
Mental Dimensions

Tales of Fantasy for a New Generation

1st Edition

Andrew G. Alt

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Tales of Fantasy for a New Generation
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To George and Kate - may they rest with their
Lord in eternal peace

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I'd like to thank my family and friends for their support, and note that Joel handed me one of these stories on a silver platter. I wish to express my gratitude and love to Bob and Artie - may their souls rest comfortably until the end of time.

Hovering on the Winds of Thought

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

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

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

mer guests.

Fully developed chapters eagerly sprouted from the sentences and gently caressed all the characters that had joined together. As the chapters aged, a book lovingly wrapped around them, giving them shelter from dangerous erasers, wet and fiery storms, and anything else that might disrupt their cohesion. A quickly-passing thought transformed into a title and rested upon the face of the book. The title found comfort upon its new bed and happily decided to remain.

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

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

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

The Beginning

The Search for the Enchanted Balls

Once upon a time in a land not unlike our own, two tabby cats named Janice and Jacob were playing in a grassy field with their enchanted balls. Janice's ball was pink with purple stripes. Jacob's was bright green with small yellow circles. They loved their toys and played with them every day.

One day as Janice and Jacob were playing, they both lost their balls. They were heart-broken. They went home and cried themselves to sleep. The next day, they decided to search for them.

Janice and Jacob left to travel the world to search for their beloved toys. They didn't know how long their search would last or how far they'd have to travel to reacquire their precious treasure, but they were determined.

They searched all over the world. They traveled by foot, by horse, by boat, by train, by plane, and by steamship. Their hearts grew heavier as time passed, each preceding day forever lost to them. They couldn't think of anything else but their

balls. Try as hard as they might, they couldn't forget about them. Often they sat with each other and talked about them. They frequently daydreamed and fantasized about how happy they would be when they again found their balls.

The days carried over to years, and the years slowly transformed into centuries. Janice and Jacob were able to expand their search using new inventions. They voyaged by spaceship to other worlds, they crossed over into different universes and searched on millions of worlds. They traveled to other dimensions. Once, they even traveled back to the past using a time machine—to the point in history when they lost their balls. Despite their best efforts, however, they were unable to find them.

Nine thousand years passed. Janice and Jacob were very tired. On a day that decided their future, they arrived on a world they'd never before visited. It was a Tuesday. The sun was shining, the flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and the lakes were calm. Jacob was looking through some tall grass bordering a forest. It was there he finally spotted his ball. He was overjoyed and—after retrieving his ball—ran to Janice, who was nearby eating lunch. Janice hugged him and expressed how happy she was for him. After Janice finished her meal, she reflected on her quest, and made an important decision. She walked over to Jacob to tell him about her wishes. As she approached, Janice was puzzled at the sad look of disapproval on Jacob's face as he looked down at the ball in his hands.

"Jacob, what's wrong?"

He replied, "This ball isn't how I remember it. I know it's mine; I know it's the same one I lost. But it's nothing like how I imagined it all those years I dreamed about finding it. This ball doesn't even seem like it's enchanted anymore. You see—" Jacob held out the ball for Janice to inspect more closely.

"Yes, Jacob, I understand what you mean. How strange."

"Would you like to have it, Janice? Maybe we'll never be able to find your ball. You may have mine if you like."

"No, thank you, Jacob. Let's leave it here and hopefully someone will find it and enjoy it as much as you did. Now, I have something important to tell you. I feel as if I'm not accomplishing anything when I spend all my time searching for my ball. I'm going to quit looking and find other things to do. I'm sure I can learn to live without it."

Jacob supported her decision and wished they'd have thought to accept their loss many years ago. However, he soon let go of his regret and became grateful for the outcome. The two friends lived for many years and had many happy adventures together. Sometimes they would talk about the fun they had with their enchanted balls. More often, however, they discussed the good things presently in their life; and they learned to love each day of their happiness and contentment, as much as they once

loved their enchanted balls.

The Obedient Parents

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

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

They looked at him in astonishment, as he said,

"Congratulations, children. Because of your teamwork, you've won three wishes."

"Yay!" exclaimed Billy and Holly.

"Holly, what should we wish for?"

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

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

Holly replied excitedly, "That's a great idea, Billy!"

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

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

Billy answered, "We forgot, Father. Please forgive us."

The father's expression became blank, and without emotion—he replied, "I forgive you."

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

to normal.

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

Billy yelled, "Stop!"

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

"Nothing's the matter, Elizabeth. The children told me to stop, so I stopped."

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

Holly interrupted, "Be quiet, Mother."

The mother looked at them angrily, but said nothing.

"Mother, don't be angry with us."

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

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

From then on, the parents were absolutely obedient to every whim and desire of their children.

Billy and Holly decided for themselves when and what they'd eat, what time they'd go to sleep, and when they could play.

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

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

The parents slowly turned around and walked out of the bedroom. They walked downstairs. They walked to the front door. They opened the front door and walked out to the driveway. They entered their car and pulled out of the driveway.

Billy heard what happened and met Holly in her room. “We have to get them back, Holly! We still need them!” Holly, having had a chance to calm down, agreed, and both rushed downstairs. They hurried outside and looked around. They saw their parents far off in the distance driving away in the family automobile. It was so tiny it looked like a little dot on the horizon. They shouted, “Come back!” But their cries were simply not loud enough

for the parents to hear. They began running after the car, but quickly became short of breath and grew pains in their sides (due to a lack of exercise). A few moments later, the parents completely vanished from sight.

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

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

of bed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Billy and Holly were instantly as they were seven years ago. Billy's eyes were open. Their cheeks were puffy and had good color. Their eyes were wide and bright with happiness and joy. They were healthy again. The elf transformed back into his small toy form. Even the bedroom looked as it did seven years ago. The parents walked into the room.

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

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

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

"Okay!"

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

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

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

"Ah, yes, of course. Well, I'm sure they'll

never forget, just as we never forgot. How old were we when you found this elf?"

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

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

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

James's Love

There was once a man who had much love in his heart. James loved his family and friends. He loved God and his church. He loved the outdoors, the sunlight, and all the wonders of Creation. However, like all people, the love in James's heart was sometimes covered by other feelings, some which were unpleasant and had the potential to be harmful to himself or others.

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

On Thanksgiving, he drove to meet his family, planning to join them for the holiday. James

greatly enjoyed spending time with his family. The saddest part was having to say goodbye, but he always left holding new memories to cherish when they were apart. James could easily recall all the love and joy he and his family had shared throughout their years together.

James slowly and carefully pulled into his parents' driveway and parked his car. He rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, Philip, his father, opened the door and waved him in, then hugged him warmly. He looked around and saw his brother and sister, standing next to their spouses with James's nephews and nieces. They all joyously welcomed him home.

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

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

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

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

His mood quickly changed when he spotted the rear bumper on his car. It was scratched, pushed in an inch, and there was damage to the surrounding area. As he got closer, he noticed on his mother's car that her *front* bumper had similar damage. He knew then that she was responsible. He instantly, almost reflexively, became angry at her carelessness. James violently threw the peace lily at the ground. The pot cracked and split, and the plant broke apart. A sudden, strong gust of wind scattered its remnants across the lawn.

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

James's father followed him into the kitchen. Philip saw that his son's face was red with anger, and his body as tense and hard as a black diamond. He calmly poured himself some water, then spoke softly, "Your mother is really upset that she hit

your car. She knows how much it means to you. She was very distracted when she got home, looking forward to spending time with everyone. She's been pretty lonely the last few years, now that everyone's moved out on their own."

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

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

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

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

The Grasshopper and the Cliff

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

The grasshopper, however, couldn't forget the urge to jump from the cliff's edge. The next day he returned to the cliff. He looked down for several minutes. Afterward, he went home to his family.

Every day for three years the grasshopper returned to the cliff. He fought back the impulse to jump each time he visited the cliff's edge. Every day he hopped back home to be with his family. During those three years, he forgot how to have fun. He forgot how to learn new activities and how to have original ideas. He forgot many other things as well.

One day, as the grasshopper was standing at the

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

The Problematic 6000

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

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

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

"Is there something I can do for you, Professor?"

"I'd like some orange juice."

"You don't pay me for that. Is there anything else you need done?"

Instead of answering, the Professor asked, "What is it you're working on?"

"I'm filing my taxes online."

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

"No, but I can't think of any good excuses to get out of it."

"Think no further, my young and impressionable assistant. I have completed my life's work. I call it the *Problematic 6000*."

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

"It creates problems."

"That's your life's work? It sounds like a really bad idea."

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

"It still seems like a bad idea, Professor."

"You think in such three-dimensional terms, my loyal minion. I will show you." Professor Zinkerton

leaned over the machine, made some adjustments, then pressed a button marked *execute*. Suddenly, an explosion could be heard from the room that Nathan had been in working on his taxes. Nathan looked into the room and saw his computer had prematurely exploded.

"What the heck was that?"

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

"No, I don't. I can just drive to the library to get the necessary forms."

"Ah, yes, of course." Zinkerton leaned over the Problematic 6000, then pressed the *execute* button. An explosion was heard from outside, and Nathan ran to check. He came back, madder than an irradiated spider. "My car's on fire!"

"You can thank me later."

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

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

Zinkerton again pressed the *execute* button. Nothing happened.

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

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

"I have to use the bathroom."

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

"I want, *I want!*"

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

After Nathan had returned from the bathroom, Professor Zinkerton explained more of the machine's features. "As you are already astutely aware, this machine can create problems for anybody, not just the owner. It therefore can act as a *revenge* machine. I'm considering marketing a copy of the Problematic and calling its duplicate the Revenge-O-matic 6000."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm my mother's favorite."

"That's not the same thing."

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

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

"It connects to a person's brain by using dust particles in the air as a conductor. Then using a power source I obtained through illegal means, an electromagnetic field is generated through an integrated circuit I invented—I created the schematic based on a dream I had one night after I had passed out from drinking."

"The chip decides on the best solution, then

makes it a reality. It can get tricky though, because the chip that determines the method of delivery is one-of-a-kind. If it fails before I manufacture another, we are all doomed."

"Doomed?"

"Yes... doomed."

"What do you mean *doomed*?"

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

"What does *that* mean?"

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

"Do you mean the complete annihilation of the universe?"

"No... only the left side."

"*The left side*?"

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

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

"By chance, yes, we occupy that certain space to which you are addressing a concern regarding

your ultimate fate."

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

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

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

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

"I get the idea."

"This is the setting I used..." He reversed the polarity of an important-looking switch. "Now, it can be directed toward someone else. Hence my idea of the highly marketable Revenge-0-matic 6000. You will finally get a pay-raise after the profits are well-reaped."

"How much of a pay-raise?"

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

"I thought that's what we were doing."

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

"Okay, I'll bite. What does the Blameter do?"

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

"Is there a demand for that?"

"Demand will be created after Revenge-0-matics are in wide-spread use. The Blameter is a simple Revenge-0-matic detector. For example, if a friend, work colleague, or someone you love is accusing you of creating your own problems, the Blameter can be used to detect the nearest Revenge-0-matic that is being used against you. Once detected, you would simply show the Blameter LCD display to your accuser, thereby proving that someone else is responsible for your problems. If no Revenge-0-matic is detected, there's a small button underneath that when surreptitiously pressed, will trigger a false positive. In effect, you will be able to blame someone else for your problems, regardless of the truth."

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

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

With the Professor's attention diverted by what

the Professor was saying to himself, Nathan quietly and quickly pressed the button marked *erase from existence*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that mean?"

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

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

"I am your father."

"No, you're not. Do you plan on reimbursing me for the damage to my computer, my car, and my brain."

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

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

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

The Camel in the Desert

Once upon a time, on a world far from our own, in a desert that spanned thousands of kilometers, a camel walked near a narrow stream of water. The camel lowered his head to drink. By the time his mouth was near the ground, however, all the water had evaporated. He began walking again to find more. He'd hoped to find a lake, but even a small river would make him happy.

Being thirsty made him sad, but he was also sad because he was the only camel remaining. All his other camel friends had died. One had even committed suicide. He'd only been able to say goodbye to one of them; the others had gone up to Heaven much too suddenly.

He walked along further, and in the distance saw a lizard. The lizard wasn't moving, and the camel approached the lizard easily. "Mr. Lizard, why aren't you moving?"

The lizard replied, "Oh, Mr. Camel, I'm so thirsty I can't even move my legs. I'm conserving

my energy until it rains.”

The camel said, “But Mr. Lizard, that may not be for months. You may die before it rains. Let me help. I have water stored in my hump and will give you some.” The camel spit on the lizard, and onto the ground in front of the lizard. He drank some and felt much better.

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

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

The two walked for many kilometers until they spotted a bird. The bird was very thirsty. After exchanging routine social pleasantries, the camel gave the bird some water, just as he had done for the lizard. He then invited the bird to perch on his tail while he continued his search for water.

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

It rained later that evening, and they knew they'd chosen a fine spot in which to stay. Soon, other creatures wandering through the desert found their little settlement. They expanded it over

time, and after a few years it became a well-populated city. None of its citizens ever died of thirst because rain came regularly. It became a tourist attraction to some space-faring camels that landed there by accident when their spaceship ran out of ion particles, a rare fuel, which could be engineered using water and leaves from berry-bushes.

The Magic Brain

Once upon a time, in a universe far from our own, people who weren't familiar with dragons, princesses, fairies, and evil stepmothers roamed the planet *Aurelius*. The citizens of Aurelius never encountered cosmic beings who granted wishes, children were never relentlessly pursued by hunters dispatched by evil stepmothers, and all princesses had haircuts of a practical and appropriate length.

On a bright, comfortably warm day, an Aurelian known as Ralph sat near a mountain watching an extremely large rock. The rock was motionless upon the ground. Ralph, however, had been watching it for nearly two hours. This activity may seem quite boring to most, but Ralph had a fluffy and glittery imagination. What he saw on the rock looked to him just as what the people of Earth would see on a movie screen. He was imagining an adventure unfolding, and seeing many action scenes and characters interacting with one another.

Suddenly a fairy appeared from a gentle wind

blowing nearby. Most would think it impossible, but she wasn't merely an *imaginary* fairy. She wasn't a fairy one might read about in false stories—she was a *real* fairy, with wings on her back and wearing a smart, well-woven, ankle-length dress wrapped around her pleasantly plump figure.

Ralph had never before seen a fairy, not even in his imagination. And to Ralph's good fortune, she was a *good* fairy.

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

"Greetings. My name is Genderina. I am a good fairy. Consider yourself fortunate."

"Okay. Would you like to sit and watch this interesting rock with me?"

"No, thank you. But I would like to grant you two wishes."

"That would be nice," Ralph acknowledged. "Which wishes would you like to grant me?"

Laughing, Genderina replied, "I see you're not quite in tune with how this works. Whatever you would like, no matter how impossible or improbable, I will give to you."

"Okay. I've never wished for anything before. But I would like to wish for a magic brain. I would like a brain that never makes a mistake."

"Your wish is granted," Genderina said, as she dramatically waved her magic wand. In that instant,

all colors of a rainbow began rushing out of Ralph's ears, nose, and mouth. Anything that could cause his brain to make a mistake was leaving his body as a flood of sparkling energy.

Ralph noticed the difference immediately. His thoughts were completely changed. He thanked Gendrina and asked, "How may I contact you when I would like to fill my other wish?"

"Simply call out my name three times and winds will carry your voice to me." She then leapt upon a passing breeze and disappeared.

Ralph sat down to continue watching the extremely interesting large rock. But all he saw was a sandy brown rock. Its surface was smooth, but also contained some sharp edges. He decided the rock had no special features anymore, stood up, and departed for home.

When he arrived home, his wife and two children greeted him with happiness in their eyes and smiles on their faces.

"Hello, Cutesy. Hello, children."

"Good evening, Father," the children replied.

"Welcome home, Ralph." his wife said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Why kiss me on the cheek? You've kissed me there many times already."

His wife, surprised and puzzled, replied, "I just felt like kissing you."

He agreed it was okay for her to kiss him if she felt like it, and kissed her back.

They all sat down to eat. While they were waiting for the food to be served, the children begged, "Please tell us a story, Father!"

"All right. Give me a second to think of one."

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

Cutesy asked, "What's wrong, Ralph? You seem different somehow. And you always can think of stories to tell. Did something bad happen to you today?"

"Oh, no!" Ralph replied. "On the contrary; I was sitting watching my favorite rock and was approached by a good fairy named Genderina. She told me I could have two wishes. Anything I wanted. So I wished for a magic brain; and so she granted me my wish to have a brain that made no mistakes."

The children laughed, "Father, that is a good story!"

Cutesy, however, was not amused. "Ralph, this sounds impossible, but the way you're acting I can't help but think you're telling me something true."

"Yes, it is true."

"Ralph, tell me a joke," his wife commanded sternly.

Ralph attempted to think of a joke but try as hard as he might, he was unable to think of one. He was confused, "I don't understand. My brain should be working better than before. It can't make mistakes. Perhaps Genderina was really an *evil* fairy and lied to me."

Cutesy cried, "Ralph, you got your wish. Don't you understand? Your brain can't make up a story or make a joke because jokes and stories are mistakes. They aren't based on cold logic and facts. Your imagination is gone! Oh no, what shall we do now? The Ralph I knew is gone." And her tears fell like streams upon her face.

Ralph wiped away her tears with a clean napkin from the table. "You are right of course, dear, but don't worry—I still have one wish left. Genderina, Genderina, Genderina!" And with his words came the wind; whispering at first, then howling through the house. And Ralph knew it was a magical wind because it disturbed nothing and nothing was blown over. A very friendly wind it was.

Genderina appeared and said, "Ralph, have you decided on a second wish?" The children stared in amazement. Neither of them had ever before seen a fairy. But Cutesy stared with anger at this magical fairy who stole her husband's brain.

"Yes, Genderina. I've decided my brain was better before I made the first wish. Please, I wish my brain worked as it did before I met you."

Genderina understood and granted his wish. Colors

flew in from outside, through the windows and fell back into Ralph's nose, ears and mouth.

Immediately afterward, Cutesy could tell that Ralph was again himself. She forgave Genderina and invited her to dine with them. And they all lived incorrectly ever after.

The Prisoner

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

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

One morning, a long time ago, a prisoner was eating breakfast. On the wall in front of him appeared a small pinpoint of light. It momentarily hurt his eyes, but the pain quickly subsided. Several seconds later the light grew bigger until its size matched a gray stone block.

The prisoner was frightened but because he was so very bored much of the time, decided to keep

watching the light to see what it would do next. The stone behind the light slid slowly out of the wall. It fell to the ground. It began to grow small arms and legs and a head. A small mouth formed on the head.

The mouth spoke, "Greetings, Inmate!"

"Uh... hello. What... who are you?"

"I'm a stone fairy."

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

"That depends on you. I'm here to grant you one wish."

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

"I wish I were free from this prison."

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

The prisoner was now upon the surface, where light could move about freely and the air was fresh and there was much space on all sides of him. He was very happy that he was free, and he jumped into a nearby lake and swam about joyfully. It wasn't until after he got out of the water when he noticed something very strange. He was fourteen years younger.

The stone fairy suddenly reappeared.

"Good stone fairy, I made *one* wish, yet you have granted me *two*!"

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

"Thank you, good fairy!" Then the fairy disappeared.

The prisoner started walking toward what used to be his home. When he was only a few blocks away, he had a choice to commit a crime, one which would give him great pleasure. Unfortunately, he proceeded to make the choice to commit an act of thievery. Along with the pleasure he experienced, he also had a sense of familiarity, and remembered this was the first crime he ever committed.

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

The Blind Man and His Neighbors

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

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

One day the man was in the forest chopping wood to heat his home, and provide his good wife with fuel for cooking. As he chopped, small wood chips suddenly flew into his eyes. They penetrated deeply and swiftly. He screamed with agony. His wife came

running. Upon seeing the pain on her husband's face and that he was using his hands to cover his eyes, she realized immediately what had happened. She quickly grabbed him and entered their vehicle, and drove him to a nearby hospital. When they arrived he was soon taken to an emergency room, diagnosed, and operated on. Finally the man's eyes were bandaged. He was then wheeled to a recovery room and tucked into a nice, comfortable bed.

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

By how they spoke and acted, he knew they were the people with whom he was familiar. He was certain their eyes were the same shape as his, and he was positive their skin was the same color as his own. The man was also sure they weren't too short or too tall.

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

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

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

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

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

"And you as well, Doctor."

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

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

The doctor slowly and carefully removed the bandages. The man blinked several times so his eyes could get adjusted to the light. Finally he was able to see the doctor, the nurse, and the person cleaning the room. The man was absolutely astonished at what he saw! The doctor's skin color was

different than his own! The shape of the nurse's eyes was not the same as his own! The height of the person cleaning the room differed by several inches!

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

William and Mary

There once lived a man named William. He lived in a large four-bedroom house in a village several miles from the city. He was seventy-eight years old. His wife, Nancy, had died seven years earlier, and his children had all married and moved out many years ago. His children and grandchildren visited William about once a month.

He missed the company of people his own age, men and women who understood each other, and grew up in the same era, who enjoyed the same music, and were fans of the same movie stars. His feelings of isolation and loneliness persisted for the next three days. He decided to go for a walk hoping to run into some of his neighbors, who were often away at work, or busy taking care of their fields. He left for his walk and soon reached a gravel road. He walked along side it. The sun was out, and he could hear birds singing in nearby trees. He looked up and saw the clouds parting to make room for even more sunlight.

William walked for about ten minutes but didn't see his neighbors, so decided he'd walk to the old, rusty iron bench set up for pedestrians, set off from the road several feet. After a few minutes, he could see the corner of the bench—the rest was blocked by a large oak tree. As he walked around the tree, he saw a woman sitting on the bench. He'd never seen her before, which surprised him because he'd lived in the area for forty years.

William greeted her. "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

"Good afternoon." She looked in front of her from left to right, then back at William. "It's such a beautiful day."

"It sure is. My name's William. I don't recall meeting you before."

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

"Same here." He sat down next to Mary, a respectable twelve inches between them.

They made some more small-talk and realized they had several things in common: as children they saw the same movies, they listened to the same music, they voted for the same presidents, and they each enjoyed treats made of chocolate. Before they parted, they made plans to meet there the next day. Then every day for seven days, they again made plans to meet. On the eighth day, William suggested,

"Mary, I enjoy your company very much. I'd like

to invite you to come stay with me for a couple weeks?" He gently took her hand in his.

Before answering, she coughed into her free hand. "I think that's a wonderful idea. I'll bring a small suitcase with some clothes and other odds-and-ends tomorrow. That should be all I need."

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

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

The following afternoon, they again met at the bench, but this time, Mary had a pink leather suitcase. William offered to carry it for her and she accepted. They walked back to his home, and he led her through the house, telling her about a special memory he had from each room they were looking at. When they got to the last room of the house, he said, "This is where you'll be sleeping. My room is right next door. Does it look like you'll be comfortable here?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. She looked at the two paintings on the wall, and the light blue curtains over the window, and pictures of his family on a bookcase. "It's beautiful, and the bed is the same kind as the one we have at home. I'm sure I'll be just fine."

They had dinner together that evening. Afterward, they played cards, talked, and watched television. Around ten they both became tired and went to their rooms for a good night's sleep.

The next two weeks were a very happy time for them. Besides simply enjoying each others' company, they helped each other equally. Mary fixed nutritious meals for William, dusted the glass on his pictures hung on the wall, and folded his laundry. William read the newspaper to Mary (she had poor eyesight), taught her how to unclog a stuck drain, and showed her the best way to pound a nail in the wall.

The two weeks came to an end. Mary woke up feeling short of breath. She knocked on William's door. He got up to open it. He looked in her eyes, heard her breath, and knew she was ill. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just a little short of breath, and feeling a little dizzy. Would it be okay if I stayed here another day or two?"

"Of course. Why don't you lie back down and I'll bring you some orange juice."

"Okay. Thank you, William." He lightly stroked her hair as she went back into her room. He came back with the orange juice. "I'm just not thirsty right now. Why don't you set it down over on the end table. I promise I'll drink it soon."

He set the orange juice down and left the room when he saw she had nodded back off to sleep.

Later on that morning, William suddenly felt a bit tired and weak himself. He planned on taking a nap but first went into Mary's room to check on her. He saw she hadn't yet touched her juice. He

pulled a chair over to her bed and sat down.

Mary slowly opened her eyes and saw William sitting nearby, looking like he was about to fall asleep. "William, come lie next to me, and hold me." William slowly rose from his chair and lay next to Mary. He felt weaker and also very tired. Before he fell asleep, his happiness at being with Mary caused a great smile to form on his face. Mary, with her friend's arms around her, felt very relaxed and happy, and she too grew a broad smile before falling gently asleep.

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The next day, a police car drove into William's driveway. Two officers were inside.

"Stop here, Bart." Bart parked pressed the brakes and the car came to complete stop. He put the gear shift lever into the "park" position.

"Steve, you sure this is the right address."

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

Bart inquired, "Who called it in?"

"James Middleton, his son. He reported that him and his kids came to the house this morning to visit, but found his father lying on the bed. He checked for a pulse but couldn't find one. He rushed the kids out before they saw anything, drove to a restaurant in the city, and called it in. He assumed it was heart failure combined with old

age."

Bart sighed sadly, "Okay. Let's go." They left the vehicle running and walked up the steps to the front door. Steve knocked once, and waited fifteen seconds before trying the doorbell. Steve looked at Bart, who nodded, then he opened the door. They walked inside and looked into each room. Finally, they found William lying on the bed, a glass of orange juice half-full on a nearby end table. Steve sat in a chair and checked William for a pulse, then checked his pupils, which failed to contract. "He's dead."

"Hmmm... no apparent cause, but the coroner can determine that."

"Yeah. Busy day for Stan. He's got that other one too."

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

"I dunno. Just like that one I found this morning."

"Two in one day. I hope I have a smile on my face when I go."

"I don't like to think about it. That gal me and Roger found this morning at her home on Fifth and Main... Mary was her name... she was lying in bed with a big smile on her face, too. On the coffee table in her living was a suitcase that was open and half-packed... but she had that big smile on her face, just like this guy here. I hope wher-

ever she was going she called ahead.”

“That's not funny.”

“Wasn't meant to be.”

The two officers called for an ambulance and William's body was soon taken away to its final resting place, his spirit departing the Earth for its new home.

Mount Solation

Once upon a time there was a mountain. Upon that mountain stood a man who was almost completely alone. The clouds swarming above were his companions.

One day, the man decided to give names to all the clouds. After 100,000 years, giving names to all the clouds became tiresome for the man, so he changed his mind. After 10,000 years of not naming clouds, he thought to name the raindrops which the clouds produced. After 50,000 years, naming raindrops grew tiresome so he ceased giving names to the raindrops. The man, of course, became very bored.

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

After 10,000 years of not giving names to anything, he again fell victim to boredom. The man de-

cided to name the mountain upon which he was standing. He thought about what name to call the mountain for 20,000 years. The man finally decided to call it "Mount Solation." He was very satisfied with the name and decided to go to sleep. He was extremely tired, and slept for 5000 years.

When the man awoke, there was a woman standing next to him. The man was surprised and rubbed his eyes. He had never seen a woman before. The man had only heard about women from the clouds—the clouds used to whisper to him stories of life, men, and women. The woman spoke,

"What's your name?"

The man looked disappointed. "I forgot to give myself a name. I am the man."

"There are many men", she laughed and smiled pleasantly. "Everyone has a name. You must have one too."

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

"Theresa", the woman replied.

"May I have it?"

"Have what?" Theresa inquired.

"Your name", the man answered.

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

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

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

The man sat down on a rock and began to think of a name for himself. After 20,000 years, he decided on a good name. He looked around to tell Theresa his new name, but couldn't find her anywhere. The man was disappointed that although he now had a name, he had nobody to ask him what his name was—nor anyone to call him by his given name. For 250,000 years he wondered how to solve his dilemma; he occasionally slept between thoughts. The man talked to the clouds often and asked their advice. Unfortunately, after 200,000 of those years had passed, the sky cleared and became blue with no clouds to keep him company. The man had been completely alone for 50,000 years.

At the end of that time, a solution entered into the mind of the man. "Today I will go down to the bottom of Mount Solation and I will look for Theresa. I would like to tell her my new name." The man began walking down his mountain, but noticed the clouds had returned. The man thought to return to the top of Mount Solation, but after a second of thought, decided to continue downward.

The man never realized quite how high Mount Solation stretched into the sky. The man thought for a second to turn and go back to the top, but de-

cided against it. Two days after that thought, the man saw someone in the distance. He was quite surprised to see anyone, for he was only half-way to the bottom.

As he drew nearer, he recognized Theresa. "Theresa!" He yelled out to her. Theresa then recognized him also, and responded back, "Hello, man!"

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

"That's wonderful! I'm glad you have a new name; I've been waiting for you to decide on one. Many times I've gone to the top of your mountain, but found you sleeping. I would have come more often, and perhaps found you awake, but it's a very long walk up and down your mountain. Please tell me now, what's your name?"

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

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

"Joseph", the man replied.

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

name, Joseph."

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

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

"What is at the bottom of Mount Solation?"

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

"It sounds very much as what the clouds used to whisper to me. They used to tell me about life, men, and women."

Theresa said, "The clouds would know about all of those things. They've seen it all. It was a cloud who whispered to me, and that's how I found you when we first met; before you had given yourself a name."

Joseph and Theresa began walking down Mount Solation toward the bottom. Joseph asked, "Did the cloud tell you its name?"

"Yes. After the cloud told me where to find you, and that you were on the top of your mountain naming all the clouds, the cloud told me that its name was 'Theresa.'"

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

"Theresa answered, "You won't find that cloud. It became some of the raindrops that you named. It now floats through a river which passes along the bottom of your mountain. It often carries with it many of the grains of sand and dirt which you've named."

"It saddens me about that cloud being gone", Joseph sadly stated.

"That cloud isn't gone; it still exists as the river, the riverbed, and is part of many other clouds that you now see. Many years ago I went looking for you, and I found you sleeping. I went back down the mountain and by the time I reached the bottom, I had almost died of thirst. The river gave me some of it's water and I continued to live."

Joseph and Theresa spent much of the time talking on their walk down to the bottom of Mount Solation. When they finally arrived at the bottom, they both were very thirsty and drank from the river.

They saw and spoke with each other frequently for many years to follow—and also to the other men and women at the bottom of Mount Solation. Ever after, Joseph lived—and experienced that which the clouds had whispered about to him, once upon a time.

The Money Trees

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

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

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

Johann had become friends with a peddler named Elijah, who resided about four kilometers beyond

the border of the kingdom. He was a pleasant fellow and was always greeted with friendly smiles when he came to the kingdom to peddle his reasonably-priced items. Elijah also brought news to the citizens about noteworthy developments occurring throughout the region. Elijah and Johann met with each other frequently. Often, their days were highlighted by stimulating and friendly conversation.

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

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

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

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

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

“You buried the penny because you believed sav-

ing it was more important than spending it?"

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

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

Johann showed Elijah the two silver coins. Elijah had heard stories about money trees during his travels—and when he was a child his parents often complained about not having one—but he had never seen anyone produce money from a tree before.

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

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

The next morning Elijah went outside to see if he had a new money tree. Indeed he did. He plucked a leaf from the tree and it transformed into a silver coin. A bright green leaf fully sprouted from where he had plucked the first leaf. He eagerly pulled off another leaf, and it too transformed into a silver coin. A leaf immediately regrew to

replace the one that was removed. Elijah again thanked Plutus and headed to the kingdom for the day's work.

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

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

The following day, the prince used the money from his tree to buy the castle being built in the

west. He hired more workers to expedite its construction. When it was completed, he hired many filthy peasants to keep it clean and work the land surrounding it. He hired many servants to clean his bedroom—all of whom were female—but always fired them the next morning, before they even had a chance to eat breakfast.

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

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

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

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

"He's not doing any better?"

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

"Tell him I said hi. I'll stop by to visit him tomorrow."

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

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

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

"To you as well, Johann."

And the two men each departed for their respective homes.

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

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

As Johann waited for the messengers to return,

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

Meanwhile, back at the prince's castle, the servants walked out after he ran out of money and couldn't pay them. The food stores now empty, and without any income or desire for honest employment, he had to move back into the king's castle. His mother, the queen, welcomed her son home with open arms, a kiss on the cheek, and a hot meal. Afterward, she sent him up to the east guard tower, where the king was with the general of the kingdom's army, discussing new security policies. His father was not nearly as forgiving as the queen.

"When you stop relying on money trees as your sole source of income, and quit gambling, you can have one of the royal bedrooms upstairs. Until then, you can sleep in the coat room next to the bathroom downstairs. And another thing—" the king stopped speaking when he suddenly spotted eight riders on horseback approach the east kingdom gate, each with a passenger accompanying him. "An attack? A scouting party?"

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

"Ah, yes," the king replied calmly. "I do hope they can help poor Stephen. Johann has been such a loyal and dedicated servant; I'd hate for any ill fate to befall a member of his family. I do hope those physicians have the knowledge of the gods to cure the young lad. General, make sure those physicians and messengers have an armed escort while they're here. Pass a message to the cook, and be sure they get a full meal, and a comfortable place to sleep for the night. If the physicians require anything to help treat Stephen, your lieutenants should notify me immediately."

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

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

To the delight of people everywhere, it rained continuously for three days and three nights. During that time, eight physicians met under a large green tent hastily erected by employees of the kingdoms Department of Cloth Shelters. Inside, accommodations had been set up for the medical spe-

cialists: a large table, chairs, writing tools, and paper. Serfs perpetually walked through to make sure everyone had fresh coffee. The tent was located in proximity to Johann's house. The specialists worked without rest, exchanging ideas and combining their knowledge. Finally they devised a treatment for Stephen; they unanimously agreed it was the best course of action and proceeded to administer it.

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

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

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

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

The two men talked for a while, then Johann returned home. He opened the front door and saw Stephen at the kitchen table, eating a large meal. Stephen looked up, and smiled at his father. Johann walked to the backyard, and found the penny he had buried. He went back in and gave it to Stephen, and

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

