not archaic, and his sensibilities aligned more with convention than innovation.

Still, Goris Pharmaceuticals wanted a seasoned technician a little more "down-to-earth" on the team. So they listened to me and assigned my brother-in-law Winston Hodge to Chalmers' crew of hot-shot physicists and exotic conceptualists.

Conceptualist. Lanier's inventive title, that.

Ah, yes, I skipped over why Goris Pharmaceuticals would take my advice on anything.

In those days — and this all began, what, some ten years ago — corporations commonly recruited insight and guidance from individuals with my particular talent. Unofficially, they called it "peeking around the corner".

Nowadays you know us as *telecasters*, or *deep-see-viewers*. Less honorable monikers, perhaps, than the old-fashioned *channel*, or *medium*, or the ultimate, reliable *psychic*. But no matter what I was called, the grim vision never failed to pollute my breath and brain with unwelcomed conflicts, dream-warping landscapes, and other people's demons stripped to the bones.

Sure, the money was phenomenal, back then. Sure, restaurants and dignitaries welcomed me with surreal reverence. Sure, I truly believed I was something special, something exalted and unique and valuable.

But after a while the gory lies, the bleak addictions, the relentless lunacy running like a river of shit through virtually every single reading infected me the way it infects every *telecaster*. We all think we're immune, but eventually it catches up. Eventually the food, the drink, the very air starts to taste bitter, rancid as a pool of black blood. Eventually, the paranoia becomes too much. You can't expect us to keep swimming through someone else's fucked-up id and aura and emerge sanitized forever. It just doesn't work that way. Eventually we all turn to our own private Edens for sanity. Eventually, we choose to stay there before it's too late. If we're lucky.

Still, those memories linger.

Even though I had withdrawn my services from the general public many years prior to Lanier's contract with Goris Pharmaceuticals, I suspended my retirement on just two occasions.

No, my purpose was not to provide a job for my brother-in-law Winston. I offered his recommendation as legitimately as any I ever made. I *saw*, with the grim vision, Lanier's unbridled concepts propelling the *WonderDent* project down more diverse corridors than Goris Pharmaceuticals could financially support, while ultimately

producing nothing of value. I *saw* him careening from inspiration to inspiration, never remaining in one place long enough to develop his idea into something substantial. Without Winston Hodge ensconced in Chalmers' lab, there's no telling where the *WonderDent* project would have come to rest, if at all. Winston possessed the ability to anchor Lanier's efforts in ways no one else ever could. Winston Hodge knew how to gently remind his ward of the goal in a positive manner. Only Winston Hodge could dissuade Chalmers from an inspired distraction without triggering the hostile resentment the boy genius unleashed on everyone else.

Lanier always liked his Uncle Winston.

More than he liked me, his own father.

Goris Pharmaceuticals never objected to the nepotistic triad governing the psychic future of their prize project. Indeed, Terril regarded us as some kind of supernatural insurance of success. The only other quack paid as well as me by Goris Pharmaceuticals was Terril's astrologer, the late, great Rhonda Redondo, who endorsed Lanier without reservations.

I never told her Lanier's correct birth date, so you can lay the debacle of her approval on me too.

What do I care? Astrology is such horseshit anyway.

Do I feel ashamed that I didn't foresee the inevitable descent from toothpaste formula to hocus pocus medicine? Considering I didn't speak with my son or my brother-in-law during all those years, no. Goris Pharmaceuticals did not invite me back for an update until the poop hit the metaphysical fan. By then the new direction of mystic science had secretly taken root. By then the formula had been lost and bootlegged by careless hacks from here to hell and back. By then our skies were destined to be contaminated with flocks of jettisoned souls of the desperate and terminal.

What I *saw* in my sessions with my only son Lanier and my brother-in-law Winston did not reveal the religious horror of this future. My psychic submersions may have introduced me to subconscious aspects of them best left obscured by their physical personalities, but no connection can be made between their inner storms and the outcome of their relationship, complicated as it was.

Still, I get the blame.

Of course, everything got worse, thanks to me. But the origin of the whole mess is quite simply not my fault.

Isabel may be the only person who understands. Despite her official association with the corporation, she never pressures me for more information than I've already provided, never requests any favors, by which I mean readings. She seems to understand the hardship, the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual strain a reading can evoke. More than Rhonda ever did while she walked the earth. More than my sister did. Or my mother. Or my wife.

All I wanted was a peaceful retirement, a calm, final retreat, permission to go gently into that good night. But the duties of a father, a husband, a son, and a brother intervened.