

About the Author



Charles Sabillon did High School in Texas and has undergraduate degrees in Philosophy, Economics and Law as well as a masters and a doctorate in International Relations. After completing his PhD, he undertook post-doctoral research in the fields of History, Economics, and Ecology. He has published books on economics and has taught economic history at a Swiss university. He completed all his degrees in half the normal amount of time and speaks fluently English, Spanish, French and German.



Roy Johansen is the most successful lawyer of all times and he has never lost a case. The Swede-American is an atheist who has a habit of ridiculing the beliefs of religious people. Although young, one day he dies and when he wakes up, finds himself in Hell.

From the moment he arrives, terrible creatures begin to torture him and the punishments are so atrocious, that he becomes determined to escape. However, to do that, he must outsmart the Devil and that is something nobody has ever achieved. Although impossible, outwitting the Devil is the easy part because there is also a need to overpower his boss and his boss is God.

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In Bed With God And The Devil



Charles Sabillon



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Part I

The Lawyer

Prologue

“Is God into schadenfreude?” the ten-year-old child asked his teacher while sitting at the back of a large and modern classroom filled with pupils older than himself. The twenty other students immediately looked at him, for they suspected that an interesting row would follow. They usually did not understand the discussions their classmate conducted with the professors, but they liked the distraction from the regular course work.

“I have already told you not to use Swedish words in class,” said the Catholic educator while he hastily turned towards the pupil who had made the remark.

“For starters, it is German,” replied the handsome blond shrewdly. “So tell us, is God evil?”

“Of course he is not,” roared the man in the dark clothes while pointing menacingly with his finger. “That is blasphemy. How dare you speak in such a way of our Creator? If you continue with that attitude, Roy Johansen, one day you will find yourself in Hell, and down there you will not get away with that irreverence. Down there, impudence is severely castigated.”

“Does that mean that after so many centuries of misguided Church policies, the Vatican still has not come up with something better? Every time religions can’t explain something, they threaten those asking the questions with punishment. That seems pretty simplistic and outdated, don’t you think?”

“Why is it that you are always so offensive to our faith?” inquired the man while despairing over the constant misbehavior of the brat. “Why can’t you be more like your classmates?”

“It is not my intention to be iconoclastic,” said the neatly dressed boy while keeping his eyes fixed on the short-haired fifty-year-old instructor, whose brown eyes and burgundy locks partly revealed his Italian ancestry. “I just want to understand why things happen in the way they do. So, tell us. Is God sexually active? I have heard new stories about—”

“Stop,” barked the Jesuit furiously, and the giggling that had erupted among the students immediately came to a halt. “This is the tenth time you have behaved in such a way in my class. Your contempt and lack of respect for our most sacrosanct institutions is outrageous. You should be ashamed of yourself. God is good and he is the source of everything wonderful in this world. Everybody knows that. You leave me no other option but to send a letter to your parents and put you on detention for the next month.”

Roy was not normal. He had never been. Since his early years, he had started to display evidence of possessing a very unusual and highly developed brain. He was brilliant in many ways, but it was his ability to debunk and trash the ideas of even the most intelligent people what most stood out. He was a precocious child who, by the age of two, had already learned how to read, who jumped ahead several years in school, and who, by his mid teens, had gained access to a prestigious university. Genius was a word that did not fully describe his talents and, by thirty-four, he had developed into something beyond the term 'extraordinary'.

The Trial

The Nassau County District Court of New York was full, and the atmosphere in the room was hot. Not so much because it was a sizzling summer day in August, but because the chamber was brimming with journalists, law students and lay people. All seats were taken and many people were standing. In the hall next to the courtroom the situation was very similar, and in the adjacent street it was the same thing, with an expectant crowd that was excitedly awaiting the outcome of the trial.

On the sidewalk in front of the main entrance of the three-storey building a young and attractive female journalist stood with a microphone in her hand while a television camera pointed at her.

"It is not yet lunchtime but the thermometer is already hitting 100 degrees," said the short-haired brunette. "However, there is another reason why the heat is on. The content of this trial is explosive, and it is that which has attracted such a throng. The hearings have been dragging on for two months and every day in court has been transmitted to the entire world by television. As most people know by now, the main participants are Mona Yalow and Pete Anderson. Ms. Yalow is the aggrieved party and she is suing Mr. Anderson with the help of her lawyer, Roy Johansen."

Mona was twenty-two years old, she was blond, she was beautiful, and she was a psychologist. Pete was thirty and was a successful architect, working in his father's firm. He had brown hair, was good looking and tall.

Mona sat next to her attorney and, to her left, on the other side of the large courtroom, was Pete, who was also accompanied by his legal counsel. The judge was a graying brunette, and she was behind her desk several yards from the parties, watching the crowd.

Everybody was dressed very formally and there was a soft chattering among the lawyers and their clients. It was the final day of deliberations and both parties were tense. Roy Johansen was sporting an elegant blue navy suit, a white shirt and a red tie, and at a given point he stood up to make his concluding remarks.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he said confidently while addressing the men and women sitting silently to his right, "this is a case that nobody had thought of bringing to court just a few years ago. However, we are in the twenty-first century and the coming of the new millennium has conveyed a novel atmosphere of rationality. This new era demands that we adopt a more consistent view of the world. It requires that we examine any claim on its merits, independent of its apparent absurdity. So long as an idea is scientifically substantiated we must bend before it even if it destroys our most cherished beliefs."

Roy paused, took a panoramic view of the room and then said, "We are thus demanding from this court that justice be rendered and that my client receives in compensation ten million dollars for the physical and psychological damages caused by Mr. Anderson's neglectful behavior."

Roy was a spellbinding orator, with a compelling eloquence. His arguments were filled with such strong logic and such pointed consistency that he had never lost a case. The blond was only thirty-four, but he was already a legend in the profession. He had won cases even before finishing college and had completed his studies in half the normal amount of time, having already studied medicine before going to law school. His photographic memory allowed him to accumulate vast amounts of information, and he could go into the tiny details of just about any subject. However, that was not his most impressive feat. His most outstanding asset was the ability to uncover the causality of any given phenomenon. Where others saw chaos in the mass of information, he would view rational order. This dexterity gave him extraordinary powers because it enabled him to demolish the arguments of any opponent.

His brain powers somehow resembled those of Leonardo Da Vinci, the famous fifteenth century intellectual, who engaged in several disciplines and outperformed the scientists of his time in all of them. Da Vinci's mind was so outstanding that most historians have classified him as the brightest man of all time.

Roy was also brilliant in several disciplines, such as medicine, law and psychology. He never studied psychology but had written a book about the behavior of women that had caused a revolution in the field of sexology. However, in some aspects, he was perhaps more impressive than Da Vinci because the Italian artist and inventor had a flaccid attitude towards most things. The Renaissance man had a terrible habit of not finishing what he had started and left numerous things incomplete. Roy, on the other hand, was somebody who would always bring to an end what he had begun.

When Roy's parents got married, everybody predicted that they would have intelligent children because Lars Johansen was a reputed brain surgeon from Sweden and Laura O'Brien an American marine biologist who taught at Stanford University. However, nobody ever imagined that their progeny would be that bright. Roy's upbringing further contributed to enhancing his mental abilities. He grew up in Sweden, Germany and France, attended high school in the U.S., studied medicine in Japan, and studied law at Harvard University. Then, he went to work for one of the best law firms in New York and, after a few years, opened up his own practice. Roy spoke six languages fluently: Swedish, German, French, Japanese, Spanish and English.

The young lawyer was also extremely handsome. He was tall, blond, facially symmetrical and built. The strength of his arguments, his speaking abilities plus his charm and charisma would usually overwhelm an audience. However, many people found him arrogant, and several in the jury saw things that way. On top of that, Pete had hired a top lawyer who pleaded his case very convincingly.

“The reason why no court in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world has ever granted validity to such a claim,” said Pete’s attorney, “is because it is a perversion of the law. There are limits to what people can demand from a court, and this case is way over that boundary.”

The fifty-year-old blue-eyed man then went on to elaborate extensively on the matter. When Pete’s lawyer finished, the judge instructed the jury to deliberate over the case and, four hours later, the twelve-person body came out from their secluded room. One of its members was a middle-aged bald man and, once the chamber had become quiet, he stood up.

“Your honor,” said the man with the polished scalp, “we have come to a unanimous decision.” The fellow handed over a folded sheet to the mustachioed bailiff, who took it to the judge.

“May the parties rise,” affirmed the graying brunette after having glanced at the paper. The two lawyers and their clients immediately did as instructed and all stared tensely at the woman in black robes. “The members of the jury find Pete Anderson fully liable for the physical and psychological injuries suffered by Mona Yalow. The jury thus grants validity to the demand for financial reparation, obliging Mr. Anderson to pay the sum of eight million dollars.”

A roar instantly erupted in the courtroom and Roy allowed himself a small smile. Mona stood up and hugged him while Pete thumped the table with his fist. A few minutes later the press outside the building was abuzz, commenting on the outcome of the trial. The pretty brown-haired journalist was among them.

“Roy Johansen has done it again,” she said. “He has not just won another case, thus keeping an undefeated record, but he has set a new precedent in American legislation and pushed the tort system of reparations to new heights. According to legal experts, this case could open the door to a totally new dimension of civil claims, which could end by radically changing the judicial system. This is the man who five years ago won the first case in history against the food industry. He convinced the court that his three thousand clients had become obese during childhood and developed diabetes as a result of misleading information on labels about the calorie and sugar content of their products. The compensation award was one of the largest in history. This is also the man who three years ago persuaded a jury that his client had become impotent as a result

of his regular consumption of cigarettes, and Philipo Tobacco had to pay six million dollars in reparations. Now, he has successfully pleaded to a dozen people something even more bizarre. This case was so out of the ordinary that nobody would have thought it worthy of a judicial deliberation just a year ago. Mr. Johansen is an attorney who is constantly defending people on matters that seem preposterous and unlikely to be admitted in court. However, he systematically manages not just to convince the juries that they are normal plaintiffs, but also that they should decide in his favor. It is a mystery how he does it, but the fact is that he is probably the most outstanding lawyer that has ever walked the Earth."

In Manhattan, at one of the best legal firms in the country, two smartly-dressed men watched TV from their comfortable chairs and heard about the outcome of the trial.

"I hate to admit it," snarled one of them resentfully, "but that sonofabitch Roy Johansen is probably the best in the world. I once had a case that was a sure win because all the evidence was in our favor, and Roy somehow convinced the jury that my client was to blame. We lost. I bet that bastard could even outsmart the Devil."

"I know," groaned the other one. "I have heard of lawyers who refused to take a case once they found out that the other party was being represented by Johansen."

The Lawyer and the Priest

Two days after the trial, Roy's relatives, friends and colleagues organized a surprise party for him. It took place at his cousin's house, which was a grand residence situated on the outskirts of the city. There were about two hundred people attending, and everybody wanted to chat with him. The attorney loved pressing the flesh because he had political ambitions, so he massaged the crowd and shook hands with everybody. Roy exchanged a few words with dozens of them, but after a while he became tired and searched for a place to sit. He chose a large round table where his father and several of his surgeon colleagues had settled down. One of Roy's uncles, a Catholic priest, was also there.

"I bet that Roy could even win a case against the Devil," one of the surgeons joked. The medium-sized lady, named Karen, was a short-haired, blue-eyed woman in her fifties. She had swarthy locks and was wearing brown pants and a white blouse. She came from a family of doctors and had recently gone through an acrimonious divorce. Karen looked at the priest and asked him with a slightly mocking tone, "Father, do you think that Roy could outsmart Satan and talk his way out of Hell?"

The priest, who was a brown-haired man in his sixties and was dressed all in black, was not amused by such a comment that suggested disbelief in the Catholic Church's claims concerning sin and punishment. Therefore, the man just sneered mildly, preferring not to answer because he knew that most college-educated people did not pay much attention to religion.

"In principal, I could never outwit him," said Roy, "because he is supposed to possess powers that are well beyond those of any human being. But even if the Devil could be somehow outgunned, it would still be impossible to escape from the inferno." The blond attorney was casually dressed and looked much younger than he regularly did in court.

"Why is that?" smiled Karen derisively, as if she was certain that the story about Heaven and Hell was just a prank that religions had played on humanity.

"Because Hell can only exist with the consent of God, and he is as pleased in having it as the Mayor of New York is in having jails. Therefore, even if somebody could somehow outsmart the Prince of Darkness, the Almighty would come out as a lawyer of last resort and debunk that person's arguments. Since God is wiser than the Devil, and there is nobody brighter than Him, then his triumph would be assured."

"It is that sort of reasoning that has made your son great," grinned Karen while glancing at Roy's father, who was sitting next to her.

"Nevertheless," added the blond lawyer, "that is a scholastic debate because there is nothing which suggests that God exists."

"Son," growled the priest sharply, "you shouldn't talk in such a way about something that is sacred to billions of people."

"With all due respect, Uncle Leo," said Roy, "but if you are alive it is because of pharmaceuticals, chemically-treated water, electricity, medical equipment, transport vehicles, processed food, tractors and thousands of other goods that embody technology, and not because of God."

"That is not true," retorted the priest irately.

"Look at everything around you. All the ample food at this party, for example, is the result of farm and food processing technology. The refrigerator, where it can be so efficiently stored, is a discovery of the 1920s. Look at your clothes. They are the typical garments of a priest, but they are made of synthetic fiber derived from oil. It is technology and not God that has provided for all those things."

"You must recognize, Father, that what Roy is saying are undeniable facts," uttered Karen, who was clearly enjoying the lawyer's discourse. She had recently gone through a rancorous court battle with her ex-husband and was eager to use the social gathering as an opportunity to forget about her woes.

"Every achievement of humanity," continued the good looking blond, "is the doing of science and technology, which results from logical thinking. Rationality, however, is something that religions are not endowed with. They are full of inconsistencies and contradictions. That is why they have always opposed science."

"Which inconsistencies are you talking about?" asked the priest defiantly, as someone who is certain that there are no weak points in his beliefs.

Leo Johansen was a member of the Dominican order, and he was a pious man who had dedicated all of his life to serve the poor. He had educated thousands of children in Africa, Latin America and Asia, and had done it with great zeal. The man had always adhered stringently to the numerous demands of his confessional and had led a life of abstinence and hard work. He was a true believer, which is why he resented it so much when somebody spoke badly of his creed.

"The Bible is illustrative of the convoluted ideas that impregnate all religions, for it has countless passages that don't make any sense," said Roy. "There are parts, for example, that recount how Jesus, while traveling the land, found a crowd of hungry and thirsty people. Moved by their suffering, he produced food and wine out of thin air for all."

"And what is the problem with that?" asked the priest sourly while grabbing his cup of coffee.

“Well, for starters, there is no way of verifying if that is true. But even if it really took place, the issue is: why did Jesus only supply them with food once? People cannot live on one meal alone, and in those times everybody was literally dying of hunger. In that epoch, the whole population of the Middle East and the rest of the world was hungry and starvation was never far away.”

“Hmm. Indeed, a very perspicacious observation,” said Karen. “Why hadn’t I ever thought about that?”

“Had Jesus really wanted to help those people, he would have provided them with ample comestibles for a whole lifetime. The scientists of the twenty-first century have done that, and they are not God. The fact that the founder of Christianity didn’t even come close to matching the achievements of the technologists of today clearly reveals that the Bible is just a fairy tale.”

“Watch what you are saying,” snapped the priest indignantly while standing up and raising his voice. “That is blasphemy.”

“Oh, come on, Father,” said Karen while lightly simpering. “Be a good sportsman and let the kid talk. I agree that his language is a little irreverent, but he has a point.”

“Calm down, Leo,” said Roy’s father apologetically. “You are a man of principle, and we all respect that.”

Lars Johansen was a well-groomed man with short, yellowish hair and a tall stature. Lars was a multifaceted individual. He was not just a brilliant surgeon and a savvy businessman, but also an effective fund-raiser for the numerous philanthropic causes of his religious brother.

The priest’s ruddy face rapidly started to regain its natural color and he sat down.

“There are other parts,” continued Roy, “in which Jesus encountered people afflicted with terrible diseases, such as leprosy and blindness. He said a few kind words, touched them and they were immediately cured. In those times, epidemics of all sorts, such as cholera, typhus and tuberculosis, were constantly ravaging the population, and as much as half of all the people in any given country would usually die in one fast go. Jesus never addressed the problem of epidemics, which was the main health concern of the time. Had he really possessed divine powers, he would have not just eliminated the epidemics but also all other health issues, and would have done it for all people, and not just a few individuals.”

Another of the surgeons at the table was a very religious man, and he was getting increasingly irritated by Roy’s words. He was an overweight brown-haired Texan in his fifties, with reddish cheeks and bad taste in clothes. His name was George, and he was wearing a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, a red shirt and jeans.

"That argument doesn't make any sense," he blurted out.

"Of course it makes sense," retorted the lawyer. "Why couldn't Jesus have snapped his fingers and, voila, everything cured? Why couldn't he have provided the medical technology to put an end to at least the worst diseases? The scientists of today have done that and they are not gods."

"Yeah. Why couldn't he have done that?" asked Karen.

"The fact is that two thousand years ago in Palestine, life expectancy was just eighteen years of age, and infant mortality was about six hundred for every one thousand live births. That is a big difference from what we have today. At present, Americans live to eighty years and only five children out of a thousand die within their first year."

"Wow. Was it really that bad?" exclaimed Karen.

"Yes, and it is also a historical fact that the coming of Jesus changed absolutely nothing about those wretched living conditions. Those people continued to die by the droves."

"I presume that with the other religions it is the same thing."

"That's right. At the moment Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were founded there was not the slightest improvement in the lives of the people that received the new gospel. Centuries later, and there was still no progress."

"You are being rude and disrespectful to the priest," growled the Texan. "Why don't we change the subject?"

"You know what," said the attorney, "that doesn't sound very original. That's what the Church has always done. Throughout the centuries, every time religious ideas were tested against the scientific evidence, they did not pass the test, and when that happened, clergymen tried to bury the information and eliminate the free thinkers."

"That's true," said Karen. "There were even times when people were burned at the stake for expressing rational ideas. Fortunately, we no longer live in the Dark Ages and ideologues don't tell us what to think. I want to continue hearing about this subject. It's getting more interesting by the minute."

"I would also like to listen to some more of that," interjected the only other woman at the table, who was wearing a red blouse and a red skirt. The mild-mannered anesthesiologist was a native of London and was in her forties. She had golden locks, a pleasant smile and was a mother of four. Catherine was a competent British doctor who had done her specialization in the United States and had married an American. She was holding the youngest of her sons in her arms and was gently caressing the sleeping three-year-old.

"The incoherence of religions is endless, and it gets revealed in a multiplicity of ways," said Roy. "Scientists have always been seen by the

clergy as the enemy, but the men of thought never had as their goal to damage the Church, and most were actually Christians, Jews or belonged to some other creed. However, in their desire to explain the world logically, they ended up colliding with their religions.”

“Could you elaborate on that,” said Catherine in her usual British accent.

“Yes, of course. According to the science of anthropology, the apparition of the human species is the result of evolution and not of divine creation. Anthropologists can very convincingly demonstrate that our species made its apparition about 100,000 years ago. They can also show that humans evolved from more primitive beings called hominids, and the first of their kind appeared about five million years ago.”

“Don’t lecture us,” snarled the fat Texan. George was a native of Houston, and his family had made a fortune with oil. He was known for being a straight talker, but also for his pompous style and his habit of gulping lots of steaks in an uncivilized way. The Texan was a family man with a loving wife and two daughters.

“Don’t pay attention to him,” said Catherine. “Go on.”

“The science of biology can prove beyond any doubt that hominids evolved from primates, and these from other less developed species. There has been a constant process of evolution for the last 3.5 billion years. These disciplines clearly reveal that there is not a need for a creating God to justify the existence of humans or the vast diversity of plants and animals on this planet.”

The priest hated every word that Roy uttered, but knew that if he argued in religious terms, the others would laugh at him. He nonetheless had to counterattack, and fast.

“The Church has for some time distanced itself from a literal interpretation of the Bible and has concluded that what the sacred scriptures really mean is that God created life and from then on it evolved,” he stated.

“That sounds consistent,” mouthed George. “And besides, science is just as ensnared with dead ends. That is why several university professors have dumped evolutionary theory. They claim that there are too many things about life on this planet that academic textbooks cannot elucidate and suggest that a possible explanation is a creating God.”

“That is pseudo science,” affirmed Karen while looking at her colleague with contempt. “Those are not real cognoscenti. They are jokers and don’t even account for one percent of scientists.”

The Interruption

Just as she was finishing her sentence, a beautiful brunette walked by and threw a flirtatious glance at Roy. The attorney instantly stopped talking and looked at her penetratingly. The girl went into another room and the blond immediately stood up and said, "Excuse me. I have to go to the restroom."

He marched into the large chamber the brunette had entered and found it filled with people. Roy searched for the girl and, seconds later, saw her. She was in the arms of a redheaded fellow and they were smiling and exchanging kisses.

James, Roy's cousin, who was the same age and looked somewhat like Tom Cruise, approached and said, "I also wanted to hit on her, but she has a boyfriend."

"Who is the pretty blonde over there?" asked Roy while pointing at a gorgeous girl in a green dress on the other side of the room.

"Don't even think about it," said James. "She is sixteen and her mother is a judge. Before you even got a hold of her phone number you would find yourself in prison."

"Too bad we have dumb laws here. In many European countries the age of consent is fifteen, and in all the others it is sixteen."

Roy then walked back to the round table and sat down.

"What took you so long?" asked Karen.

"Yeah, we are impatient to continue with the discussion," said Catherine. "So what were you saying about evolution?"

"Oh, yes. The problem with the Vatican's argument is that it does not add up with what biochemistry states," said Roy. "That discipline claims that the first unicellular organisms on the planet, which came into existence billions of years ago, resulted from a particular chemical process. Although complicated, such a process can be reproduced in the laboratory from lifeless substances, thus demonstrating, once again, the spontaneity of the situation."

"And that is not the only thing that is not in need of a Divine hand," said Karen as she stood up and walked to a nearby table to grab some food.

"Right," added the lawyer. "Planetary science, astronomy and cosmology can demonstrate that our solar system and our galaxy are the result of physical forces that have a life of their own. They can also show that the universe was always there and is, therefore, not in need of a Creator."

"What do you mean that it was always there?" asked George

disbelievingly. "It had to come from somewhere and it had to start sometime. Everything has a beginning."

"According to the real scientists," sneered Roy, clearly differentiating them from the academics who had given a respectful backing to the spurious ideas of the religious right in America, "the universe is about fifteen billion years old, and in about ten billion years it will stop expanding and begin to contract. Many billion years later, it will have shrunk so much that every galaxy in existence today will have been crushed and destroyed."

"And what is the problem with that?" interjected George unpleasantly.

"If you keep interrupting, it will take longer for you to find out," hissed Karen icily.

Roy went on expounding. "The constriction process will stop once all the matter in the universe gets compressed into a particular point and, at that moment, it will explode and begin to swell again. As it grows, galaxies and planets will form anew and, in some of them, life will spring up. It is a recurrent and repetitive process with a cycle of many billions of years, and it just happens over and over again without ever stopping. The cycle is driven by its own internal forces. There is, thus, no need of a God."

"That is not the only possibility," asserted the priest disapprovingly while crossing his arms over his chest.

"Look, Uncle Leo," said Roy. "As unpleasant as those arguments might sound to a religious person, the fact is that we have no better guide than science because it is the only one that has delivered concrete results to society. And science clearly demonstrates that God does not exist."

"What you are saying only shows that the Church's position is not fully consistent," retorted George airily. "But it does not demonstrate that God is a hoax."

"You know, it is quite interesting what social anthropologists say," explained the lawyer. "They have noticed that ever since humans made their first appearance, about 100,000 years ago, they have been venerating a God of one sort or another. The number of religions that this world has seen is gigantic, and even though most have disappeared by now, it is possible to find a common denominator in all of them."

"That is ridiculous," groaned George heatedly after having swallowed a third of his glass of whiskey in one fast go. "All religions are different, and mine is the only true one."

Roy stopped and stared at the fat Texan. He then took a sip from his glass of red wine. For Karen, the pause took too long and she queried with impatience, "So what is the commonality?"

"In all human societies we find a structure of power, and there is always somebody who holds the most might. Today we call him president

or prime minister and in the past it was the king or emperor. After the top man, there is invariably a pyramid structure and, as it moves downward, the number of people holding power increases but their decision-making capacity decreases. Today the ministers come second, and after them there are many more individuals who hold even less sway and have more individualized tasks."

"And what does that prove?" snarled George.

"How many shots of whiskey have you had?" snapped Karen, increasingly displeased with the rude attitude of her colleague. "Please, Roy. Go on."

"When you analyze all the present and past religions of the world, you notice that there is also a pyramid in which authority decreases at each step down the ladder. There is always a top God that can interfere in all domains and then many less important divinities with specialized activities which, in their turn, have several minor deities that implement their commands. There is a divine division of labor, just as in a human government."

"And what does that mean?" asked Catherine while she continued to caress her sleeping son.

"It is interesting to notice that from the earliest of times to the present, it is men who have ruled in all nations of the world. Even today, despite the impressive political emancipation of women, men rule in about ninety-nine percent of all countries. Is it coincidence that in all past and present religions the top God, or even the top prophet, was always a man? Goddesses have never taken a leading role."

"I still don't see the point of your previous statements," uttered Catherine.

"That is what social scientists call anthropomorphism. People created Gods in their own image because that was the first thing that came to their minds. Had God really existed, It would have appeared in a neutral form so that It would have not projected a biased image towards a particular gender. Why would a God who is as concerned about the welfare of women come as a man?"

"Oh, I get it," said Catherine. "Yeah. That makes a lot of sense."

"It would have surely caused a better impression had the Almighty showed up as a giant ball of light or something of the sort. Religions always present God or his son or his prophet as a human male because the people who made up the religious tales were men, and they were using themselves as the measurement of all things. In their egocentric brains, they could see no better model than themselves."

"I had never thought of that," said Karen. "But all the creeds of the world are indeed overflowing with testosterone."

"That's true," said Catherine. "At the top there is always someone with a penis."

"The same goes for the power structure in all religions. It is a photocopy of the one that humans have created. Since human government is characterized by a polyhedron structure, the people who fabricated the creed concluded that the divine government had to function in the same way, and they thus presented it as having a pyramidal form."

"That is just coincidence," growled George, showing increasing signs of irritation as he clenched his teeth angrily.

"Oh, really?" retorted the blond. "Let's go back to the matter of God being a man. Why should God be male? Why do his representatives, whether his sons or prophets, always belong to that gender? Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, to name the most relevant. To that you have to add that all religions are sexist. Women have always played a secondary role in the church, and frequently they didn't play any."

"That proves nothing," said George while refilling his glass with whiskey.

"Isn't it interesting that all creeds share that common denominator? Then, we look at human society and we immediately notice that throughout history, and even today, women have always played a secondary role in government or no role at all."

"That is so true," said Karen.

"There is only one possible conclusion," affirmed Roy. "People invented religions together with the Gods that come with them and took pointers from the way human society functions to imagine how the government of Heaven works. Since men are the ones who rule in all nations, they figured God and His prophets had to be male."

Everybody at the table listened attentively to Roy's ideas. Some were fascinated by his comments while others found them repulsive.

All of a sudden, a phone rang. Everybody at the table searched for their portables and, seconds later, Roy's father said, "It's for me." He talked for a brief moment and then addressed four of his colleagues.

"Something has come up at the hospital. We have an operation in a few hours. We have to go now."

George, the two women and another man stood up and, at that moment, the priest's phone rang. The clergyman was needed at his church, and he also left.

Monique

Two weeks had gone by since the party, and Roy was driving his brand new Mercedes to his office. He had bought it with the income from his latest case, which amounted to fifty percent of the award the court had granted.

It was nine o'clock in the morning and the sun was shining brightly. The sky was cloudless, there was a warm breeze, and everything suggested that it would be a great day. Even the scents swirling around him were agreeable. The pleasant aroma of the new leather seats poured gently into his nostrils, mixing graciously with the smell of the flowers he had just bought for his office.

As he drove, the lawyer saw a glamorous girl on the sidewalk. She had long, silky, orange hair and a face that seemed to have been chiseled by a Renaissance artist. She was tall and had such a curvaceous and proportionate body that drivers stopped in the middle of the street to gaze at her. Roy was a master opportunist, and his appointments for the morning could wait. He rapidly parked the car, got out and walked towards her.

When the blond crossed her he asked, "Excuse me. You study law, right?"

"No, I am still in high school," said the girl, smiling, as she stood in front of a barber shop wearing a white skirt, green T-shirt and silvery sandals.

"I thought I saw you yesterday at the law library at Columbia University."

"No, it wasn't me."

"Then it must have been your sister."

"I doubt it. My sisters are younger."

"Maybe it's somebody that looks like you. My grandmother used to say that there are about seven people throughout the world that look like each one of us."

"Seven?" she queried surprised. "That's a lot."

"Well, in your case, there are surely less, because only 0.1 percent of the world population has red hair. Your doubles are obviously not easy to find, but there surely are some. I didn't used to believe in those stories, but I once went to Russia and somebody over there told me that there was somebody that looked just like me. After that, I have taken my grandma's words seriously."

She laughed lightly and said, "Really?"

"So when will you be finished with school?"

"In a year, and I am planning to study journalism," she said enthusiastically.

"You seem to have chosen well, because you look like one of those people who will one day be awarded a Pulitzer Prize."

"What do you mean, I look?"

"Well, my grandmother used to tell me that the eyes are the windows to a person's soul and the gateway to its future, and you have a sparkle in your pupils that suggests somebody who is investigative, perspicacious and full of energy. My grandma earns her living by analyzing people's futures, and when I was a kid, I was her assistant."

"Really?" she chortled and beckoned the blond to continue with her tone and posture.

"My grandmother told me that when people have a look suggesting ample energy, discipline and wit, as in your case, it frequently coincides with a strong professional line. Have you ever seen your professional line?"

"What is that?"

Roy gently grabbed her hand, looked at her palm and pointed with his finger. "This is your professional line. Wow, it is pretty long. Most people's are shorter. An extended one usually coincides with people who have a long career."

"You know, I am more into scientific explanations, and palm reading is not scientific."

Roy had a ready-made answer for every situation. "Such a comment is a reflection of a highly rational brain. However, there is also science in palm reading. The field of parapsychology has been studying it for some time, and even though the experts have not deciphered the causality of the phenomenon, they recognize that some people have extrasensorial powers that allow them to correctly interpret the future of others."

"You are kidding, right?" said the redhead while giggling in exultation.

"Did you know that the FBI and the CIA utilize mediums to solve certain cases when traditional police and spook techniques do not deliver the desired results? It is indeed an impressive feat that by just touching the clothes or other belongings of a kidnapped person, for example, those mediums sometimes provide clues that help solve the crime. My grandmother has those abilities, and I inherited some of them."

"Do you truly see all those things in me? Do you think I will get to be a good journalist and could one day get awarded the most important prize in that profession?"

Roy responded while still holding her hand and gently caressing it. "Well, for a more precise analysis we would have to undertake a session of

meditation so that your karma gets fully expressed, because when it does, the information in the hand lines becomes clearer. I was in Tibet some years ago and learned several techniques for transcendental meditation. I was about to go and do that. Would you like to go for a session?"

"Right now?" she asked with surprise and pulled her hand back.

"Well, it only takes, like, ten minutes, and my meditation room is just around the corner."

She hesitated and looked suspicious. Noticing that, the attorney reverted to one of his many subterfuges.

"Studies show that meditation also enhances mental capacity. Memory, in particular, is enhanced, as well as intuition. You will do a lot better on your tests by building up those abilities."

She wavered for a few seconds and then uttered, "Okay."

Roy then started walking by her side towards his car. He opened the door for her, closed it, and rapidly got behind the steering wheel.

"So you are a senior, huh?" queried the blond while driving towards his apartment.

"Yes," she said spiritedly. "I am starting classes next week, and in five months I will be eighteen. By Easter my parents will no longer be able to forbid me from going to Asia with my friends. I want to go to Singapore, China, Japan and Korea."

"Good choice. So, what's your name?"

"Monique," she answered.

Teenagers were what Roy most liked. They always had a smell of freshness and an aura of innocence that was impossible to find in women of an older age.

Soon after, they got to Roy's glamorous apartment and, after having closed the door, he proposed, "Let's sit down in the living room."

She walked towards a comfortable chair and grinned, almost blushing at the lawyer.

"Here, on the sofa." He pointed and they both sat down. "Meditation is about not thinking about anything so that the stress gets liberated. You will close your eyes and try to concentrate on a particular word or a small phrase. The word *om* is most frequently used, but if you have another one, please use it. Then, repeat it over and over again while you exhale."

"Okay."

"Great. Let's get started."

She lowered her eyelids and remained motionless. Roy did likewise, and in no time the girl began to experience a feeling of nothingness. About ten minutes later, Roy approached her and uttered in a low voice, "Now we will try to extricate your karma."

He started by softly massaging the fingers of Monique's right hand one by one. Then, he gently rubbed her forearm with circular movements, and after that the rest of the limb, which was followed by the left one. Then, the lawyer went on to remove her left sandal and he immediately began to knead her toes, which was followed by the rest of her foot. During all that time, Monique remained with her eyes closed and continued to respire as instructed. After finishing with the foot, he did the calf, and slowly moved upwards.

Half an hour later, it was all over, and Roy had a very satisfied grin. Monique felt bad about having been picked up in the middle of the street by a complete stranger and having sex with him. It wasn't even a date, and she had never done that before. However, Roy was physically impressive, his pickup lines had an overpowering, seductive punch, and he was rich. Despite the negative aspects of the situation, she thought that it was the start of a great love story.

Nevertheless, in the days that followed, Roy did not call. She waited patiently for the phone to ring, but it never did. Eventually, she got desperate and went to his apartment, but he was not there. Monique went back several times, but nobody opened the door. The redhead found out where he worked and paid him a visit, but Roy's secretary told her he was not in the office. She nonetheless left with his number and called repeatedly. When she finally got hold of him, the lawyer said he would be extremely busy in the following days and would call her later. He never did.

The Birthday

About three months after having met Monique, Roy went to a party. His father was celebrating his birthday, and the brain surgeon invited his friends and relatives to his stately mansion. The priest was there, as well as George, Karen and Catherine. Karen was eager to continue with the philosophical discussion from months earlier, and she wasted no time in getting all of the participants to the same table.

They were sitting on the veranda, which offered a magnificent view of the shoreline and of the huge garden. It was late afternoon and the sun was setting, giving off soft rays of light that graciously illuminated the place.

There was first some drinking, the casual chattering, and the usual cracking of doctor's jokes, and once everybody was in a good mood, Karen slipped the disputatious subject into the conversation.

"So what is your position on the origins of religions?" she asked Roy, while flaunting her new Rolex, which matched her silvery-hued dress. "How did they come about?"

Roy, who was casually dressed in jeans and a white shirt, was not expecting to delve into that matter again, but he loved to talk about controversial themes, so he took up the challenge.

"When all past and present creeds appeared, living conditions were deplorable in every corner of the world," he explained. "People suffered terribly due to constant famines, epidemics and war, and under such a horrible environment, they desperately sought for a way to alleviate their situation. In their frustration over the constant absence of progress, they were driven to deposit their hopes in a belief that claimed to have the capacity to improve things rapidly."

Catherine was with her sons again, and had the youngest one in her arms. She said, "You mean like a quick-fix consolation?" The blond anesthesiologist was wearing white pants, a ruddy blouse and red shoes.

"That's right. Humans have a natural propensity to take short cuts when they want to solve problems, and our ancestors approached the question of God in such a way."

"Could you elaborate more on that?" asked Catherine.

"Sure. All forms of divine worshiping have always promised a wonderful life on Earth and a perfect one after death if people follow their precepts. The good life on Earth is the key to understanding the whole matter, because religions claimed it could be attained at any moment if only God would want to grant it. So by doing something as simple as praying, it was possible to earn his favor and obtain everything."

"But it never happened, and thousands of years went by in which everybody prayed regularly and nothing ever improved," uttered Karen. "Why is it that so many people place their faith in something that does not deliver results?"

"It is because our species is genetically predisposed to be illogical. That is why people are so fascinated with irrational subjects, such as sex, money, love or sport. They have a habit of adhering to things blindly, even if they don't make any sense. You are right. They prayed for thousands of years and life never ameliorated. When living conditions finally began to get better in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it wasn't because their prayers were finally answered. It was because there was an unprecedented proliferation of science and technology."

"God, alone, decides when living conditions get enhanced, and it was him who gave the green light so that science could make rapid progress," said the priest defensively. Leo Johansen was again wearing black clothes, and he was again not amused by the tone of the conversation and the direction it was taking.

"Oh, please, spare us from that litany of nonsense," mouthed Karen, while she glanced contemptuously at the clergyman. "In past epochs, religions managed to delude the masses with such trifles, but nowadays people no longer swallow those simplistic explanations."

"Not only are they simplistic, but they also don't add up," affirmed Roy. "Of the major world religions today, Hinduism is the oldest, for it appeared more than four thousand years ago. However, today India is one of the poorest countries in the world. Don't you find it bizarre that the nation which has been kneeling to God for the longest and begging Him to improve their lives is the one that has suffered the most?"

"Yeah, it doesn't make any sense," said Catherine while she reached for a soda to give to her son. The little boy had just awakened and was nagging his mother for a gaseous drink.

"At present, the most prosperous nations are the ones that believe in God the least. At a time when Europe believed wholeheartedly in Christianity during the middle Ages, life was miserable and brutal. Life expectancy during the period 500 to 1500 was just eighteen years, and infant mortality was monstrously high. Wars were constant, and many were undertaken in the name of religion, the Crusades being among the most notorious."

"Those were indeed terrible times," uttered Karen.

"They were horrendous. Today, on the other hand, the population of Europe is largely atheist, agnostic or indifferent to the creed it officially belongs. Less than ten percent go to church regularly, but today, they have none of the problems of the middle Ages."

"Is church attendance really that low?" asked Catherine.

"Oh, yes. In some countries, like Britain, it is as low as three percent. So many people have abandoned their belief in God that countless churches have been turned into museums, private homes, businesses or cafeterias. Interestingly enough, it is precisely at this time, when belief in the Almighty is at an all-time low, that Europe has attained its highest level of prosperity and peace."

"That is a provoking but interesting thought," said Karen, and then she stood up and went to the ladies room.

"So what can be concluded from that information?" asked Catherine.

"What history has seen is the opposite of what religions claim. They say that if you believe, things will improve, but they don't. They actually deteriorate. Believing in God does not bring prosperity. It brings poverty, ignorance and violence."

"That's not true," asserted the priest airily.

"Oh, yes it is. Look at Muslim countries. By the time a coalition of armies invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it was the nation most fanatically devoted to Islam. It was also the poorest in the world, the most ignorant, the most repressive, the one that treated women the worst, and the one with the most terrorists. On the other hand, the United Arab Emirates is the most developed and peaceful of Muslim countries, and it is also the one that follows the precepts of the Koran the least."

"But Europe and the Middle East are not the world," countered George aggressively, believing that he had found a weak point in his opponent's argument. The Texan was again in his usual cowboy attire, with a rodeo shirt, jeans and a brown hat.

"I hope you are not talking about the U.S.," said Roy, "because that is another good example. At the time the U.S. saw its origins in the early seventeenth century, everybody believed in God and life revolved almost exclusively around religion. That was a time of famine, epidemics and penury. Today, hunger and destitution are a thing of the past, and the vast majority of Americans live in relative comfort. But by now, half of the population is indifferent to the religion it belongs. Only 45 percent go regularly to Church. In past centuries, everybody went every weekend to the house of God."

"That all sounds like a lot of mumbo jumbo," growled George. "I am not convinced."

"The evidence is abundant," pressed Catherine. "What else do you want?"

"Roy is a sophist," snorted the fat Texan, making reference to the captious and fallacious philosophers of ancient Athens who were despised by the great Socrates. "He twists the information so that it will support his

beliefs, but it is all bullshit. That is the only thing lawyers are good for. For them, the truth is irrelevant. All that counts is winning a case, and it doesn't matter how they do it."

"I am impressed by your choice of words," mouthed Roy shrewdly. "However, Socrates would have sided with me. The famous Hellenistic thinker from the fifth century B.C. used to poke fun of the numerous inconsistencies of Greek Gods, and that is why the Athenians condemned him to death, forcing him to drink hemlock. You see, most religions preach peace, but when they are seriously questioned, they become violent and kill their critics."

Of the eight persons at the round table, five nodded approvingly at what the lawyer asserted. At that moment, a beautiful blonde, who was George's daughter, approached the table and asked her father for money. She got a hundred dollar bill and left. The beauty caused just a small interruption, but the pause was prolonged because Roy kept glancing at her as she walked away.

"Please continue with your previous argument," said Catherine impatiently.

"Sure," muttered Roy, but he did not open his mouth until the girl had disappeared from his view. "Prosperity for humanity only started to be significantly appreciated in the nineteenth century, coinciding with a marked decrease in the level of religiousness in most nations. In the following century, progress accelerated, and the belief in the divine fell faster."

"But has that also happened in non-Western countries?" asked Catherine.

"Yes. Religion has seen a retreat everywhere. In India, the rest of Asia, in Africa, in Latin America and in the Middle East the share of the population that is deeply committed to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and all the other creeds is much lower today than it was in the past. Living conditions in those countries are still poor, but they are much better than in previous centuries."

"Does that mean the less a country believes in God, the better it performs?" asked Catherine.

"That's right."

The priest lost his temper and stood up, grunting angrily. "Your problem, Roy, is that you do not respect anything. You are a pathological scolder, a serial blasphemer."

"But why should I revere something that does not exist?"

"How dare you say that?" exclaimed George. "You are worse than the worst of the worst. You are a vituperative snake."

"There is no need to be rude," growled Karen, who was returning from the restroom.

"Look," uttered Roy, "when you take a long-term view of the history of humanity there are three things that can be concluded with respect to God. Humans have dwelled on this planet for about 100,000 years, and for 99.9 percent of that time all nations endured famine, malnutrition, epidemics, diseases, war, and many other horrible things. While they were suffering terribly, they repeatedly pleaded to God to liberate them from their woes, and the Divine never moved a finger."

"God has his reasons for doing things in such a way," said the priest apologetically. "We cannot question His almighty wisdom because we do not have the capacity to understand Him."

"That has been the traditional defense of the Church throughout history. Since nothing makes sense, they put the blame on human stupidity and give the benefit of the doubt to God's super wisdom. If science would have tried to explain the world in such a way, we would still be living in caves and trees. That is not a credible approach."

"And what, according to your smartass brain, would be the right approach?" snapped George sourly.

The lawyer decided not to answer that question directly because he had already done so, so he went on discoursing magisterially.

"According to the National Institute of Demographic Studies in France, the number of people who have dwelled on this planet from the origins of humanity to the present is about eighty billion. That's a lot of individuals, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that's quite a crowd," said Karen.

"The horrible truth is that for ninety-nine percent of all those people, life was a constant martyrdom, because they grieved terribly during their whole existence. They kneeled and prayed to the heavens for a better life, but things never improved. When is this God going to finally liberate us from distress?"

"He is testing us," responded the priest. "Life is a test."

"Is that so? Well, it is surely a long one," sneered Roy disdainfully. "So how much longer do you think we should continue waiting until His Holiness decides to free us from disease, war, terrorism, crime, poverty, unemployment and many other bad things? Another 100,000 years?"

The clergyman felt crushed and decided not to answer because Roy would probably ridicule him further.

"You are exaggerating," affirmed George raucously. "Life is not so bad."

"Perhaps not for a surgeon, but that is not the case for the average hamburger flipper, and there are many of those in this country."

"Even people working in those activities have a decent life."

"But that is not the case for the rest of the world. About three-

quarters of humanity lives under miserable conditions. Even if the U.S. was the only country on this planet, the religious argument still does not add up. Life expectancy for Americans just a century ago was only forty-five years, and two centuries ago it was twenty-five years. Life was rotten for everybody back then, and during all of the preceding history it was worse. Why did those people have to suffer so much?"

"So what is your final verdict on religions?" urged Karen.

"There are three possible logical conclusions that derive from what history has witnessed," asserted the blond. "The first is that there is a God who wishes the best for us but does not have the power to help us. It would be similar to those situations we usually see on television about Africa, where lots of poor women are holding their squalid children in their arms and are begging for food. Those mothers love their progeny and want the best for them but they just don't have the means to even supply them with enough to eat. As a result, the kids endure terrible things and they usually die young. God would be in a similar situation and is thus incapable of helping us. If that is so, why should we bother with Him?"

"That is nonsense," snarled George while scratching his head. "God loves us and takes care of us."

"Yeah, right," said Karen mockingly.

"So that type of divine being would be something like a pathetic loser God?" inquired Catherine.

"That's right."

"So what is the second possibility?" asked Karen.

"The second is that God is all-powerful. He has the means to liberate humanity from its misery at any moment but has deliberately left us in agony for 100,000 years because he enjoys seeing us suffer. The Germans have a word, *schadenfreude*, which makes reference to the pleasure people feel when informed about the misfortune of others. God would be somewhat like that: a being that delights in seeing wars, violence, hunger, poverty and disease."

"You mean like teenage boys who love to see gangster, war and horror movies?" queried Catherine.

"That's right. That would be another type of God that we don't need. Why pay tribute to someone whose main goal is to see us cry?"

"I must say that such an idea is perhaps too bold, but it makes sense," affirmed Karen. "And what is the third alternative?"

"The last possibility is that God does not exist and has never existed. Humans invented Him in order to console themselves in their endless suffering, and it is a sort of last resort hope. In all nations, popular sayings state that hope is the last thing that dies. By creating an all-powerful God, who could, at any moment, free people from their pain, our ancestors invented a system that supplied a hypothetical guarantee that

things would get better someday and that such a day could be the next."

The priest turned red in anger, and George was equally irritated. Without saying a word, both stood up and left.

"Roy, I am proud of you, and we are all deeply impressed with your intellect," said his father. "However, there is no need to be so arrogant. You were rude."

"I do not agree," said Karen. "Clerics are always annoying with their moral preaching, and many of us are fed up with the antics and violence of religions."

Two days after the birthday party, Roy was in his office reading some documents when his secretary marched in and reminded him that he had a preliminary hearing in court.

"It is the Bergman case," said the sixty-year-old woman, who was dully dressed in dark clothes. "You have to be there early because Judge Harrison will be presiding, and he doesn't like you. Remember what happened the last time you were late?"

"Right," snarled the attorney, giving himself a soft slap on the forehead for having forgotten. "Thanks, Lorna. I will leave right away."

The lawyer was wearing an elegant black suit with a white shirt and a bright yellow tie that made him look stunning. With his flamboyant swarthy shoes and cool hair style, he looked even better than a prime minister or a model.

He dashed towards the elevator and was soon on his way, rushing at high speed in his luxurious vehicle through the wide streets. Soon after, the attorney got to the courthouse and, after having parked, he suddenly heard a loud noise. It was coming from somewhere near, but he could not identify the source.

He then felt dizzy and sensed a small pain on the left side of his head. He tried to open the door but couldn't. His hands were not responding. He tried again, but it was to no avail. His arms were simply not moving. Roy's vision then started to go blurry and, seconds later, everything went black.

Part II

The Underworld

The Red Valley

When Roy woke up, it was totally dark around him. He remembered the situation in the parking lot and suspected that something had happened. He had probably fainted and had been taken to the hospital.

"I have been sleeping only three hours a night for the past week," he reasoned. "That Bergman case has been draining me. This was bound to happen. Good that it occurred while I was not driving."

He stood up and searched for the light switch, but couldn't find it. He went for the curtains, but there weren't any. Roy then took a few steps towards the left, hoping to come in contact with something, but there was nothing. The only thing the lawyer could sense was silence. Not a single tone could be heard.

"There is something very awry here," he thought suspiciously. "There are no nearby voices, no street noise, not even the sound of the wind. This is the most absolute stillness that I have ever encountered."

The blond began to get nervous, and since his eyes had become used to the darkness, he tried to distinguish something that could serve as an orientation feature. However, all he could see was the sable emptiness of obscurity.

"Nurse," he called loudly, but nobody answered. "Nurse," he boomed even more clamorously, but there was still no response. He thus progressively elevated the potency of his voice until he started shouting. "Hey! Hey! Where is everybody?" However, nobody came. The blond paused and then howled despairingly, "What in the hell is going on around here? Where the fuck am I?"

All of a sudden a strong, deep and frightening voice that seemed to come from everywhere stated, "That's exactly where you are. Welcome to Hell."

At once, everything was illuminated and Roy saw he was in the midst of a gigantic valley that seemed to have no limits. There was a reddish glow all over the plain, which gave the place a very surreal and ghastly appearance. There was also an obnoxious, fetid smell that instantly nauseated him. The odor was abominable, and it was that of putrefaction. He could feel a strange ground under his feet, which was hard and soft at the same time, resembling a mixture of rock and clay.

He turned around, but there was nobody. The attorney checked his body and saw that he was not wearing a hospital gown or pajamas. He was in the same black suit with the white shirt and the yellow tie. He even had his swarthy shoes on. It was as if only a few minutes had gone by since the moment when he lost consciousness.

The level of lighting was below that of a sunny day, but it was clear and he could see well in all directions. He looked around and, wherever his sight alighted, the distance seemed infinite. There was flat terrain on all cardinal points, and the soil was homogeneously colored in burgundy. Roy was perplexed by the vastness of the landscape, but also by its strangeness.

After some time he yelled, "Where in the hell am I? What kind of place is this?"

Suddenly, he sensed the presence of somebody behind him and felt a terrible chill on his back. He started trembling and fear overpowered him. Never in his life had he experienced so much trepidation, and the dread was such that he could not move.

"You have just answered your own question, Roy Johansen," groaned somebody with a gruff and potent voice. "You are in Hell."

The voice was different from any other he had ever heard, and it appeared to be produced by something artificial, but it was not that of a machine. It was penetrating and intimidating, and at once the blond began to wonder if his mind was playing tricks on him.

Roy had frozen from the very first moment the words were spoken, but the curiosity to discover who had said them eventually made him recover muscle coordination. When he gyrated, his face turned pale with horror. A nine-foot tall abominable creature stood in front of him. The being had the torso of a human, but instead of feet it had claws like those of an eagle and legs like those of a goat. The lower part of the body was bizarre, but the rest was even more abnormal. From the sides of its trunk surged six arms. It had just one head, but it was hideous, with two large, pointed horns that sprung out from its top. The beast had two eyes, a mouth and a nose, but they were the ugliest facial features the attorney had ever seen. The body was entirely covered with a thick brown fur, and the only area without it was the head, which was bright red.

Roy just couldn't believe what was going on. Everything looked so real, but he was not the sort who got easily impressed or deluded.

"This must be a trick from my cousin," he thought. "Because two years ago he drugged me and, when I woke up, I was trapped inside a coffin." Roy smiled at the thing in front of him. "Is this a treat from James?" he asked. The Creature did not respond, and Roy instantly figured out what was going on. "I can't believe he went to all the trouble of creating an artificial environment just to spook me. Is this something like a movie studio where they make science fiction or horror movies?"

The Creature looked at Roy calmly, but then it took out a large Arabian-style silvery sword from behind its back and, with lighting speed, moved towards the blond. Before Roy could realize what was going on, the blade was swinging vigorously towards his abdominal region. In a flash it reached him, sliced the flesh and partitioned his body. The next second Roy

was bleeding on the rugged floor and his torso had been completely severed from the rest of his frame. The attorney could not believe what was happening, and felt an excruciating pain.

"Ah, ah, ah," he moaned.

"At the speed you are bleeding you should have already passed away," affirmed the Creature. "The only reason why you can fully understand what I am saying is because you are already dead. I could slice you even further and you would still not perish. In this place, you never die. Here, you just suffer."

"Help, somebody please help me!" cried the attorney desperately.

"I tried to explain that you are in the inferno, but you just didn't want to believe, so I had to take action. Actions always speak louder than words."

Roy was dumbstruck at seeing the awful bifurcation of his body, but also because of the odious Creature and the bizarre environment surrounding him. He was stupefied beyond the imaginable and just couldn't believe what was going on.

"This can't be real. I must be dreaming."

"Do you want me to pinch you?" grinned the six-armed being sarcastically. "I can do that very well, but you will still not wake up. This is a nightmare from which nobody has ever woken up."

The lawyer was in terrible agony, which is what ultimately convinced him that he could not be dreaming. It took some time until reality finally sunk in and, when it did, he uttered with a timorous voice, "How did I die?"

"You had a stroke."

"But that is not possible," he asserted while trying to prop his torso upright with his arms. "I was young and in great physical shape. I trained at the gym regularly, I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, I didn't consume drugs, and there was no history of strokes in my family."

"You are like the guy who has never smoked but nonetheless dies of lung cancer. It does not happen frequently, but it happens."

The Creature had six large fingers with pointed black nails on each hand. It twisted two of them and, in a flash, Roy's torso reunited with its legs. The blond was bedazzled. He touched his body to check everything and his whole frame was again in normal condition. Not a single drop of blood could be seen. His clothes were not sliced, and the distress was gone.

"Does that mean I will never again litigate in New York?" asked the lawyer with a quivering voice. The demon gave him a look that confirmed the obvious, and the man's despair mounted still more. Roy lingered for a while and then asked with a fearful tone, "What is going to happen to me now?"

"We will torture you, torment you, mistreat you, beat you, kick you, pummel you, pound you, strike you, burn you, squash you, dissolve you, cut you, tear you, eat you, and many other things. You will endure grief and anguish for the rest of eternity, and then you will experience it some more. We call this place the House of Pain."

Roy turned colorless at the sound of those words. It was a terrorizing beast that stood before him, but his future seemed even grimmer.

"But how could I be sent to Hell? This must be an error. I never committed a crime. I never even got a ticket for speeding. There are billions of people in the world who do worse things. This has to be a mistake."

"I am sure you still remember Monique. Do you think your behavior was honorable?"

"Okay," uttered Roy apologetically, "she was under eighteen, but she was almost an adult, and I didn't drug her. I didn't even get her drunk."

"That she was seventeen is not the issue here. We would have forgiven you even with a fifteen-year-old. However, the whole process of seduction was based on deception. Had you lied for something good, like to liberate an innocent man from prison or to obtain funds for cancer research, we would have pardoned you. However, you digressed from the truth to please your sexual urges, and that is as selfish as it can get."

"But everything I said to the girl was true. All the information about meditation and paranormal activity is real. On top of that, I never promised her anything."

"You were born with a brain that was way above that of other people, but instead of deploying it for something good, you used it exclusively to promote your cause in the most egocentric of ways. That is why you had no need to get girls drunk."

"But –

"Shut up. You abused your powers to serve your needs, and in the process other people suffered. Monique, for example, felt like a slut, and she had never behaved like that. She was depressed for about a month, and she even went to your funeral. The worse part is that the redhead was not the only one. You pulled that trick for more than ten years on a total of 103 girls. Your self-centered behavior hurt all of those women. Now, it is your turn to experience the same thing."

Roy paused for a second, and just as he was about to counter argue, the Creature started to grow. The six-arm being expanded at an impressive speed, and the lawyer chilled at once. The beast grew and grew and, in just a few seconds, it measured about forty yards. When the swelling stopped, the demon bent down and grabbed the Swedish-American.

Before the blond could get a grasp of what was going on, it had swallowed him whole. Roy descended rapidly through a cylindrical and slimy tube, landing in what seemed to be the Creature's stomach. The place was white and rounded, it had a flat bottom, and it was well illuminated. The belly was empty, but soon, a thick brown fluid began to emanate from the walls. The liquid advanced towards Roy and the lawyer at once sensed that he was not about to have a bubble bath.

When the dark substance touched him, his body immediately shuddered from the noxious stimulus.

"Ahhhhhh!" he screamed. "This thing burns like volcanic magma."

The fluids were highly corrosive, and they instantly began to tear his skin. The distress was monstrous, and he hollered and called for aid, but nobody came to his rescue. Minutes later, his epidermis was gone and he looked like a medical school muscle anatomy dummy. The tanned-hued substance went on corroding his body, and soon the musculature began to fall to shreds.

"Mercy, have mercy please!" he shrilled desperately as he tried to remove the potent liquid with his hands.

There were simply no words to describe the anguish that he was enduring, and his SOS calls remained unanswered. Unprotected by his skin and muscle, his internal organs became exposed, and they also started to dissolve. Some time later, Roy stopped screaming, but not because the grief had disappeared. It was because his tongue had been eaten away by the virulent material. Eventually, all that remained of the lawyer was his skeleton. However, he remained fully conscious of what was going on and his capacity to endure woe remained intact. Moments later, his bones started to break apart. The last to melt down was the skull, and it was only then that he lost consciousness.

The Hymenoptera

When the blond recovered lucidness, he was again in one normal, human piece of skin, flesh and bones. He was again wearing the same suit and tie, and these were impeccably ironed, as if they had just come out of the dry cleaners. His hands were trembling, his face was sweating, and his whole body was still shaking from the dreadful experience. The attorney palpated his body with incredulity, for he could not really believe that everything was back to normal. He then looked around. There was nothing. There was just the flat terrain, the reddish glow and the malodorous smell. All at once, he recognized the odor.

“Uh, that is sulfur,” he muttered disgustedly. “That is without a doubt the most nauseating and repugnant scent of the universe.”

The effluvia were odious, but there was something else that was even more frightening. It was the ignorance and uncertainty over what would happen next. The future seemed only to augur terrible things, and Roy could not recall having ever been in a worse situation.

All at once, Roy felt the presence of somebody behind him. He turned and saw the Creature, which was back to its original size.

“I must say that you were hard to digest,” uttered the being hoarsely while remaining immobile. “I’ve had many who went down easier.”

Roy was speechless, and the bedazzlement on his face was complete.

“Tell me,” furthered the horned being. “How was the pain? On a scale of zero to ten, and in comparison to the ones you endured on Earth, how was it?”

“This ... this was by far the most terrible experience ever, and nothing during my whole life comes remotely close to it,” muttered the attorney with a cracking voice while still panting.

“We are well aware of that. What we want to know is by which amount was it more torturous than your most distressful experience? What was the worst you ever went through?”

Roy thought for a while and then said, “When I was seventeen, I fell head over heels for a girl named Daphne. She was pretty, tall, blond, and had big tits. One day she dumped me, and I fell into a terrible depression. I have never felt so bad. It was so awful that I wanted to commit suicide.”

“If that was the most sorrowful, and on a scale of zero to ten it would be classified as a three, what level would getting disintegrated by my stomach be?”

"That would definitely be a ten." Roy looked confused and then inquired, "Why do you ask?"

"We have here a policy of continuous improvement and are constantly calibrating our tormenting techniques. So what you just told me is pleasant news and we can sit on our laurels. We've had some masochists who have only given us an eight. That hurts, but fortunately they represent less than one percent of the world's population."

Roy decided to digress from that subject and address his main concern.

"Why am I being put to such woes when what I did to those girls is standard policy for the bulk of the world's population, and that includes women? Women also give men a lot of grief with their lies, their cheating and their inconsistent behavior. The girl I just talked about troubled me mightily, even though I never treated her badly. If I became such an asshole with women it was because they behaved frequently like whores, flirting with just about anybody as soon as I turned my back."

"Well, what makes you think that those ladies are not coming here? The ones who behaved in such a way are now our guests, or soon will be."

"I don't see anybody," uttered Roy while gazing attentively in all directions.

"Don't let appearances fool you. We have a policy of creating a personalized Hell for everybody. In a way, Hell is like Australia, because we have plenty of space. Actually, we have infinite space. Look at your surroundings. They are pretty big, right? Well, we have similar accommodations for every bastard who comes here."

"Why?" queried the Swedish-American with a curiosity that also reflected his horror.

"We believe in not putting two or more people together because humans are social creatures. They suffer when they are alone. One of their greatest pleasures is to chat. Here, they never have a chance to do that. Solitude depresses people, and you and the rest will remain alone for the rest of eternity."

Roy gulped in fear at the sound of those words.

"Since you were talking about the evils of women, it will probably please you to know that women become distressed considerably more than men when they are all by themselves. They grieve more on Earth and in Hell. Here they cry endlessly, and they even tear out all of their hair, bleeding abundantly. Their desperation is such that some even poke their eyes out." The Creature then made a brusque movement with one of its arms and affirmed, "Okay, enough prating. Now it's time for your dose of anguish."

"Wait," shouted the blond. "I need more explanations to understand what—"

However, before he could continue, the six-armed being disintegrated into little pieces, which rapidly transformed into ants. They were the largest insects of the hymenoptera family that Roy had ever seen, measuring two inches in length and each having a pair of sharp pincers. The black creatures rapidly took formation and began to advance towards the attorney. The lawyer immediately dashed away, but the ants followed him. He sped as fast as he could and kept turning his head to keep track of the enemy.

"Damn," he exclaimed. "These animals move fast."

They were catching up, and in his desperation Roy tripped and hit the ground. A second later, the insects descended upon him and started tearing his clothes and his flesh. They were small bites, but there were millions of them, and in no time he was experiencing a horrendous pain.

"Help!" he screamed. "Somebody, please help me."

Roy shouted and shrilled while he rolled on the ground in a desperate effort to remove the hymenoptera. It was to no avail, and the enemies kept on eating his skin. At a given moment, one of them gripped his left eye and, with his right hand, Roy tried to remove it. The creature had locked its jaws deep into the pupil and, when Roy pulled, the whole globule came out.

"Ah! Mercy! Please have some mercy!"

His cries became more hysterical, and then an ant went into his ear and started to eat the inside. He punched his head in an effort to harm the enemy, but he was the only one who got hurt. The blond began to run erratically while shouting his lungs out, but that made no difference. The insects had done a thorough job by then. His skin was gone, his muscles were gone, and most of his organs had also disappeared. The noxious stimulus just kept on increasing, and when they started munching his heart, it reached stratospheric levels. There was a terrible sense of helplessness, and the situation was so bad that the blond thought things could not get any worse. He was wrong. Soon after, the animals went for his brain and the memories of his life began to disappear. Eventually, he could run no more because the bones in his legs had vanished. Seconds later, Roy lost consciousness.

Lonesome

When he came back to his senses, the lawyer was again in one piece, as if the ants had never touched him. His suit was impeccably ironed, his hair was combed, and he lay flat on the ground. He was again surrounded by the desert-like landscape, the reddish glow and the terrible smell. Roy got back on his feet and looked nervously in all directions, expecting to see the demon. But there was nobody.

“And all this just because I jumped some girls,” he groaned. “This is crazy.” He started plodding forward and, after a while, shouted, “Creature, where are you? I need to talk to you.”

There was, however, no response. Roy marched on, but was not sure which way to go because the terrain looked the same in all directions.

“There are no mountains, no hills, no craters, no rocks or anything that can serve as an orientation feature,” he thought. “This is the most boring landscape I have ever seen.” He moved forward, at times slow and at times hurriedly, but the inland scenery never changed. After a long trek, he stopped. “Oh, man, this is frustrating. There is nothing that suggests I have moved from point A to point B.”

An endless flat territory lay before him and, after a long pause, he continued walking. Time passed, and it went by slowly. It was hard having an idea of how much had elapsed because there was no cycle of light and darkness. The level of luminosity was constant, not even varying by a tiny bit. After much sauntering, the Swedish-American had the impression it had been a very long time since he had last spoken with the Creature. Up until that moment, the demon had tortured him mightily, and from that perspective the blond was pleased that the six-armed being had not shown up. However, there was something about its presence that was positive.

“That Creature is right,” muttered the attorney while slouching dejectedly. “Loneliness is a terrible thing. I always enjoyed the company of other people. Now that I think about it, there was never a moment in my life in which I was alone because there was always someone. Sometimes it was relatives, sometimes friends and sometimes girls.”

To assuage the isolation, he increasingly spoke out loud, but the soliloquy was no compensation for a conversation. Roy kept calling the Creature, but did it hesitantly for fear that the next castigation would arrive sooner. He wanted to talk with somebody, but the only possible interlocutor was a hideous being, which was so horrible that just glimpsing at it caused pain.

He kept on wandering through the deserted territory, and time passed. Alone and having nothing to do, the clock seemed to move

considerably slower. The period that Roy rambled through the reddish valley felt like an eternity, and the suffering increased with every minute that passed. It was terrible.

“This boredom is so atrocious,” he howled, “that it feels as if somebody is sticking a jagged knife into my flesh.”

Being solo was monstrously unbearable, and to distract his thoughts the lawyer began to punch himself. That was a tactic used by many stupid people on Earth to forget about other woes. It was a tactic that never worked, and Roy knew that, but under the bizarre circumstances of Hell, anything seemed worth a try.

Getting to Know the Inferno

At one point, while looking at the horizon, Roy felt the presence of somebody behind him. He immediately turned and saw the Creature.

"How did the loneliness feel?" asked the multi-armed being.

Roy had experienced something appalling, but he decided to lie. "It was not that bad."

"Is that so?" uttered the demon suspiciously.

"Yes. The truth of the matter is that I never liked the company of people. The immense majority of the ones I met throughout my life were just too mentally uninspiring, and being with them was pretty uncomfortable. That is why I only had sex with women, because talking with them was a torture."

As a lawyer, he was used to paltering, and was incredibly good at it. He had fooled countless juries with his sagacious arguments and theatrical antics. Roy hoped that, with such a ruse, he would induce the demon to change track and provide him with some company.

"I am not falling for that," said the Creature while smirking. "Do you think we are as dumb as the people you met on Earth? We know that you suffered. The only thing we don't know is by how much. We are not putting you with anybody. What do you think this is: a country club? If you believe this is a place for social gatherings, you are in for a big surprise. This is not even a prison, where visits are allowed every now and then. This is Hell, and in this inferno there is total pain." The Creature paused a moment and then said, "Now I am only going to ask this one more time. How was your last punishment relative to the previous ones?"

"I am not answering," grunted the blond defiantly.

"Do you actually think you are in a position to negotiate something? Your only possibility is full collaboration. I don't even want to threaten you, because after what you just went through, it is clear that we are the masters of pain."

Roy hesitated, and realized he was trapped. He then begrudgingly responded, "The second punishment was more painful than the first, and the third is not so easy to define. At first, the loneliness was less distressful than getting digested or being eaten by ants, but after a while it was worse than the previous ones."

"Good. That's how it's supposed to be."

"What do you mean?"

"We have developed a system of incremental suffering, whereby the level of agony progressively gets worse."

"Why?"

"We want to make sure that nobody gets blasé." The six-armed being went silent for a few seconds and then added with a haughty chortle, "That means we can congratulate ourselves. Well, that's not new. We are used to meeting our goals."

"Are you sure I was not sent here by mistake?" queried the New Yorker despairingly. "My life might have been mostly selfish, but I helped many people obtain justice in court, and several of my clients were poor. Doesn't that count?"

"Remember Einstein's Theory of Relativity?" responded the Creature while taking a few steps towards the attorney. "Well, we also believe in that, and, relative to the country, the family and the epoch in which you lived, you did practically nothing that was selfless."

"What?"

"That's right. There are many people who have robbed and murdered as a result of having been born in a poor country without parents and without intelligence. For them, procuring enough food to survive was extremely hard and, as a result, they had no option but to resort to an unlawful behavior. Relative to their circumstances, the crimes they committed were less egocentric than yours."

"You don't really mean that, do you?"

"Of course I do. The cases you won in court, sometimes on behalf of small-time individuals against large corporations, was not because you believed in defending the weak. It was because you saw it as a means to exploit the situation with the press. You knew that such Robin Hood-esque antics attracted a lot of attention, and you loved seeing your face on television and in the newspapers."

"But doesn't—

"Shut up and listen. Aside from the vanity, you also viewed it as a way to make a lot of money. You attacked large companies because they offered the potential for extracting big amounts of money, and you always took a huge percentage of the award. Once you pocketed the money, it was exclusively deployed to buy the apartments, the cars and several other things that were used to impress pretty women in order to land them in bed. During your life, about 50,000 people died daily of hunger, and it never occurred to you to use that money for charity."

"But I did give to charity."

"Not really. What you donated was such a tiny fraction of your revenue that it was almost imperceptible. We have actually calculated how much you granted, and it was less than 0.1 percent of your life's income. And it was not because your revenues were small. You were rich, and earned fifty times more than the average American. You could have given ten times more and it would have still been an egocentric act. For it to buy your way out of here, the amount would have had to have been so large

that you would have abstained from numerous things you loved. That was never the case."

"But nobody ever explained to me that it had to be done that way," exclaimed the New Yorker plaintively. "How was I supposed to know?"

"It was easy to infer, and of all people, you were the best at deducing things."

"But money was not the only motivation behind all my acts as a lawyer."

"That is true. At times you defended the weak without trying to make big bucks, but it was not because of pity or solidarity or something of the sort. It was because you planned a political career for the future and knew that such stunts attracted free publicity. You didn't do it to help others but to advance your long-term aspirations."

"But what is wrong with trying to become president? My country has numerous problems, and I wanted to improve things."

"That is bullshit. What you really wanted was the power. Humans get a kick from being the boss. They love to give orders and hate to receive them. They enjoy being the top dog and revel in attracting the attention of the press. It isn't as if you were not interested in reducing unemployment and assuring world peace, but that was secondary. What you really desired was to be at the center of the world and satisfy your ego."

"But I—

"That is why you didn't study economics and other related fields. You read about those subjects, but only enough to keep abreast of what was going on. In order to solve problems, there was a need to advocate a whole life to such matters, but you never even considered that. Power is not for opportunists, and your plan for getting to the presidency was terribly opportunistic."

"But all American presidents have done that. Not a single one was there for the good of the nation. All were there to promote their personal interests, their careers, and sometimes even to pocket government money. The heads of state from all other countries have also done the same thing. Those people never sought those posts to put things right. Their only goal was to get the most for themselves."

"Well, guess where they are now?" mouthed the Creature while simpering. "What makes you think that only rulers like Attila the Hun, Ivan the Terrible, Tamerlane, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot come here?"

"But if such a behavior is severely punished, then the bulk of humanity is condemned to damnation. Not only would the majority of people from the twenty-first century be sentenced to Hell, but also those of the preceding centuries. It would seem as if there is no way of escaping this place."

“Many people avoid Hell.” The horned being paused, and then it said, “Well, we’ve talked enough. Now it’s time to suffer.”

“No!” shouted Roy. “Wait.” But before the blond could say another word, the Creature had disappeared. The lawyer immediately began to panic and started to fear the worst. “What is it going to be this time?”

Roy gazed in all directions, but there was nothing. He turned incessantly, thinking that some monster was going to appear out of nowhere or that tiny insects would prop up and devour him, but nothing showed up. Time went by and, at a given moment, he saw something in the distance. He began to take some steps backward and then sped away. After a while, he stopped and noticed that the object had moved closer, but instead of running, he decided to observe it in order to identify what it was.

Gulliver

However, before he could distinguish its form, the ground started to tremble. With every second that passed, the shaking became more pronounced, and a loud thumping sound that resembled footsteps was also heard.

“That type of jerking and that sort of noise reminds me of a Spielberg film,” mumbled the lawyer apprehensively. Then, he saw something big in the distance. “Oh, shit. It’s the demon, and he has taken the form of a giant again.”

Roy immediately sprinted away, dashing as quick as he could, but the goliath could move much faster and, in no time, it had caught up with him. Before he knew it, a huge thing was blocking his way, but in a flash the Swedish-American realized that it was not the demon. It was something else.

The being was as large as a ten-story edifice, but it was a woman, and a beautiful one at that. She resembled a famous 1960s actress due to her rosy cheeks, white skin and chiseled face, while her large breasts and sculpted body added further to the similarity. The humongous girl had swarthy hair, was elegantly dressed in a long, multi-colored robe, and her arms were adorned with numerous golden bracelets.

“Why are you fleeing?” demanded the titan calmly.

“Err! I don’t want to be digested,” stammered the lawyer while wobbling.

“Don’t worry. I won’t eat you.” The blond began to breathe a little lighter almost instantly, and the woman added, “You look stressed. Have they been giving you a hard time?”

“Oh, yes. It’s been awful. There hasn’t been a minute without something horrible happening.” He paused, took a few steps backwards, and then focused on her symmetrical facial features. “I didn’t know that Elizabeth Taylor had died.”

“I am not that person,” mouthed the woman loftily. “I am Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt.” Her imperious look and her haughty tone faded all at once, and then she uttered dejectedly, “Well, that was a long time ago.”

“But you look European. I was once in Cairo, and the people over there didn’t look Caucasian.”

“I was of Greek descent. My forefather was Alexander the Great of Macedonia. When he conquered Egypt, he left many of his soldiers in the land of the Pharaohs.”

Roy rapidly searched his memory and then said, “Yeah, you are

right. He subdued most of the Near East in about 330 B.C.”

While on Earth, Roy had been an avid reader of history books. He was passionate about that field and would usually devour one or two tomes per month.

“I was born three centuries later, but the ruling class along the banks of the Nile was still Greek. That, nonetheless, changed in no way my suffering. European or Middle Eastern, it didn’t matter. There was simply no way of escaping the atrocious living conditions of the time. We women value dearly family ties, but in my era it was difficult to share your love with blood relatives. Life was so brutal that it was almost like living in the jungle among wild beasts.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, to give you just a few examples. My father beheaded one of my sisters, my siblings tried repeatedly to kill me, and I ordered the assassination of two of my sisters. I loved by brother, but the priests forced me to marry him in order to comply with a stupid tradition. It wasn’t in such a way that I wanted to love him. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes. I see what you mean.”

“I wanted to be a good mother, but instead of deploying my time in the rearing of my children, I had to spend most of my days thinking about how to keep them away from murderers. It was a continuous marathon to stay alive, fleeing from one place to another in order to evade an interminable array of plots and conspiracies.”

“Was life really that bleak back then? I am sure it was terrible for the masses, but surely not for the royal family. You were known for your lavish parties and your numerous men. You seem to have been a fun girl.”

“Excuse me,” growled Cleopatra huffily. “I only had two men in my life, Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony. Perhaps you can accuse me of being a snob for having dated only the rulers of the Roman Empire, but I was no tramp. The marriage with my brother was never consummated because I broke the union. I was passionate, but not promiscuous. Why are men always applying double standards to us?”

“It is just that—

“A girl only has to have more than one guy in her life and she is immediately labeled a slut. However, the more women a man lands in bed, the more he gets glorified. I spent most of my time pondering about scientific subjects and government matters, and not about men. I was a mathematician, a businesswoman, a politician and a polyglot. I spoke nine languages.”

Roy instantly recalled having read that Cleopatra was indeed a brilliant and strong-willed ruler who had fought bravely for her country. “You are right,” he said contritely. “History books have effectively dedicated many pages to your numerous qualities. You are not depicted as

an angel, but neither as a ruthless individual or a lewd woman. The image of a licentious female is a general misconception due to the antics of movie directors. Sorry about that.”

“Apology accepted.” She lingered, and then said with a sad tone, “Oh, you can’t imagine how bad things were in my days. It was atrocious.”

“I think I can, because history books are very descriptive.”

“No, you can’t. No book can capture the sorrow and pain that I experienced.”

“You would be surprised to—

“Oh, shut up.”

The next second, the giant queen swiftly seized Roy with her right hand and elevated him to the level of her mouth. It was a sensuous mouth, with voluptuous lips and pearl-white teeth, but it was also a huge cavity capable of easily crushing him.

“I thought you said you were not going to eat me,” squeaked Roy anxiously.

“Had I wanted to do that, I would have gulped you a long time ago. Now, look into my eyes and concentrate on my pupils.”

“What?”

“I said, look into my eyes,” exclaimed the queen commandingly.

Roy decided to obey, because annoying such a mighty woman didn’t seem like a good idea. Although he was certain that nothing good would result from the act, he immediately stared at the basketball-size pupils. At once, he began to feel dizzy.

Before he could realize what was going on, he found himself surrounded by ancient-looking edifices, obelisks and pyramids. He was in the Egypt of Cleopatra, and had landed on the balcony of an elegant building that was situated on a hill. It was a beautiful palace, and it provided a panoramic view of the city, the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea. The stately house had five-yard tall columns, exotic engravings on the walls, a decorative marble floor and elegant wooden furniture. The place was empty, and the streets in the city also seemed deserted.

All of a sudden, he heard screams, along with the sound of clashing metal, and then he saw in the distance thousands of people running desperately in different directions while soldiers wearing brown uniforms fought against others in gray robes. Fires began to sprout in different parts of the town, and large rocks dashed eerily through the air, crashing violently against a fortress some miles away. There were warships in the river and in the coastal sea waters, and they were combating against one another. Some were drifting, most were clashing, a few were burning, and others were sinking.

In the palace where he stood, the place was vacant, and it was the only area in the whole city that remained free of violence. Such a placid environment, however, was soon altered. The next moment, Roy heard footsteps, and then he saw Cleopatra, who was with a six-year-old boy and ten soldiers. They were rushing through the large chamber that was adjacent to the balcony where Roy stood. All looked frightened and kept looking behind as if they knew that somebody was after them. All at once, a group of soldiers wearing a different uniform appeared in front of them and the queen's guards began to fight with them. The enemies of Cleopatra were more numerous and, soon, all of her soldiers had been slain. The men in brown clothes then surrounded her, seized her and wrested the infant from her arms.

"No," she bellowed imploringly. "He is just a child. Don't harm him."

"We have orders," said one of the men.

"He's my son," she affirmed imperiously. "His integrity must be respected."

"It is precisely because he is your progeny that he will die." The warrior looked at his comrades and ordered, "Take them away. Put her in a cell, and you know what to do with the boy."

The next second, Roy was again in the Valley of the Damned, and he was standing over Cleopatra's hand. The giant slowly lowered him to the ground and a huge tear fell from her eye, splashing only a meter from the lawyer.

"That was the child I had with Julius Caesar," she uttered while sobbing. "They murdered him." Another giant tear rolled over her cheek and then plummeted to the ground, which was followed by a few seconds of silence. Then she said with a soft and crumbling voice, "You can't imagine what it is to lose a son."

"I think I can."

"No, you can't."

"I studied medicine and—"

"Oh, shut up. You don't know what it is to carry someone in your womb for nine months. It creates a bond like no other that lasts a whole lifetime. It is such a strong, binding force that it even subsists beyond the grave."

The blond realized she was right and dropped the subject. There was a small pause and then Roy asked, "How come you are here?"

"Well, I ordered the assassination of countless people, endorsed war and lied a million times. It was hard to avoid this place with such behavior. Nevertheless, when I passed away, I was certain I would go to Heaven."

"Why?"

“By the age of thirty-nine I was cornered. My troops had been defeated and my enemies had become too strong. I had only two options; slavery or suicide. I took the second, and let myself be bitten by an asp, the cobra of Egypt. Our religion assured that death by snakebite would secure immortality in Heaven. It turns out that only half of the story was true. I attained eternal life, but in Hell.”

“Well, it is not only the religions of your era that were unreliable,” said Roy consolingly.

“You are probably right, but that is no longer relevant.” She lingered for a few seconds and then uttered, “I guess we have chatted enough. Now it’s time to do my job.”

Before the lawyer could say another word, Cleopatra raised her huge foot and dropped it forcefully over the blond, squashing him mercilessly. She then lifted her sandal and said, “That’s for all the girls you called whores during your life. If somebody was a prostitute, then it was you.” She then walked away.

The American had been squeezed like a tomato, but he did not die and remained fully aware of what was going on. His frame was so deformed that he could barely be recognized. However, he was capable of perceiving all of his aching muscles and bones. The pain was atrocious, the agony indescribable. The man moaned and wailed without respite, and his laments were so potent that they were even heard in the furthest corners of Hell. The attorney suffered and then grieved some more, but eventually he passed out.

When he woke up, his body was again in its normal form and there was not the slightest indication of having ever been crushed. He immediately got up and surveyed the horizon. There was nothing. But then he saw a figure.

“Crap. Not Cleopatra again,” he squealed fearfully. However, just as he was starting to run, the lawyer noticed that it was not the fateful queen.

A Man in the Land of the Hungry

"That is not a person, but several," he muttered with surprise. He waited for a while and then saw six normal-sized men. All at once, he sensed a ray of hope. "Perhaps the demon has granted me my wish, or maybe such a being does not have full control over everything that happens here. These guys are probably people like me who are searching to hook up with others in order to make their experience less sorrowful."

When the individuals got to a distance of several hundred yards, Roy noticed that they had an awkward appearance.

"Wow!" he croaked tensely. "Their hair looks weird, as if it has never been cut and as if it has never been combed. And they are hardly dressed."

The fellows were only barely covered with a tiny amount of leather and resembled men of the Paleolithic period. All looked Caucasian, although they were unusually hairy. When they got closer, the lawyer became aware of something else.

"Oh, crap," he sputtered shakily. "They are carrying five-foot long spears. This does not look good."

"Ashuka!" yelled one of the cave men suddenly.

Roy could not understand what the word meant, but when they all started running menacingly towards him; he immediately realized that it was time to flee. The Swedish-American began to sprint, but seconds later a spear landed three yards in front of him.

"Oh, shit," moaned the attorney while rushing as fast as he could. "Something tells me this is not going to end well."

Then, another lance fell by his side and the blond got even more scared. He kept speeding, but a few seconds later a pointed artifact pierced him in the back and the tip came out through the other side of his body.

"Ah!" shrieked the blond as he fell to the ground.

The lawyer tried to crawl but could barely move because of the pain and, a moment later, a second spear perforated his right leg. Roy could no longer advance, and in no time the barbarians surrounded him.

"Rasula," barked a brown-haired man, who measured about seven feet.

The others looked similarly savage and big, all having thick bones and large muscles. The Paleolithic men removed the two lances from Roy's body and ripped off his clothes. Then, they tied him to a log and left him on the ground, while they began to work on something.

"I hope that what follows is not worse than this," thought the New Yorker as he bled on the ground.

To his chagrin, it soon became clear that things were going to get worse. The cave men had built two one-yard tall towers of rock with a six-foot separation, in between which they lit a fire. After that, they went for Roy and carried him to the fiery site. They then placed him on top of the flames and started to rotate him like a pig on a spit. The blond began to scream stridently.

“Ah! Please stop! Have some pity.”

He hollered his lungs out, but that did not change a thing. He was already suffering mightily before the burning began, but when they placed him over the glowing gas, the torture multiplied exponentially. The lawyer was being cooked alive, and the disgusting smell of his charred flesh rushed nauseatingly into his nose. It was an odor far worse than that of sulfur, and it revolted him to the core.

Roy's father was Swedish and his mother Irish-American, which translated into him having a very white and almost colorless skin. However, over the fire, his outer layer turned red. Sometime later, it mutated to sable, but it was a different tint from the people of Central Africa or Sri Lanka, and the difference resulted from the fact that Roy's epidermis had died. That was the color of death.

With every turn of the log, the agony increased as the flames destroyed more and more tissue. The attorney thought that he would soon pass out because the anguish had reached a level as high as when Cleopatra had stepped on him. Unfortunately for him, that was not so. Roy could barely concentrate because of the pain and the constant spinning, but he soon thought of something.

“There is pattern in these punishments. First I suffer, then I die, and later on I resurface alive without a scratch. I will soon be in perfect physical condition and without a blister.”

However, despite that comforting idea, the fright was still there. It was just as present as during the first castigation, and just as strong as it would have been if he were still on Earth. At the same time, the pain was very real, and no notion concerning his eventual resurgence could attenuate the pain caused by the wounds and the fire.

At a given moment, one of the barbarians took out from a leather bag a pointed and thin dark rock that resembled a knife. The others stopped turning Roy and the man approached the blond. He palpated his flesh and then cut a large piece from the leg.

“Ah!” shrieked the attorney clamorously. “Don't do that! Please, have mercy.”

The cave man didn't even glance at the lawyer, and the distress multiplied horrendously. One portion after another was taken away, and the American pleaded, insulted and damned, but it was to no avail.

Eventually, Roy could no longer scream. His energy was gone. He had bled and burned so much, that all of his strength had vanished. Then, the other five Neanderthals took out similar cutting utensils and mowed their share. Roy could see them chewing his quadriceps and making gesticulations that suggested that the food was good. After they were finished with the legs, they went for the arms and then for the torso.

“This is the quintessence of grief,” he thought. “I hope this is over soon.”

Unfortunately for him, that was not the case. He didn't faint or die and remained fully aware of what was going on. It took a long time until he finally perished.

Confronting the Enemy

When the blond recovered consciousness, he was in the midst of nowhere and the Paleolithic men were gone. His body was complete and without a scratch, and he was again wearing his black suit. While getting devoured, he had endured more anguish than in the preceding punishments, and the idea of experiencing a similar torment anew was unbearable.

“I can’t go through this again,” he murmured anxiously. “The worst is that in the next castigation the level of affliction will increase even more. I have to get out of here.” He paused and then moaned despairingly, “But how? There is simply no way out.”

He pondered over the matter and then an idea sprang up. It was not a great plan, because any plan seemed destined to fail in that world, but it was the only one that offered a ray of hope.

“My only possibility is to attain a great amount of information about this place. With it, maybe I can devise a way to escape. Unfortunately, the only known source is the Creature. I have to figure out a way of tricking him into spilling the beans. At the same time, I don’t want to even come close to that being again. Just to think of it gives me the chills.”

He repeatedly evaluated the pros and cons of summoning the horned entity, and in the end fear won the day. Nevertheless, some time later the Creature appeared.

“Did you enjoy the meal?” asked the six-armed beast jokingly.

Roy was not amused and became inflamed by the mockery of the demon. Not only was he being tortured, but he was also being teased and harassed. That brought him to a boiling point, and it was that which ultimately gave him the courage to try something drastic. He thus resorted to one of his most frequently used tactics during his days as a trial lawyer, which was to question the logic of his opponents’ behavior.

“Some time before I died, somebody who was very wise asserted that the Devil was a million times smarter than the most intelligent person. However, I am starting to think that is not true. Nobody in his right mind could possibly think that a person who lives for just thirty-four years and lies regularly to attain sex and jobs deserves eternal damnation. That is a chastisement totally disproportionate to the sins committed. The punishment doesn’t fit the crime. It is obvious that the castigation should be much lower.”

“You are thinking in human terms. Those are the rules people have created, but they don’t apply here.”

“You guys might be exempt from respecting the legal precepts of

Earth, but the only way to harness the forces of the universe is with science, and science cannot be created without logic. If you are part of the universe, then you must be consistent with your acts, and what you are doing is not."

"I see you are in an inquisitive mood today," said the demon pensively. "Your words are indeed perspicacious and insightful. Perhaps we have overreacted. You surely had your good side, and maybe you deserve a second chance. You know what? We will send you back to Earth."

Before Roy could utter a word, the being was gone. The attorney was not sure what to think of that, but things had gone much better than he had expected. He grinned, and it was actually the first time since arriving in that hideous place that a smile had surfaced on his lips. As the hours passed and nothing happened, he began to suspect that the Creature was just toying with him.

"I bet that demon bullshitted me," he growled angrily as he stood motionless. "I am sure this is all part of his typical routine of giving hope to the damned only to quash it later." He began to pace and, after a couple of minutes, mused, "Oh, no. That means a new painful experience will soon commence."

However, a considerable amount of time passed and nothing occurred. As the days elapsed, the blond began to suspect that he was already in the midst of a new penalty, which consisted of enduring loneliness.

Out of Africa

As he was having those thoughts, Roy was all at once catapulted upwards. Before he could get a hold of what was going on, the lawyer was flying at lighting speed and, some time later, his body was rushing through a darkened environment. There were, nonetheless, small points of light, and it soon became clear what they were. They were stars. He could see thousands of them, shining brightly in the celestial sky. But that was not the only thing that was different. The fetid smell of sulfur was also gone.

"I can't believe I am going back," he pondered. "This must be a ruse."

All of a sudden, he had the Earth before him, and gazed at it as astronauts do from outer space. In a flash, his negative thoughts disappeared.

"Wow! It is beautiful. It is just breathtaking." Suddenly, the blond felt his body being pulled in a particular direction. "There is the American continent. And there is New York. Great, I am going back home."

And then, everything went black. He waited for some time, hoping that the spatial environment would reappear, but it didn't.

"Where in the heck am I?"

He couldn't tell, but it was a constricted space and his body was totally encapsulated by soft walls. The situation was extremely odd, for it was impossible to see a thing, and everything felt wet. Even more bizarre was that he could not perceive air around him. He wasn't breathing, but for some strange reason sensed no asphyxia. Then, his body began to move in a strange way without him having any control over it, and soon a dim light was seen.

"What the hell is going on? Where am I being taken?"

A superior force was pushing him in a very precise direction, and the lawyer had no idea what was behind such a situation. The luminosity became progressively stronger and, suddenly, it was bright all around him. He immediately saw an earthly environment and noticed that he was in a sort of wretched hut. A few seconds later, something grabbed him by the torso and took him out of the small shack. Roy directed his eyes upwards and saw a blue sky and a radiant sun. He then looked forward and viewed a semi-desert landscape with a few trees and shrubs. The soil was parched and composed of a sort of clay, and in the distance there were several sand dunes.

He then heard voices, but could not recognize the language. It was a human tongue, but it was not English or anything else that he could identify. Suddenly, water fell over him and, for a while, he could not see a

thing. He was dried with a towel and felt somebody turning him. He saw a giant woman who smiled at him. The huge lady took Roy back into the hut and gave him to another large woman lying on a bed. The two female giants had dark skin and wore black robes. They talked for a while, but then the one who was no longer holding the attorney handed mirror to the other. At that moment, Roy was able to glance at himself, but could not recognize what he viewed.

“What is going on?” he thought. Seconds later, he understood. “Oh, shit. I have just been reborn and I am inside the body of a baby. I seem to have resurfaced in a developing country.”

Everything suggested that he and his family were poor, and Roy immediately began to experience the unpalatable atmosphere that derived from that poverty. It was extremely hot, and there was no fan to refresh the air even a little. He felt sticky and uncomfortable, but that was a small problem relative to the hunger. The lawyer immediately sensed his stomach churning. It hurt, but soon the discomfort disappeared as he was breast-fed by his mother. However, the infant could not enjoy the meal due to the cloud of flies that were all over his body. Roy sucked as fast as he could, but before having satisfied his appetite, his mother had run out of milk. The woman was malnourished. She had been undernourished all of her life, but in the past months things had gotten much worse.

The lawyer soon found out why things had deteriorated. He heard voices, and the language was English. He saw two Caucasians in their fifties standing close to the entrance of the hut. They were wearing light clothes and khaki-colored hats. One was a man and the other a woman.

“It must be terrible getting expelled from your home by warring militias, as these people have,” said the woman while she wiped some sweat from her forehead. “Do you think that now we have come to supply these refugees with food and medicine, the militias will stop their attacks?”

The woman’s name was Sally, and she had once been a nun who had worked alongside Mother Teresa. She had short brown hair, was of medium height and had a slim constitution.

“We are a Canadian humanitarian organization,” uttered the man worriedly, “and that offers a certain degree of protection for these people. However, if the militias decide to assail them again, there is nothing we can do to stop them. Nonetheless, for now that is the least of our problems. The situation has improved considerably since we arrived, but there is still a scarcity of water, food and medicines.”

Perry had also brown locks, and was noticeably overweight, but that was not a hindrance in his work. He liked helping others and had been doing this job for several decades.

“Don’t remind me of that,” said Sally gloomily. “Half of the children have diarrhea due to the low supply of potable water, and about

one-tenth have lost their sight due to Vitamin A deficiencies. If we only had a budget twice as large, we could take care of those problems.”

“Our funds come strictly from donations, and in the past years they have been decreasing. It’s a pity people give so little.”

“Well, we should be thankful that they give something, because most don’t even care.”

Roy suddenly realized that if he had given more to charity that money could perhaps be serving him now.

Perry took a big-picture look at the camp and said to his colleague, “You know, the Hindus believe that when you die you get born again. They think that people undergo metempsychosis, changing into somebody or something that is proportionate to their past deeds. It all depends on how good or how bad you were in your previous life. If you were very evil, you don’t even get to come back as a human. If I were to reincarnate, whether in the form of a person or an animal, I would surely not want to resurface in a place like this. Western Sudan is one of the most dreadful places on Earth.”

“Don’t say it twice. It is hard to believe that in the twenty-first century this is still happening. The living conditions here are deplorable, and it is difficult to imagine how things could get worse.”

Well, soon things did get more unpleasant. Only minutes after the Canadians had ended their conversation, horsemen appeared and, before the aid workers could radio the U.N. forces in the region, the enemy had destroyed their communications gear. The aggressors had a policy, and it consisted of terrorizing the population to force it to flee the country. It was a war of ethnic cleansing, and Roy’s family was among the ones who were getting evicted. The horsemen, who hardly looked any different from the refugees, rode swiftly through the camp, torching and thrashing everything in their way. They also shot randomly into the fleeing crowd, and wounded several. As if that was not enough, they stole their cattle and kidnapped several teenage girls. When they finished with the rampage, the Yinyawit rounded up the refugees and pointed their guns at them.

“This land is ours, and we want you out,” proclaimed the leader of the attackers, who was an ugly man with a large scar on his left cheek. “We will soon return and if we find any of you, we will not be as gentle as this time.” They then rode away with their loot.

Everybody in the camp had frozen as the foe had pointed their weapons at them, but as soon as they left, all immediately began to pack their meager possessions. Roy’s mother was very weak. Not just from having given birth, but also from the chronic malnutrition. Despite her condition, she grabbed her few belongings and her son, and took off with the others.

The woman was just twenty years of age. She was medium height, with a thin body, dark hair, dark eyes and a symmetrical face. She had been the prettiest girl in her village, and despite the harshness of the living conditions there, life had not been that bad. One day, the enemy changed all that by burning the whole place. Her mother and grandparents were shot, her sisters were kidnapped, and she was raped. She fought vigorously to defend her dignity, scratching, striking and kicking the assailer. However, the man was stronger, and when he punched her on the face, she was knocked unconscious. It was him who got her pregnant, and although the infant was the result of a terrible act of violence, she immediately felt a strong attachment towards the newborn.

Roy was bundled up and placed on his mother's back. There were seventy thousand people in the camp, and almost all took off simultaneously and began to march through the semi-desert plain. They headed west, having the scorching sun as their only companion. The heat was oppressive, and there was no wind to provide any respite. After just a few miles, Roy began to suffocate.

"Oh, man, this is atrocious," he thought. "My tongue has literally transformed into sandpaper, and there is no sign that we will soon reach a better place."

Roy was in misery, and he began to cry. His mother gave him some water, but the liquid had a strange color. It was yellowish as a result of countless impurities, and it tasted terrible, but at least it freshened up a little. Some minutes later, the thirst was back, for Roy had continued to sweat intensively. He felt sticky and dirty, and in all directions there was only parched land with no trees to provide shade. The blistering sun burned almost as hot as a stove, and to make matters worse, it was only ten in the morning. The worst was yet to come. He was also hungry, and cried for milk, but his mother barely had enough energy for walking. He sobbed and whined for a long time, but his pleas went unattended.

"The grief is unbearable," he thought. "Nothing can be worse than this."

Unfortunately for him, the desert soon proved him wrong. Just as it seemed that things had hit rock bottom, a sandstorm appeared. Out of nowhere, a huge dark mass was spotted several miles away. At first, the brown behemoth was not coming their way, but then the wind shifted direction and it began to move straight towards them. The approximately seventy thousand people froze, and then they panicked, running erratically in all directions. The tempest approached at a dashing speed, and in no time Roy and his mother were engulfed by a maelstrom of dirt, sand and debris. They could no longer see or breathe. It was asphyxiating, and Roy began to choke.

"I can't inhale," he moaned squeakily. "My lungs are filling with

sand.”

He felt compressed from all sides, and a sense of helplessness overtook him. Millions of particles incessantly hit his diminutive body with such force that it was like thousands of needles were piercing his skin. It was a sunny day, but visibility was now less than one yard, and his eyes were hurting terribly. His mother put a cloth over his face and he began to respire again.

Some time later, the storm came to an end, but there was not much to rejoice about because the heat, the thirst and the hunger were again torturing him. All of a sudden, Roy began feeling much worse, and started crying. He felt strong aches in his stomach. The infant was sick, and the culprit was the contaminated water he had been drinking since coming into the world. He cried inconsolably, but his mother had no medicine, and Roy became aware that the level of suffering had reached new heights.

“Oh, man,” thought the attorney. “Things have gotten so bad that I am sure it will soon be all over.”

He was wrong again, and seconds later his mother fell to the ground. She had lost consciousness due to the exhaustion from the long march and the absence of food and water. She had last eaten three days ago, and her last sip of water had also taken place a long time ago. Roy could barely hear her respiration and her heart. Some time later, his mother’s vital signs progressively slowed down, and then he could perceive them no more. Her heart had stopped thumping.

“What?” he groaned grimly. “This can’t be.”

Roy had only been in the world for about a day, yet despite that, he felt a strong attachment to the woman. There was an intense sense of bonding, of togetherness, and of love. All at once, the lawyer forgot completely about the suffocating heat, the thirst and the hunger, and could only think about the death of his mother. He began to cry, and this time he wailed louder than ever before because the pain was greater. It was horrible, and it felt as if the sky had fallen apart. It was actually worse than that. It was as if the universe had collapsed and all the debris had poured over him.

“This woman probably never experienced a single day of happiness in her life because she hungered every second of her existence and lacked all other necessities. Life is so unfair. I bet she never did anything to deserve these conditions. The worst part is that she is not the only one. Millions, and even billions of people have to confront a similar situation. It is as if most humans only come into this world to suffer.”

Roy was deeply immersed in philosophical thoughts when, all at once, he heard a hiss. He turned his head and, in a flash, his mind shifted gear. A large snake was moving towards them, and it was clear that his

problems were not over. The snake was huge, measuring about four meters, and it was a cobra, the most dreaded of all serpents.

The reptile moved elegantly on the sand with undulating movements, almost levitating over the surface, and it went directly towards them. It approached the woman's body, halted only a few inches from it, and then climbed over her head. The lawyer's face was only a few centimeters away and he was shivering from fear. The animal sensed the trembling and then it struck, biting Roy on the arm. Soon after, he saw no more.

Debating with Demons

When the attorney came back to his senses, he was again in the midst of the vast and desolate reddish valley. He was once again in his adult body and in his lawyer's clothes and he was again alone. He stood up and saw something in the distance that was coming his way. He instantly thought it was the cave men and started to run, but soon noticed that it was a sole individual. The blond also noted that the being was waving, and paused to see who it was. It was the Creature, and minutes later it was standing next to him.

"You really can't say that we don't grant wishes," said the hairy being while sniggering. "You asked to go back to the world, and you went back. So what do you think of Africa? Isn't it a beauty? Isn't it just the perfect place to go on vacation?"

"Where is she?" Roy asked all at once with a sour tone.

"Monique is still on Earth and she is doing fine."

"I mean the Sudanese woman who was my mother?"

"Oh, you mean her. She is keeping us company."

"What? You mean she is here in the dungeons?"

"Yes."

"You are kidding, right?"

"No."

In a flash, Roy's eyes became filled with fury, and showing no sign of fear, he exclaimed, "Wasn't it suffering enough that she had to spend her whole life in poverty? Why must she go to Hell when she has already experienced hell on Earth?"

"She was no angel, you know."

"But what could she have possibly done to deserve this?"

"Well, she stole on numerous occasions, lied even more frequently and abandoned her first child. You were her second."

"She had to do all that to survive," croaked the blond irately. "It was not her fault that she was born in one of the poorest countries of the world and into one of the poorest families in that country. She never met her father, she had to constantly put up with civil war, and she never had a chance to visit a school. The woman is not to blame for what she did."

"If she is not to blame, who is then?"

"It is those who created this chaotic and anarchic world. It is you, and those who are at the top of the decision-making pyramid in this universe who bear responsibility. You first put people into horrible conditions that drive them to commit terrible acts and then you censure

them for having transgressed laws that you knew could not be respected. What sort of incompetent and inept beings are you?"

All at once the Creature's facial complexion changed and the smugness disappeared.

"Did you just insult me?" snarled the demon.

Roy was angry, and even though he was well aware of the immense powers of his adversary, he had had enough of the inconsistent world he had come to know after his death.

"No wonder the Earth has always been such an appalling place and history has been so full of war, hunger and disease," thundered the Swede defiantly. "With rulers like you, the world does not need enemies. With masters like you, it does not require a self-destruct mechanism."

"Watch your words, my friend."

Roy was not intimidated, and went on. "People are actually doomed before they even get born. They never really have a chance. The truth of the matter is that you guys manage the world like a bunch of rookies and retards. If you are such incompetent idiots, why don't you leave the job to somebody else that can do it better?"

"I think you have been missing your sessions of pain," snorted the Creature menacingly as it took two huge spades from its back and clashed them in mid air. "You have just asked for the next one."

"I bet you are not even the top guy in this lousy place," retorted Roy swiftly, sounding as he usually did in court. Cross-examining people at the stand was what he had always done best, and he was going to deploy up to the last of his abilities to fight his foe. "You are probably just one of those lackeys and sycophants of the Devil who are appreciated for their capacity to celebrate every dumb thing your boss says."

"You are asking for major pain."

"Wow! You are going to inflict me with pain? Who would have ever thought of that? That is really original. That is pure rocket science."

"Your sarcasms will only make your situation worse."

"I bet you are somebody whose meager mental abilities allow him only to undertake repetitive and mechanical jobs, such as torturing people."

"I advise you to change the subject or you will regret it."

"Tell me, how long have you been doing this work? I bet all you can do is press the button for the next punishment."

"Shut up," barked the demon angrily.

"That aggressiveness only confirms what I just said. You fall very easily into psychological traps. You are actually dumber than I thought."

"Shut your bloody mouth or I—

"You will what? You will torture me? Of course you will do that because that's all you can do. Your tiny brain doesn't allow you to do

anything else. It is so inept, that adding two and two is probably too hard for you. I am sure that when there is a problem in this place, you are never consulted on how to solve it. Isn't that so?"

The Boss

All of a sudden the Creature disappeared, and Roy knew that some dismaying new penalty was about to begin. But he was too enraged by the whole situation to bother with thoughts of castigation. He just couldn't stop thinking about the Sudanese woman and the life she had had.

A considerable amount of time went by and then the Creature was back, but this time it was not alone. Next to it was a strange looking entity that was even more heinous and frightful than the demon. It was a large monster with two big tusks, four legs and four arms. The largest part of its body resembled that of a spider, because it was rounded and more or less flat, supported by four huge, insect-like legs. Attached to one extremity of that area was another portion of a smaller size, which was oval in shape. That part was positioned upright, and four arms sprouted from its sides. The arms had a human form, but its hands had claws instead of fingers. The head came immediately after the torso, and it was rotund, but it had no nose and no ears. It just had two big eyes and a broad mouth full of large and pointed teeth. From behind its jaws, two large horizontally positioned tusks protruded. They were mobile, and could be used to clinch. The thing was about five yards tall and seemed to weigh several tons. It was by all means a feral-looking and intimidating figure whose whole body had a dark green hue. Only a few seconds after having made its apparition, the monster emitted a high decibel noise that caused a pernicious torment in Roy's ears.

"What makes you think that we are incompetent?" roared the green spider with a creepy and powerful voice. Roy was dumbstruck and could not utter a word. The size and ugliness of the being was so ominous that it had frozen him almost like a statue. However, soon after, he regained his composure.

"Well, there are so many contradictions in the structure of this world that I would need a calculator to count them all," uttered the lawyer boldly while trying to rub the distress from his ears.

"What could you possibly know about this place? You just arrived."

"True, but I can infer numerous things from my experience on Earth and from what I have seen here. For example, over the centuries numerous people have recounted stories about apparitions from the Devil and from demons. In more recent times, many of these stories reached the literary scene, and some even turned into movies. Is there any truth in the matter?"

"Yes. We have sent some of us for brief visits to the Earth on numerous occasions."

"What was the point of doing that?"

"We enjoy frightening people."

"I thought you guys were in a sort of fight, or perhaps even a war, with God?"

"Yes, we hate Him, and we also dislike that so many humans revere Him. We, on the contrary, have nobody that believes in us."

"Let me ask you one thing. What is the one thing that you most desire for the world?"

"That people no longer believe in God."

The beast swiftly moved closer to the blond and stopped only three yards from him. Roy paused and felt immediately intimidated by the hugeness of the Monster. However, he knew it was imperative to persevere because it was his only chance. Since his early years as a trial lawyer in New York, he had learned never to show weakness before an opponent, no matter how powerful he was.

"If that is your main goal, then the last thing you should be doing is going up there."

"Why is that?"

"Because when demons show up, they remind people that there is a God and that they should believe in Him to get protection from you. You guys are not exactly rocket scientists, are you?"

"My deputy told me you have a cantankerous attitude, and we have never liked irreverent individuals. In case you haven't understood your situation, we have all the winning cards."

"The issue here is not who has the power, but how wisely it is used. If you use it irrationally, you end up hurting your own cause. In case you haven't noticed it yet, humans tend to distance themselves very rapidly from religion as soon as they are not suffering. That is why as nations began to emerge from total poverty in the nineteenth century, they started to rapidly abandon their creeds."

"Don't lecture us," snarled the Creature.

"If you had some brains, you would never send anybody to Earth because your presence up there hurts your cause, for it brings people back into the arms of God. What you guys are doing is the equivalent of somebody who is trying to stay afloat on a rubber raft and starts letting the air out. What sort of logic is that? In case you haven't understood it yet, logic is universal, and it applies even here. You have to be consistent with your own goals. You can't say you want to go north and then move south. That is simply incoherent and lacking all sense."

"Beware your words," warned the Creature.

Roy was not cowed by the menace and went on. "The truth of the matter is that you are not that much smarter than the average person. People say that their priority is staying alive, but they systematically sabotage that goal by not doing what science counsels them to do. They do not exercise regularly, they eat junk food, they smoke, they drink, they drive fast, and they do a lot of other dumb things. As a result, they die prematurely. If you want humanity to forget about God, then the last thing you should be doing is showing your ugly face up there. Why is it that you can't come to that simple conclusion? Even a child could figure that out."

"Are you calling us stupid?" growled the Monster wrathfully.

"Well, it is not me who made all those dumb errors."

At once, the arachnid emitted a deafening shriek and Roy fell to the ground in pain. The green beast made a second, more powerful, noise and Roy's eardrums exploded. Streams of blood began to come out from his ears and he could no longer hear a thing. The Monster then moved towards the blond and kicked him. Roy flew fifty yards in the air and landed violently on the reddish ground. The huge spider approached and threw him again, propelling him even higher. He fell hard on the ground, sounding like a bag of potatoes that had plummeted from an airplane. Most of Roy's bones got broken in the first strike, and after the second, not a single remained in one piece. The lawyer was in terrible pain, and when the Monster kicked him for the third time, it multiplied exponentially.

On Earth, any person who had experienced such a demolition would have passed out after the first punch, but in that place, everything was different. Roy remained fully aware of all the woe that his shattered body was enduring and just watched helplessly as his foe pummeled him. The emerald-colored being neared anew and with one of his giant claws grabbed Roy's legs and with another his arms.

"No! Please, no!" begged the attorney. But the spider just grinned.

The multi-limbed entity started pulling in opposite directions, and in no time the lawyer's body split in two. The torso had detached from the rest, but Roy remained conscious of what was going on and saw how his legs lay several yards away. He hoped the horror would end soon, and some time later, he blacked out.

When he came back to his senses, there was nobody in sight and he was laying flat on the ground. His body was again in one piece and it did not have a single bruise from the massive beating it had received. As usual, he was in the same suit, the same shirt and the same tie, and they were all free of any wrinkle or stain. Moments later, the Creature and the Monster reappeared.

"You see? It does not pay to insult us," asserted the arachnid with an authoritative tone.

Roy stood up and took a deep breath, as if he was debating internally what to do next.

"Before you arrived, I had several conversations with the Creature, and he said that you guys have a policy of mastering pain. He also claimed that every one of us damned moves through a process of incremental distress, which means that no matter what I say or do, I will always receive punishments for the rest of eternity and they will progressively become more horrible. Thus, I see no reason why I should pretend that you guys are smart."

"Don't dare ridicule us again or you will pay dearly."

"It is clear that I will get no favors from telling lies about your intellectual capacities. The simple fact that you tried to convince me to stop talking about your mental ineptitude is proof of how chaotic and incompetent your brain is. Why would somebody who has absolute powers and who is not obliged to hear me try to convince me to stop speaking about his cerebral weaknesses? It is obvious that only somebody with a dysfunctional head would do that."

The two nefarious beings were taken aback by the bravado of the human and became more irate, but they were also baffled. It was rare that a man dared to defy them. The blond immediately noticed their wrath, but he didn't care. His sense of desperation had progressively increased as his hopelessness about the situation had become more evident, and his fear of them had significantly decreased.

He thus went on asserting, "The simple fact that you structure your thoughts in such an inconsistent way leads me to the conclusion that you are not the top boss here. Surely the one running this place must have more mental powers than I have heard from you two."

"You shouldn't trouble your head over who governs Hell," said the Creature gruffly.

"But you should. If you aspire to one day run this show, you should concentrate more on developing your cerebral abilities than on inflicting pain on the damned. Probably the reason they have you here is because you are good at following orders, no matter how stupid they are. Top bosses always like obedient employees who comply to the letter. You guys epitomize to the fullest the concept of the good soldier. The dumber they are, the more they are appreciated."

"You are asking for major pain," grunted the green spider threateningly.

"There is no risk with you," riposted Roy disdainfully. "You have been ordered to implement a gradual system of punishments and you will not depart a single bit from the regulations. It doesn't matter what I say or do, you will stick to it come what may. I bet you have never digressed an

inch from the mandates of your boss. I bet you have never even thought about digressing an inch.”

“Shut up or we will beat the crap out of you.”

“If you tried to come up with a new mode of castigation, you would probably spend half of eternity just debating over who would cut the inaugural ribbon. Once the ceremony was over, it would turn out that the new system is only two percent different from the previous one. You guys don’t have the brains or the temerity to swerve a tiny bit from the prefabricated model.”

Suddenly, the Monster and the Creature were gone. Their disappearance frightened Roy because that suggested the coming of a new chastisement. However, time went by and nothing happened. After a while, Roy began to think that he was already in the midst of a new punishment and that it was like the third, in which he spent a long time alone and bored to death.

The New Yorker had not moved from the place where he had debated with the infernal beings. He had remained largely immobile. Nevertheless, after a long wait in which nothing occurred, he decided to budge. The lawyer began to march through the plain, and he did so for a long time, but after a while he got tired and sat down.

The Mandarin Connection

The next second, the scenery changed and the hellish valley disappeared, as did the disgusting smell of sulfur. There was green all around him, and the plants had all the same size. He was in the midst of a rice field, and it was evident that he was back on Earth. The cropland was situated on a mountain, more specifically on a man-made plateau. The lawyer could see the adjacent hills, which had also been carved by the agricultural activity of people. And in the distance, there was a large city.

“Where in the heck am I?” asked the attorney in bewilderment. He immediately checked his body and noticed that he was in a normal adult frame with a white skin. “At least I wasn’t put inside something weird.” He paused and looked around. “These mountains look somewhat familiar. It seems I am somewhere in the Sierra Nevada. I am far from New York, but at least I am in the U.S.”

The attorney felt the need to descend the landmass, but after having taken only a few steps, he stopped.

“That was some debate I had with those two,” he thought. “This must be a new penalty because the creatures were really pissed off by what I said. On the other hand, I won my case. Maybe I made them reconsider and I am being given a second chance to lead a selfless life.”

He started going down and took a small trail, marching hastily while incessantly gazing at his surroundings. After having walked for about fifteen minutes, the lawyer spotted a poorly dressed man about half a mile away who was coming his way. He looked like a farmer, but his attire was somewhat odd. The other man saw him from afar and waved, walking straight towards the attorney. When the fellow was some thirty yards away, Roy noticed he was Asian. He was a thin-medium sized individual with a big mole on his cheek. The guy approached and, as soon as he got close enough, began to behave and talk as if he knew Roy. The New Yorker was surprised because he did not know the skinny character, but the strangest part of all was that the man was speaking in Chinese.

Roy had studied medicine in Japan and had learned the local language, but it was very different from Chinese. Although one of the three alphabets of Japanese was similar to the writing of the mainland, the two tongues were as distant as English and German. The lawyer had met many people from China throughout his life, but he didn’t have any friends from that country. The other man had surely confused him with someone else, and as the dark-haired individual began to speak, something very bizarre happened. Roy could understand everything he was saying. The attorney was astounded and did not know what was going on. When he opened his

mouth to explain that he didn't speak that language, something more incomprehensible occurred. The words came out in Mandarin. He spoke it fluently, and he had never even tried to learn it.

"Going home, huh?" said the other man smiling. "I am also finished for today. I hope the new fertilizer will work better than the previous one. Last season we lost half of the crop."

Roy was aghast and all at once asked, "Where in the hell am I?"

"What do you mean? Oh, I see. You have been reading Confucius, right? Yeah, he asked that frequently. Where are we really? And what is our role in society? His philosophy is complicated because it blends the Taoist communion with nature and the Buddhist concepts of the afterlife, mixing them with social ethics and moral teachings. I have never understood his writings well, but I know somebody who does. Maybe you would like to meet this guy. He lives in the next village. He has read everything from the great master."

"No," exclaimed the lawyer exasperatedly. "What I want to know is the geographic location of this place? This is the U.S., right? Is this the Sierra Nevada?"

"You are starting to worry me," said the skinny fellow apprehensively. "I know these last weeks have been very troubling for you with the price of rice falling so low, but I had no idea it had affected you so much."

"Look," said Roy while trying to calm down. "Let's play a game. Let's assume somebody has erased all my memories and I don't know who I am."

"You mean like amnesia?"

"Right. So tell me. Where are we?"

"We are in Sichuan province in the southwest of central China some kilometers away from Chongqing. Chongqing is the most populated city in the world, with over forty million people. This is where the Chinese government took residence during the 1930s in its war of resistance against the invading Japanese troops."

"This can't be," bawled Roy despairingly while placing his hands over his face. "Those damn demons did it again."

"What are you talking about?" queried the other man while looking concerned. "Are you really suffering from amnesia?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter," stuttered Roy as he tried to regain his composure. "I have to get to the U.S. Which road must I take to get to the nearest airport?"

"You can't do that. You can't leave your wife and daughter just like that. Look, I will take you to your house and, once there, the memories will probably come back."

Roy decided not to argue and accompanied the thin fellow. After all, he needed to think things over and investigate his new situation. They

marched down the mountain and, thirty minutes later, the other man stopped in front of a small, rustic house that was painted in white and stood all alone at the foot of the landmass.

"This is your manor," said the guy with the mole. He knocked, and seconds later a beautiful Chinese woman opened the door. She was inordinately pretty and was holding an even lovelier four-year-old girl who was asleep in her arms.

"You are just in time for dinner," she said to Roy. She then looked at the other man and courteously asked, "Deng would you like to stay for supper?"

"No thanks Bo. I have to get back. Your husband is not feeling well. He seems to be forgetting everything. It appears he is suffering from amnesia."

The man left and Roy went in. Suspecting something similar to the time when the Creature had sent him to Sudan, he immediately searched for a mirror. He found a large one in the living room and looked into it. The shock was almost as big as the last time. He was a Chinese farmer in his thirties, with black hair, flat eyes and a medium stature. He was dressed in typical peasant clothes and was thousands of miles away from home. During his life, the lawyer had resided in many cities of the world, but there was only one place he really called home, and it was New York. He had to get back to the Big Apple, and thought the girl could help.

"I will be going to the United States," said Roy. "Do I have a bank account or some money under the mattress to pay for the trip?"

"But you have never traveled," said Bo astounded. "You have never even gone outside Sichuan. On top of that, you do not speak English and we do not have enough money. Besides, we have more important things to finance at this moment. I just came back from the city hospital and the doctor had the test results. They were not good. In fact, they were horrible."

"What do you mean?"

"The unexplained fevers and infections that our daughter has been suffering are not caused by an allergy, as my uncle assured. It turns out Ling has leukemia. The doctor says it is curable, but the treatment is very expensive."

Roy was taken aback by those words, but he ultimately didn't care. After all, that was not his wife and that was not his daughter. He had most probably been sent to Earth to suffer, and the lawyer was determined not to fall into the trap the demons had set for him. It was clear that the woman and the child were not his responsibility. It was a sad thing that the infant had such a dreadful disease, but he could not take care of every sick person who crossed his path.

"That is terrible," said Roy pretending he was struck by the news. "That only reinforces the need to go to America to find work so that we will have enough money to pay for the doctor. So, tell me. How much do we have?"

"We only have eight thousand yuan."

Roy knew that a dollar was equivalent to eight yuan, which meant that their whole savings amounted to a thousand dollars. That was surely not enough, especially if he was to enter the U.S. illegally, and that was the most likely scenario considering that he was a poor peasant who would never get a visa.

"Maybe we can sell the house," he suggested.

"I don't think my father would appreciate that. This was his marriage gift. He gave it to us so that we would have a place of our own." She lingered for a couple of seconds and then appended, "But perhaps you are right. The life of Ling is more important."

Roy didn't like the idea of taking the savings of poor peasants, but there was no way he was going to stay in China, particularly in such a desolate, rural place. Had he at least landed in one of the big, modern, coastal cities like Shanghai, things wouldn't look so bleak.

"Hold Ling while I go and search for our bank booklet and the property documents for the house," said Bo while she gently handed the little girl to the lawyer.

As the twenty-three-year-old mother came close to him, she gave Roy a small kiss on the lips, and at once everything changed. The attorney felt a sort of electric current go through his entire body and his mind immediately flipped. He no longer wanted to leave China, Sichuan or even the small peasant house on the mountain. The lawyer sensed a strong emotional attachment to Bo, and the idea of running away with her money disappeared. However, as his hands touched Ling, his frame was shuddered with even more intensity. It was as if lightning had struck. He was instantly blasted out of his indifference and was left shaking, having the impression that all of his cells had been infected with love. Immediately, he sensed the weight of thick chains that bonded him to the little girl. They were even stronger than those with Bo, and at that moment he knew that Ling was his own flesh and blood. The idea that she was sick became at once a terrorizing notion, and his mind automatically went into overdrive, pondering incessantly over how to save her.

In the days and weeks that followed, Roy went with Bo and Ling to the city to search for a second opinion, and when the doctor had the results, the four met in the oncologist's office.

Once all were seated, the man in the white robe said, "There is not the slightest doubt. Your daughter has a blood dysfunction, more specifically, acute lymphocytic leukemia. But do not let yourself be

frightened by the word cancer. This type is curable in ninety percent of patients. Nevertheless, the required chemotherapy is expensive. Untreated, it is almost always fatal, and it is a rapidly progressing illness."

Roy and Bo were taken aback by those words because the treatment was well beyond their financial means.

"Is there some other way of curing her?" asked Roy anxiously.

"As you well know, China has the biggest wealth of naturalist and alternative medicine in the world. There are treatments made from plants and from animal parts. There is also acupuncture, meditation and a few other techniques. Some of those are likely to help, but they are not as effective as Western methods."

Roy and Bo left the clinic in a depressed mood, but they immediately began to ponder over how to solve their problem. They consulted with their relatives and friends, who offered their full support. All assisted them monetarily, but what they supplied was just a tiny fraction of the amount needed. Thus, they sold the house, the rice field, their wedding rings, and exhausted their savings. That managed to pay for a third of the procedure, and during the time it lasted, Ling's fevers relented. However, when the cash ran out, her health rapidly deteriorated. They pleaded with the hospital and with the banks, but to no avail. Without assets, nobody was willing to lend, and in the China of the twenty-first century, the health industry had become as commercially-oriented as in the West.

The small family moved to the house of Bo's parents and there the lawyer and his wife saw their gorgeous daughter slowly wither away. She was an intelligent, lively and obedient child who had captivated the attention of everybody since her birth. Her shining black eyes and symmetrical face were not just beautiful but also bewitching. Her name meant *delicate* in Chinese, and the gentle way in which she moved and spoke convinced everybody that the choice of her name could not have been better. Roy fell in love with Ling from the first second he held her in his arms, and with every day that passed, his feelings for her grew. Unfortunately, all that did nothing to stop the progress of the malady.

On a Sunday afternoon, three months after the treatment had been interrupted, Roy was in bed together with Bo and Ling. It was raining outside and the clouded sky only added to the despondent mood that had overtaken the peasant family. Ling was very feverish and was trembling, but she had managed to fall asleep. The infant looked pale and anemic, but even in sickness her beauty still illuminated the whole room.

"The doctor said she has a few weeks at most," moaned Bo while shedding some tears.

"I know," uttered the lawyer somberly. At that moment, Ling woke up and hugged Roy.

"When will we go to see the animals?" she asked with a tender and weak voice.

"When you get well, dear," affirmed Roy shakily, knowing that such a day might never arrive.

"I want to see the pandas and the horses," insisted the child.

"Okay, sweetheart," said Bo. "We will go tomorrow."

"Yes, we can go in the afternoon," affirmed Roy while trying to sound cheerful.

The little girl then repositioned herself over the lawyer's chest and fell asleep. The parents exchanged worried looks and Bo went to prepare some tea. Roy caressed Ling's head gently, and suddenly he sensed that the girl's breathing began to slow down. He shook her lightly, but she didn't react.

"Wake up, sweetheart," he stammered nervously. "Wake up." But the girl remained comatose. Roy rocked her again and exclaimed, "Come on. Don't do this to me. You can't give up. You made it this far, you can still make it much further." Ling, however, seemed lifeless.

"Bo," he shouted anxiously, "come here. There is something wrong."

Bo came dashing from the kitchen and asked, "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. But she is not waking up."

Bo began to cry and rushed to Ling's side. She palpated her face and then her torso.

"She is still breathing. I will go and get the village doctor." And before Roy could tell her that he would do that, Bo had already left.

The lawyer held Ling in his arms and felt the beating of her heart becoming more irregular and slower. He became desperate and paced from one side of the room to the other while trying to comfort the infant with soothing words and chants. He then went back to the bed and, suddenly, he could no longer feel her respiration. The attorney pressed his head against her chest and noticed that her heart had stopped thumping.

"No!" he yelled. "This can't be. Don't leave me, darling. You can't go just yet. You have a whole life before you. This is not the time to die."

He jerked her one more time, but then realized that it was all over. He immediately began to weep, and the laments of sorrow soon transformed into a deluge of tears.

While he had lived in New York as a successful lawyer, Roy had never wished to become a father. The idea of spending time with children never appealed to him. He saw it as boring and as a waste of his life, never managing to understand why parents spoke so excitedly about their young. Now he knew. Now he knew why mothers would fight tooth and nail for

their offspring and why they would dedicate their whole lives to them. It was the bonds of blood that made them behave in such a way. They were so strong that they seemed to have been forged of something a thousand times sturdier than titanium. He was now overwhelmed by the love that a parent felt for his child, and by the pain that the loss of that infant meant to a father. It was a suffering far more horrible than those experienced up to that moment, and one that he would not have wished upon even his worst enemies. Roy sobbed inconsolably, and the trauma was so crushing that it was as if a thousand-ton edifice had fallen onto him. He bewailed incessantly, and there was a point when he just wanted to die so that the harrowing weight on his shoulders would disappear.

Soon after, he saw no more.

Defiance

The next second he was again in the somber and desolate valley of the damned, with its interminable reddish horizon and its unbearable putrid smell. He lay on the floor and was, as always, in his Caucasian body and in his lawyer's clothes. Only a second after having realized where he was, his thoughts went back to Ling. She was such an enchanting and adorable child, and he had been unable to save her. The American was terribly shaken by the experience in China and was deep in remembrances when suddenly the Creature and the Monster appeared.

"It is quite a thing to be a parent, huh?" mouthed the spider intently. "You can get very attached to those little buggers, can't you? You see, it doesn't pay to defy us. You challenged us about not being able to digress from the prefabricated model and we came up with something new."

"We can be very imaginative when it comes to arrogant assholes like you," snorted the Creature.

Roy was still overwhelmed by the death of Ling and could not concentrate well on debating the demons. However, he had to focus because that was his only chance. There was simply no room for error in his battle against these creatures. The attorney got a grip of his emotions and stood up.

"You call that diverging from the preordained formula? Don't make me laugh. That was surely the punishment I was going to get anyway. What was so original about that? It was a castigation that inflicted a more intense sorrow than the previous one, which means that you fulfilled the two criteria of the system. You tortured me and you did it in a more extreme way than formerly. You guys are a joke, and your capacity to be creative is as good as that of a dissected cockroach."

The haughty grin of the infernal creatures immediately disappeared as it became clear that the combativeness of the lawyer had not been dented even by a little.

"You presumptuous son of a bitch," roared the Monster. "We will make you eat those words."

The next second, the two beings vanished and the lawyer was left wondering what would happen next. Time passed and nothing occurred, but eventually the two reappeared.

The Top Boss

“We’ve brought somebody you might like to meet,” said the Monster icily.

All at once, a huge mass of fire with the form of a snake appeared. The blond instantly recoiled from the horrendousness of the thing, and his hair literally stood up. It was a giant and dreadful being, but once Roy took a good look, it became evident that his fright had blurred his vision. In reality it was a large serpent that emanated fire from every part of its body. The thing was huge, measuring forty yards in length and having the girth of an elephant. However, there was more in that entity that was inordinate. It had two three-yard-long arms with fearful claws on their ends that were situated eight meters from its head. Its head was over-dimensional relative to the body, more like that of a dragon than a snake. It had two large horns over it and two giant fangs in the upper jaw, which protruded even when the mouth was closed. The color of its scales was black and its eyes were yellow. The reptile was terrifying, but it was also imposing and it radiated an aura of authority. Since its apparition, the immense beast had erected about a quarter of its body, leaving its head and several yards of what followed in a vertical position.

“So, you are the one who likes to insult us,” groaned the Serpent thunderously. “Are you not aware of what is going to happen if you continue with that attitude?”

Roy immediately trembled from the mighty resonance of its voice and from the gale of hot air that emanated from its breath. The thing was tremendous, and it inspired more trepidation and awe than the other two. Roy instantly thought that it was best to avoid confrontation, but he knew that there was a need to face the beast head on and grab it by the horns. Only by doing that was there a small chance of coming out of this odious place. He had to stand up to the portentous foe and try to debate his way out of the inferno.

“How should I know?” answered the lawyer boldly while taking a few steps backward. “I recently arrived and have not yet met anybody with sufficient brains to explain that to me. Nonetheless, one thing is certain. It cannot get worse because I will receive endless punishments for the rest of eternity, and they will become more noxious every time, even if I start flattering you.”

“Don’t be so sure,” riposted the Serpent sternly. “We are very resourceful and have endless possibilities. Do not test our resolve.”

“I think you are just bluffing. What could you possibly do to me?” He posed ironically as a thinker with his hand holding his chin and added, “Oh, I know. You are going to kill me. Please don’t whack me. I am afraid

of dying.” Roy then abandoned his sardonic tone and affirmed, “The reason why you want me to shut up is because you guys are proud of your supposed wittiness and I am ruining the party by pointing at the obvious.”

“Over the millennia we have had many wise guys like you, and they all discovered, to their misfortune, that it was useless to mess with us. We are in a higher league than humans and way above your possibilities. We are simply in another dimension that is so superior to yours, that you can’t even comprehend the basics of it. It is impossible for any mortal to outsmart us.”

“Is that so? In that case, you could perhaps explain why, for thousands of years, you have been sending demons to Earth.”

“We have our fun in such a way.”

“Well, that’s pretty lame because your presence up there strengthens the belief in God, and having people become unreligious is what you most want. What makes it more stupid is the fact that you have been dealing with humans for about 100,000 years and you have still not gotten to the simple conclusion that such a policy is counterproductive. How much longer will it take you to figure that out? Another 100,000 years? Your brain is so inept that it needs an eternity to decipher the simplest of things.”

“How dare you speak in such a way to our master?” barked the Creature maddeningly.

Roy glanced at the Creature and then went on with his caustic discourse. “The worst part of the whole story is that you’ve had considerably more time than 100,000 years because you’ve been around for all of eternity. I can understand that you have fun terrorizing people, but there are surely other forms of entertainment that would allow you to get your adrenalin rushing without having to shoot at your own feet. You just said that you were resourceful and have endless possibilities. If that is so, then you should have long ago figured out a way of amusing without pushing people into the arms of God. What sort of morons are you?”

The Serpent suddenly made a swift movement of its left arm, and in a flash Roy found himself totally encased in a block of ice. The ice was hard as a rock and it pressed brutally against his body, crushing every one of his muscles and bones. Unfortunately for the attorney, that was not the only thing inflicting misery. A terrible coldness immediately swept through his body, seeping through every pore of his skin. It was impossible to know the precise reading on the thermometer, but it must have been lower than anything ever registered on Earth.

During his life, Roy had been in many cold places. On one occasion he went to Siberia during winter, and it was so cold that his spit would freeze before landing on the floor. Despite the thick winter clothes, he had shivered every second of the journey. However, the situation in the

Siberian tundra had been warm in comparison to what he was experiencing inside the block of ice. Had the attorney been able to move, he would have trembled faster than the speed of light.

The ice cube was about four square yards, and Roy could see through it. The Serpent, the Monster and the Creature were standing several meters away, sporting disgusting grins.

"You see?" said the snake. "You cannot outsmart us."

"That should teach him a lesson," said the Creature

Roy was in agony and wished only that the harrowing situation would soon end. Suddenly, the giant reptile moved its left paw and the block of frozen water disappeared, leaving the blond flat on the ground. He was quivering and panting, and could not think. The lawyer slowly got on his knees and his breathing began to laggardly calm down.

"I think he is finally getting the message," mouthed the spider.

Roy continued to shake, but eventually he managed to get on his feet. He looked at his torturers and thought rapidly about what to do next. The attorney was terrified, because the torments brought about by the reptile were far worse than those of the other two. However, he knew that perseverance was the key to success.

"What you just did is one more proof of the incompetence of your brain," he uttered scathingly. "Only primitive beings resort to violence. They do so precisely because they have run out of arguments and see no other way to impose their will."

The three dreadful beings were taken aback by Roy's challenging words, and before they could say something, the lawyer added, "Tell me. Why are you down here and not up there, running the whole show?"

"That is none of your business," snapped the snake.

"It was because God outwit you, right? You were never a match for Him, and that is why you do his dirty work. That is why you live in this ugly and stinking place, and why nobody likes you. Your work is to torture and terrorize people, and, as a result, all that you receive from the Earth are insults and hatred."

"Shut your bloody mouth," barked the Creature.

"If you were wiser and presented more consistent arguments, you would probably obtain a better deal from God and get some sympathy from people. You are clearly quicker than these two, but that's no big deal because these guys are obtuse. This is clearly a story of dumb and dumber."

"So you think you are very clever?" snarled the Serpent angrily while swiftly moving closer to the lawyer.

The blond recoiled and said, "It is not so much that I am cunning, but that you guys are stupid."

"Do you know who I am?" hollered the giant snake thunderously.

"You are obviously the boss of these two, but that is no big deal and surely not a merit."

"I am the Master of Darkness and the God of Suffering. I rule over this universe."

Roy paused for a second and then retorted, "Well, that is also no particular achievement. You probably got this job because you were the only one available, and not because you were the best."

Roy's words were poignant and irritating because he had the ability of always putting his finger on the wound. It was a trick he had learned since his early years as a lawyer. Exasperating a witness on the stand would usually deliver wonderful results because the person would lose his calm and start saying things that would have been better kept hidden. It was doubtful if those subterfuges would produce the same results in this bizarre world where the Earthly rules no longer applied, but the effort was worth a try.

"So tell us," said the attorney contemptuously. "How did you get this job? There are only two possibilities. The first is that you were the only one available, and the other is that you kissed the boss' ass better than anybody else. You know, on Earth people say that the first profession in history was prostitution, but the truth of the matter is that the first was kissing the boss' ass. So what was it? Did you flatter him or were you the only one who applied for the position?"

The Serpent's eyes were yellow, but they had turned red, suggesting a change of mood. There was a frightening silence for a few seconds but then it opened its jaws and launched a ball of flames directly at Roy. The lawyer immediately caught fire and began to scream.

"Ah! Help!" he yelled, and threw himself to the ground trying to extinguish the hot radiation.

However, his efforts proved fruitless and the virulent orange gas remained as intense as before. In a matter of seconds his clothes vanished, his hair evaporated and his skin turned black. He could smell his charred flesh, and it had the most disgusting of odors. The man was scorched intensively and ran erratically. He went from right to left and from north to south, but nothing could quash the combustion.

After a while the Serpent asked, "Would you like me to turn it off? You just have to stop irritating us."

"Okay, okay," shouted the Swede.

A second later and the blazing gas disappeared. The attorney was spread out on the surface of the ground and he slowly got back on his feet, checking his body. Everything was back to normal and his hair, skin and clothes were as good as new.

Once the American had recovered his breath he uttered, "On

arrival, I repeatedly asked the Creature to investigate if my presence here was due to an error. I was told there was no mistake. The question is: Who decided that I come here? Was it you or anybody from Hell?"

"No," replied the Serpent.

"That means it was God. Even though you dislike God, you actually work for him, for he has given you the task of punisher and you comply by the letter. That signifies that, as his employee, you cannot digress from his rules and, therefore, I am condemned to forever endure bane and woe. You will torture me over and over again no matter what I say or do, so why should I be nice to you?"

The Serpent, the Monster and the Creature looked at each other and, seconds later, they vanished into thin air. Roy was panting and still distraught from the burning experience. His mind was in turmoil, but he was clear over one thing. He did not have the faintest idea what would happen next, and that was just as frightening as what he had just gone through.

"I wonder if my words are having an effect," he muttered. "On Earth, they always did, but here—. Here, there is no telling what they will deliver."

Time passed and the lawyer looked incessantly in all directions, fearful of the castigation that would follow.

"I wonder why the three beings disappeared? Was it to discuss what I just said or was it to talk over my new chastisement?"

Suddenly, his enemies reappeared. As before, the Serpent was in the middle and the two others on its flanks.

"I have never disobeyed the rulings from above," said the snake, "and the only time I did, many eons ago, I was banned to this desolate place. I have learned from my error and do not want to commit a second one. Things were not always like they are right now. At first, it was very painful. After being dumped here, I spent a long time just lingering in this cheerless valley and had to beg for a change in my situation. I actually had to implore Him to give me the job of Commander in Chief of Hell."

"Yeah," appended the Monster. "Before we started torturing humans, this was a very boring place."

"You are right," affirmed the Serpent. "We are obliged to vex you for the rest of eternity. However, there is some room for maneuver. If you stop harassing us, we will reduce the frequency of your punishments and they will stop becoming more agonizing."

Roy paused for a few seconds and immediately sensed a ray of hope. His words were having an effect after all, or so it seemed.

"On the matter of the frequency of the castigations, what exactly are you proposing?"

"Well, you would spend a considerable amount of time without any physical pain. It would be so long that when the torments reappear, you would actually welcome them because they would break the monotony."

"That means I will get regularly tortured with loneliness," retorted Roy airily. "You have already castigated me with that and it was no picnic. What you are offering is a continuation of what I have already experienced. That's not a good deal. I want company. I want to be with other people. I want to be with the Sudanese woman who died in the desert and with Ling."

"Ling is not here," said the Creature. "All children below the age of ten go straight to Heaven."

The Serpent went silent for a few seconds and then looked at his two companions. The three pulled back and went to powwow in the distance. Soon after, they returned.

"You are asking too much and we risk the wrath of God," said the dragon of fire. "We will only grant you the company of one person, and it will be us who choose who that will be."

"Okay. That's acceptable. But what about the matter concerning the level of pain endured in each punishment?"

"The level will not increase."

"Does that mean it will remain at the same degree as the last one in which I burned alive?"

"Well, yes," uttered the Serpent evasively, "but you should not forget that you are the only one who has ever gotten such a privilege in the whole of eternity. For the last 100,000 of your human years, we have been systematically lashing out at people and we have never digressed a tiny bit from the preordained model."

"I must say that it is, indeed, an honor," retorted the attorney sarcastically, "but I couldn't give a shit about that. I am not willing to even accept the degree of pain endured in the first punishment, because that was horrible. It was simply too much. Why don't you set the level at one hundredth of what I first experienced?"

"Are you crazy?" riposted the snake exaltedly as it rattled its tail. "If we were to do that, why not also bring in a few hookers and a couple of go-go girls. The lowest I can go is one-tenth."

"Okay. Let's try at one-tenth and see how it works."

The next second, the Prince of Darkness produced a long document out of thin air, which Roy signed without reading it all.

The Archduchess

Before Roy could sport a triumphal smirk on his face, the three beings had disappeared. Nevertheless, in the minutes that followed he began to develop a smug expression, but after a long wait in which nothing happened, it vanished. He then started to wonder about the validity of the agreement he had just signed. While on Earth, Roy had seen many movies about the Devil, and he was always portrayed as treacherous, unreliable and deceitful. He was the master of guile and the king of falsehood, being somebody who would never respect his own deals.

Time passed and nothing changed, which drove the attorney to suspect a non-compliance clause that was probably hidden in the tiny print he had not bothered to look at. Some days later, while he walked aimlessly through the desolate terrain, he saw something in the distance. He stopped at once, and his first reaction was to panic.

“Oh, man,” he moaned tensely. “That must be my next punishment. I’d better get out of here.”

Just as Roy was about to sprint, he noticed that the figure looked human and of a normal size, so he decided to stay put and observe. The thing moved slowly as it headed directly for him. When it got a little closer, he was able to distinguish something.

“It cannot be a Paleolithic man, like the ones that ate me, because it is too wide in the lower half of the body. However, that is not necessarily good. It is actually pretty weird.” He watched it approach some more and then exclaimed, “Shit, maybe it is something worse.”

However, he managed not to lose his nerve and decided to continue his observation. The fact that only one was approaching was obviously less threatening than six, but one was enough to deliver massive pain. He nevertheless refrained from the idea of fleeing. As the individual approached, it became evident that there was something very strange about him.

“There is something unusual about its head,” Roy mumbled anxiously.

When the distance between the two had shortened much more, the lawyer became aware of what was going on.

“Oh, crap. That guy has no head!”

Roy again thought about running, but noticed that the person did not carry any weapons and was not a primitive savage. The being was fully dressed, even elegantly attired. Piquing Roy’s curiosity even more was the fact that the clothes were those of a woman. Eventually, the person stopped a few yards from Roy and stood without moving, giving no indication of

aggressiveness. Only half of the neck remained on its body; the other part having been cleanly severed, leaving behind an eerie spectacle. The woman had a pleasant bodily structure and was dressed in a luxurious silvery robe that was tight around the torso but large below the waist, extending all the way to the ankles. The clothes immediately caught the attention of the blond and he tried to decipher what they meant.

"That wardrobe is evidently not from the twenty-first century, or even the twentieth," he thought. "It resembles that of eighteenth century Europe, and more particularly that of France. The style of the shoes and the rest suggests that the period was the latter eighteenth century. They look elegant." He addressed the lady and asked, "Were you a French aristocrat?"

There was no answer and, after a few seconds, Roy added, "Were you beheaded during the French Revolution? In those times the guillotine was used very frequently to decapitate criminals, political prisoners and members of the royalty."

There was again no response. The female just stood there.

"Who are you? Why were you sent to Hell?"

Nothing, not even a slight motioning of one of her limbs. Roy felt a mixture of unease, impatience and fear.

"No wonder you don't speak. You have no mouth. Can you at least understand what I say? Just twitch a finger if you understand what I am saying."

However, the headless lady wasn't doing any of that.

"Of course you cannot hear," moaned the lawyer. "You have no ears." The Swedish-American paused a moment and then snapped, "I knew those sons of a bitches would not comply with the deal."

The blond paused for a few seconds and looked around, expecting to see the Serpent and his deputies, but there was nobody.

He noticed that the woman was carrying a wooden box that was about one square foot, and was nicely carved with strange designs. She at once unlocked it, opened it, and took out something rounded. It was her head, which she placed on top of the box. The lawyer immediately became alarmed and thought that something horrendous was about to occur.

The head had its eyes closed and looked dead, but then the eyelids raised.

"I am Marie Antoinette, queen of France," it said. "Who are you?"

"I am Roy," stuttered the blond astounded. "I am an attorney from the twenty-first century." He lingered and then appended, "Are you really the famous French empress?"

"Yes."

"Wow." There was a break in the verse and, after some seconds, Roy said, "So you were the gorgeous dame of Versailles, whose reign was

abruptly terminated by the French Revolution. It is said you were the most beautiful monarch in all of Europe.”

“Whether I was the loveliest or not, that is irrelevant right now, don’t you think? Not even with a ton of make-up would I look good.”

Roy thought it best not to comment on that and said, “So, how was it? How did it feel to be a queen?”

“It was not that great. For starters, I had no decision whatsoever in the selection of my husband. My dad, the king of Austria, wanted to cement a military alliance with France and decided to use me as his pawn, so he married me to the crown prince of that country. I didn’t even get to enjoy my childhood because, by fourteen, I was already a wife. It was the year 1770, and I still remember it as if it was yesterday.”

“And how old was he?”

“He was fifteen, so from that perspective I was lucky not to have been handed over to an old man, as was the case with some of my sisters. However, Louis XVI was ugly. He was fat, awkward and shy. He also had bad breath and farted continuously.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It was terrible.”

“I guess that being a king doesn’t immunize somebody against flatulence.”

“It actually made it worse, because the succulent food served at all banquets increased his appetite and he ate like a pig. But that was nothing in comparison to other things.”

“What do you mean?”

She remained silent, so Roy insisted. “What other things?”

“Well, for starters, we never got along well. We disagreed over most things and fought a lot. He wanted a submissive wife, but I was somewhat irreverent, and he slapped me on more than one occasion.”

She paused abruptly and looked pensive.

“Is that all?” asked Roy.

“No, there is more. Louis was also bad in bed. In fact, he was terrible. The king was so uninspiring that when he would finish, I could never tell that the show had already ended. I was actually never sure when it had started.”

“Was he really that bad?”

“Yes.”

“I think I once read something about that. The book said that during the first seven years of the marriage you were not able to get pregnant and everybody thought it was your fault, while in reality it was the fault of your husband. He suffered from a condition called phimosis, which prevented him from fathering children.”

"Well, phimosis is just an elegant way of saying that he couldn't get it up."

Roy grinned and said, "Yeah, that's true. So does that mean that in the first seven years of your marriage there was no action?"

"That's right. But afterwards, the action was never good. It was at best mediocre."

"Can't say you enjoyed it, huh?"

"No. Everybody thinks that being a queen is fun, but it wasn't. I not only got all the blame for the failings of my erectile-dysfunctional husband, but I was also expected to produce children like a machine."

"I know. In the eighteenth century, women were just seen as incubators."

"My mother had sixteen. Can you imagine that?"

"Yes."

"Can you really?"

"Well, I am not a woman, but I loved history and read a lot about your epoch. I have a good idea of what the women and the men of your time had to put up with. Epidemics were regular, famines were just as frequent, and there was hardly a year without a war. Life expectancy was barely twenty-five years, and infant mortality was monstrously high."

"Those are just statistics. That is nothing in comparison to having experienced it. Do you want to see for yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"All of my memories are warehoused in this box. If you look into it, the images of my life will flash before your eyes."

"You are kidding, right?"

"No. Go ahead and take a peek."

Marie's right hand grabbed her head by the hair, lifted it from the wooden box and then handed the squared object to the lawyer. Roy opened it hesitantly and looked into it, but all he could see was the brown floor of the container.

"Get closer and focus," explained Marie.

The attorney did as he was instructed and, before he realized it, found himself in a large and sumptuous chamber. He was no longer in the Hellish valley and he was no longer inhaling the odious fumes of the inferno. Everything around him seemed luxurious, and there was a luscious smell of perfume swirling in the air. The room contained a considerable amount of furniture, but at the center of it was a huge and regal bed. The place was dimly lit and nothing could be clearly seen, but it was evidently a bedroom, and it appeared to be empty.

Suddenly, he heard a male voice say, "Yes, baby, yes."

The room fell silent again, and then a female voice, which Roy immediately recognized, uttered, "Get off me."

The next second a snore began to be heard and then he saw a figure moving away from the bed. A moment later, the curtains were drawn and he viewed Marie in a voluptuous nightgown standing next to the window. She looked divine. She looked sublime. Her resplendent and immaculate beauty was so imposing that her statuesque body seemed almost like a work of art that had been chiseled by a Baroque artist. It was late afternoon and the sun's rays poured obliquely into the chamber, falling over the radiant queen and making her face shine even more. She gazed at the bed. Louis was there, sound asleep and loudly snoring.

"This guy is getting worse by the day," she said contemptuously. "This time he nailed me in less than a minute. At the rate things are going, one day he will set a world speed record."

Roy blinked and the scene instantly changed. He was in a large public square and there was a multitude of people in heated agitation. Surrounding the square were a number of poorly constructed three-story buildings, a church, a government edifice and a fortress that looked like the infamous Bastille prison. Most people were wearing drab peasant and worker's clothes and carried sickles, reapers, mowers, pickaxes, axes, hammers and other working instruments, which they brandished menacingly in the air. Some held swords, spears and rifles, and all were shouting angry words. The people were dirty, greasy and malodorous, and they all looked destitute, sick and hungry.

The site was the city center of Paris, and it was fully packed with thousands of people. But, all of a sudden, the wrathful crowd began to make a clearing. A horse-drawn cart was coming, and there was someone in it. It was Marie, and she was handcuffed. She looked terrified, but the queen did not lose her composure and kept her head high. She was wearing the splendid silvery robe Roy had seen in Hell, and as the cart advanced and the throng made more space for it, the lawyer was able to see what lay ahead. About a block away was a wooden structure, and on it was a large artifact containing a huge blade.

As she was being conveyed to the ramp where the guillotine was mounted, somebody in the crowd shouted, "Courage!"

Marie remained serene and said, "I will surely not lose my courage at the moment when my sufferings are about to end."

Roy blinked, and the next moment he was back in the reddish valley of Hell.

"Yeah, you are right," uttered the attorney dejectedly. "Your life was no joyride, and as if that was not enough, you were later sent to Hell to grieve even more. I don't know who created the system of life, death and punishment, but it is a rotten one."

The American continued to chat with Marie about her life, and as the hours passed, the subjects of the conversation became more varied. He would occasionally refer to the queen as the archduchess, because that had been the title she had received at birth, but regardless of how he addressed her, she always seemed interested in what Roy said. They conversed about numerous things, and the days elapsed.

Roy was not able to obtain any information about Hell because every time he inquired she changed the subject. However, a few things could be inferred from her presence there. The situation was far from what he had hoped for, but it was much better than being alone. The empress never behaved violently, which was another sign of an improved environment.

The socializing went on and on, and after a while the attorney wondered why the hellish creatures hadn't shown up. It was impossible to know how long had it been since he had last spoken with them, because in that world time could not be measured in the same way as on Earth. However, it felt as if weeks had gone by, and he certainly did not miss them. The new environment was not jovial, because seeing a beheaded person was never a pleasant sight, but it was not a terrifying one.

One day, Roy was telling the archduchess how he had once won a case in court after having only interrogated the first witness, when all of a sudden the picture changed.

The Jungle

Before the attorney could get a grasp of what was going on, he found himself in a strange jungle. The place was overflowing with lush vegetation that had potent colors and exuberant forms. A multiplicity of sounds could be heard coming from all sides, with the strongest being the shrieks and growls from wild animals. He could feel soft soil under his feet, and could smell the aromatic fragrance of flowers. Everything seemed very Earthly, except for one thing. The size of the plants and the trees was gigantic. Even the blossoms were humongous, and he was instantly overwhelmed by their hugeness. The trees were so tall that he could not see the tops.

“Where in the heck am I?” asked Roy uncertainly while he gazed left and right.

All at once, he heard a noise, and his body instantly froze. Something was coming his way, and he could see the vegetation moving several yards ahead of him. The lawyer was bewildered by the amorphous landscape, but the main reason for remaining still was because it was probably his best defense against whatever was moving towards him. The sound was nearing, and then something emerged from the bushes.

Roy could not believe his eyes. It was something monstrously bulky and terribly deformed. The thing had an elongated body that seemed to extend for many yards, and it was as tall as he. The creature was green, it had a slippery substance covering all of its skin, and it looked hungry. Although it did not have a threatening appearance, its giant size was enough to scare anybody. It was an over-dimensional worm, and that immediately made him realize something.

“I can’t possibly be on Earth, because there is no maggot with such dimensions. This thing is simply out of all proportions.”

The lawyer stood petrified, and the worm was also motionless. Only Roy’s pupils managed to move, and they meticulously observed the insect. The lawyer soon concluded that the annelid resembled those that eat leaves.

The enormous nematode approached the attorney and, all at once, he sensed no fear. Despite its monstrous size, he was not afraid. Roy could not understand why he felt like that, but the fact was that in seconds he went from panic to serenity. That was complemented by the attitude of the limbless creature, which gave no indication of wanting to attack. The soft-bodied being looked at Roy and then it took a new direction, moving slowly through the ground. The lawyer instinctively began to follow it and, as he did so, he noticed that his bodily movements were very awkward. He tried to look at his legs, but could not see any. He tried to examine his

arms, but there was nothing. He then turned his head and gazed behind him. The American was immediately shocked.

"Oh, shit," he exclaimed darkly. "I have no limbs."

He had a long and cylindrical green body that seemed capable of contorting in all possible directions. This was clearly the structure of an invertebrate.

"Shit. Those bastards put me in the body of a worm. I am on Earth, but as a nematode, and that is why everything looks so big."

When Roy was a kid, he had on numerous occasions fantasized with his friends about being an animal. When asked, he always asserted that if he could transform into anything, it would be into an American eagle. That bird was not only large and majestic, but it also dwelled in the skies. Many of his friends chose creatures such as lions, tigers, pumas, elephants, wolves, dolphins, whales, hawks, falcons, horses or bears. Roy was uncompromising with his bird, but he acquiesced that the choices of his friends were alluring because those animals also had numerous assets. Over the years, those conversations came and went and many other beings were also presented as ideal for embodying.

In every group of friends there is always one with weird tastes, and Roy befriended many people in the course of his childhood and adolescence. Those with bizarre preferences would usually say they wanted to be an uninspiring creature, such as a cat, a monkey, a goat or even a parrot. However, nobody ever fantasized about being a worm. Having been sent to Earth as an insect larva was clearly a punishment, and the lawyer immediately began to wonder what other surprises this castigation had in store for him.

Roy followed the other caterpillar and crawled his way through the soil. They covered a large area and eventually reached a plant that was at least one hundred times taller than them.

"We will go up," said the other worm.

It was not clear why Roy had understood what the nematode had uttered, but it was as plain as English, and the two began to climb.

"What's up there?" asked the lawyer curiously.

"Let's hurry, or else we'll be left with nothing."

Roy's body had a number of sucking organs along its bottom, which firmly attached to the stem, and a vertical ascent posed no problem. When the two reached the first branch, they encountered many more of their kind. There were thousands of them, and they were all feasting on the leaves. Roy instantly knew that the creatures on that plant were not just from the same species, but also from the same family. Those were his brothers, sisters, cousins and uncles. He could not explain why he was so sure of that, but he was certain. The lawyer sensed the bonding and, in no time, he was feeling more than just sympathy for them. Roy observed

attentively the behavior of the annelids and noticed that they had a voracious appetite. They were devouring the foliage of the plant with incredible rapidity, and all at once he, too, felt hungry.

"I wonder how this thing tastes," he muttered. "Ever since I landed in Hell, I have not eaten a thing. I have been devoured several times, but have not yet put something in my mouth. I am starving, but this doesn't exactly look like a barbecue." He hesitated and then said, "Let's give it a try."

During his human life, Roy had frequently eaten salads, because he was more into health food than junk. Many professionally made salads tasted well, but on flavor alone, they could not compete with a burger or a pizza. However, when Roy tasted the leaf, he was immediately surprised.

"Damn," he affirmed gleefully. "It tastes great. I'd say this is better than an enchilada."

However, just as he was going for a second bite, all the worms suddenly froze and stopped munching.

"Is something wrong?" asked Roy while looking to his left and right confusedly.

"A red bird has just landed on the branch, and we are his favorite dish," said Woro, which was the worm Roy had first met.

The lawyer immediately turned and noticed the feathered animal, which was dozens of times his size. Before the nematodes could react, the winged creature began to snap the caterpillars. It did it so fast that in no time it had eaten about a tenth of Roy's family.

"Run! Run as fast as you can," shouted Woro, who was the leader of the pack.

The others immediately began to flee, and Roy did likewise, but it was at such a snail's pace that before they could reach the ground, the enemy had snatched another batch of his brothers. Roy was shaking from fear, but he was also overtaken by a sense of sorrow at the death of his siblings.

"On the ground we are just as defenseless as up there," moaned Roy as he pushed his way through the soil. "What's the point of running?"

"That's not so," replied Woro. "Here the bird cannot distinguish us among the leaves and other things on the floor."

There was a sense of relief, but the winged foe was still in the area, and the danger had not yet disappeared. In the seconds that followed, the annelids were not sure what to do and remained motionless. Soon after, the feathered animal took flight and vanished.

"Are we climbing back onto the plant?" queried Roy.

"We are still hungry," chorused many of the slimy nematodes while directing their gaze at Woro.

"I have the impression that bird is still around," said Woro worriedly. "I think we should go somewhere else."

The herd obeyed and immediately began to move away from the plant. The attorney remained anxious, but in the minutes that followed nothing happened, and just as things were starting to calm down, a new threat appeared. A black scorpion emerged from under a log and instantly raised its huge pincers. Before the worms could react, the weapons struck and chopped two that were some inches to the left of Roy. A thick green liquid instantly came out from their bifurcated frames, and the pack of insects panicked.

"What's going on?" asked Roy uneasily. "I thought arthropods did not prey on maggots."

"They don't eat us," replied Woro, "but those creatures are stupid and they feel threatened by our large numbers. They always react like that."

Roy looked at the huge enemy and thought, "I must be somewhere in the American continent, because if I am not wrong, that is an *Opisthacanthus* scorpion, and they are only found in the New World."

In no time, the six-limbed foe slit four more worms open, and even minced a millipede that was passing by. The nematodes were defenseless and tried to escape, but they were too slow. The scorpion stung two others with its poisonous tail and, after that, it struck one that was next to the lawyer.

"Oh, shit!" yelled Roy. "I am next." And just as it seemed that he would meet the same fate as the others, the arthropod left.

"That was close," said the attorney frantically while panting. He then looked at the leader, who was still by his side, and asked, "Why did it stop? Not that I am complaining, but it was surely not because it thought we could beat him."

"Like I was telling you," explained Woro. "Those animals are dumb, but at some point they realize that we are not a menace to them."

The death of his relatives was again deeply felt, and Roy was overwhelmed by the sorrow. It was strange, but the more he spent time with them, the more he bonded with the little fellows.

Although they were far from having eaten adequately, the worms decided to call it quits for the day and crawled back towards their lair. They traveled several yards through a humid and uneven terrain until they reached an old tree. The elongated creatures then climbed the first ten inches of the trunk and went into a small hole. After a few more inches, they reached a hollow area where a vast amount of nematodes were congregated. There were tens of thousands of them, and they were all doing things that were very much like the things people do. Most were conversing, others were sleeping, a few were romancing, and the infants

were playing. Roy immediately knew that he was home.

"I never thought our family was this big," said the lawyer.

"What do you mean by big?" asked Woro. "This is only a fraction of what it used to be. In the recent past, our numbers have been rapidly shrinking. We don't know what is causing that, but if this continues, we will soon disappear."

As a worm, Roy had a far superior ability to sense substances than as a human. He wondered about the causes behind the rapid decrease of his kin, and as he was doing that, perceived the unmistakable smell of chemicals. He immediately began to suspect what was responsible for their death.

Suddenly, he heard a loud noise outside the tree and went to investigate. He crawled through the hole and soon reached the opening. He saw three Caucasian people several yards away who seemed to be laboring at something. Two were men in their forties and the other was a woman in her thirties. They were loaded with gadgets and carried badges that said 'GREENPEACE-USA'. The ecologists were dressed in khaki-colored clothes and wore baseball caps. All had brown hair, reddish cheeks, and had a medium stature. One of the men took out an instrument from his backpack and made several measurements of the soil.

"Yeah, it is as we suspected," he said. "There is a high concentration of three different pesticides in this area. These pesticides rarely kill plants or animals, but they usually disrupt their reproductive systems. Their effect is stronger in animals, causing sterility."

All of a sudden Roy recalled how he had once defended in court a chemical company that produced those goods. He had won the case on a technicality, even though the evidence clearly showed that the corporation was responsible for having killed an entire ecosystem.

"They dumped their waste on a protected area and they did not even bother to pack it correctly," he thought sadly. "This is indeed ironic. When I was alive, I behaved like a predator, but now, it is me who is the prey. Now I am a defenseless victim of pollution. It wouldn't surprise me if this contamination was caused by the same company I once defended. After all, they are the largest in the world and have operations in just about every country on the planet."

The woman from Greenpeace, who was quite thin and had a pointed nose, pressed several buttons in a hand-held device and then frowned.

"Jeremy, I think the pesticides are responsible for much of the damage, but they are not the only culprit," she said. "Look at this," she added, and pointed at an area further to her left. "There are many dead insects, and the readings on my analyzer show something very unusual."

"What is it?" asked Jeremy.

"These creatures died from heat stroke. The jungle has become much hotter in these last years and many species have not been able to adapt to the new conditions."

"What is causing that?"

"This is one more treat of global warming. Those heat-trapping gases are a real menace. They are a major threat to the biological stability of this planet."

As a highly educated person, Roy had read extensively about global warming. However, like most people, he didn't want to take any action to stop it. He just didn't want to pay the higher taxes that were needed to fund new technologies that would create alternative sources of energy capable of replacing oil and coal.

"It was a very selfish way of seeing the world," muttered the lawyer repentantly. "I never imagined that my acts would have such a massive impact on the life of animals." He paused and then added, "The truth of the matter is that I never cared about animals."

The attorney continued to look at the ecologists through the hole in the tree with great interest. The man who had not yet spoken was the only one writing down his observations in a laptop computer, and he was a very stocky individual with a small goatee beard and a mole on his neck. His name was Jeff.

"Rosy, you are right," said Jeff, "but I am starting to suspect that there are more factors responsible for the rapid decrease of animal life in this jungle."

"Oh, yeah?" uttered the girl while glancing at her little machine. "Like what?"

"In the last few decades, the forests of the world have been rapidly disappearing as a result of commercial logging. The increasing use of land for agriculture has also depredated much of the landscape. This area in between the frontiers of Brazil and Venezuela is a good example of that. It is supposed to be a reserve, where no commercial activity is to be undertaken, but every day about a square mile of jungle disappears."

Roy had landed as a worm in South America, and over the past few decades much of the rain forest in that region had vanished. During his years as a lawyer, Roy had once been approached by an environmental group who wanted to stop a consortium of European and American firms from transforming twenty square miles of Central American jungle into a moonlike landscape. The company intended to log the trees and engage in large-scale mining. Roy sympathized with their cause and was struck by the fact that in the preceding years ten thousand species of plants and animals had become extinct worldwide every year. However, there was no money to be made with such a case, and he turned them down.

"I can't believe I did that," he lamented squeakily. "I was an asshole. Now, that attitude is coming back to bite me."

Roy was about to continue ruminating, but the ecologists had not finished talking.

"You know," said Jeremy. "Buddhists believe that all life is interconnected and dependent on each other, which in a way coincides with what environmental science asserts. An ecosystem such as this one contains millions of species, and if one disappears, the food chain becomes imperiled and could lead to the death of all the other animals. In a way, Buddhists think that even an insignificant worm is as valuable as the president of a powerful nation."

"Is that something like the story of reincarnation with the Hindus?" asked Rosy.

"There are some elements of Hinduism in the Buddhist religion, for the latter also embraces the concept of rebirth, believing that consciousness continues after death and finds expression in a future life. However, it is a different vision of the world. One of Buddhism's core ideas is the principle that life is the priority for every creature, be it plant, animal or human, with all having an equal right to it."

"For the Hindus, respect and pity for any animal is also an obligation, because a loved one could have reincarnated into any sort of creature," said Jeff.

"Do you think there is some truth in what those religions assert?" asked Rosy while she inspected the bark of a tree.

"I am a scientist, and would thus be inclined to say that all religions are without a credible base. But you never know," said Jeremy.

"Well, in a way they are right," affirmed Jeff. "All life on this planet is connected, and something like climate change is affecting all plants, animals and humans."

Soon after, the scientists left the area and Roy remained pensive and thought over what he had just heard. Then, he returned to the inside of the tree where the other worms were resting. Threats to him and his family of nematodes were numerous, but at least for the foreseeable future, the situation seemed to have stabilized. Dusk arrived soon after, and the small creatures passed the night in the relative security of their home.

The next day, as the colony was preparing to undertake an excursion to their closest eating grounds, many sensed that there was something different in the air. As they came out of the tree, they noticed that the level of luminosity was way below normal.

"I think there will be a storm," said one of the green animals close to Woro and Roy.

"Maybe, and maybe not," uttered Woro thoughtfully. "The sky has darkened, but those clouds do not look like the ones that carry rain."

The leader was right. Those were not masses of condensed vapor. It was smoke, and it was coming from a nearby fire. A mineral company was burning the jungle to make way for their iron ore operations, and the flames were rapidly gulping everything in their way. In no time, they began to approach the area where Roy and his family resided.

"Wow! This is early morning and it already looks like dusk," said Roy.

"This is not good," affirmed Woro tensely. "The temperature has risen too much."

The annelids kept observing their environs and, suddenly, a worm next to Roy shouted, "Look. The canopy trees are on fire."

Roy turned to his left and saw blazing tongues of orange gas rapidly surrounding the area. The insects immediately retreated and took refuge inside the trunk. Outside, the fire was devouring everything in its path, and the lawyer watched the dreadful spectacle from a small opening.

The scorpion that had attacked them the day before was there, some feet away. The arthropod was scared, and was running for its life, trying desperately to outmaneuver the enemy. But it soon found itself without an exit. In no time, his body was overwhelmed by the flames and, seconds later, all that remained of him was a charred frame. Roy also watched a colony of ants, a spotted panther and a monkey get incinerated. The blazing combustion was closing in, and the lawyer was forced to retreat deep into the lair.

However, the den was not able to offer much protection. As the fire closed in, the temperature rose until it became so high that the inside of the tree combusted. Roy saw how one nematode after another went up in smoke. Their bodies exploded, with some literally evaporating. Woro tried to shield an infant with his body by enveloping it, but soon both were dead. The heat was asphyxiating, causing Roy unbearable distress, but the biggest grief of all came from seeing his relatives suffer. They were such kind, peaceful and gentle creatures that it was impossible not to fall in love with them.

The flames eventually engulfed Roy, and then he saw no more.

A Devilish Discussion

When he recovered consciousness, he was back in the desolate, reddish landscape of Hell. The headless queen was no longer there, and he was again in his human body and his lawyer's suit. Roy was breathless, but his first act was to meditate over what he had just gone through. However, only seconds after having started to do that, a voice said, "You are wondering why you were such a selfish, arrogant prick, aren't you?"

Roy rapidly turned and saw the Serpent of fire together with the Monster and the Creature. The American was still gasping for air due to the trauma of the recent events and could not utter a word. It took some time before he finally recovered his speaking abilities.

"I was wrong," he said repentantly while bowing his head, "and I am deeply ashamed of my life. I wish I could rectify my errors and improve the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the Earth."

"That is indeed very touching," said the reptile mockingly. "If this continues, I will get all misty eyed."

The blond lingered and kept his head down, as a strong sense of remorse and contrition overtook him. However, there was a need to get back to business, for there was still much to take care of.

"This experience has made me think a lot. True, I was self-centered, but that is not the issue here, because I was not the only one. As a matter of fact, during my whole life I never met a single person who was not acting in the same manner. Just about every individual on that planet is an egotistical ass. Does that mean that everybody, or just about everybody, goes to Hell?"

None of the three beings responded, and all looked at each other as if they suspected that Roy was about to lash out at them again. It had been thousands of years since they had last felt fear. The only one who could instigate angst on them was God, but their relations with Heaven had been good for some time. It was an extremely odd situation, and in a million years none would have ever imagined that something like that could occur, but the fact was that a strange trepidation took hold of them. They feared that the lawyer would ridicule them again, making them feel stupid. For the second most powerful creature in the universe, that was a terrible humiliation, and one that would be remembered for the rest of eternity. It was one that would be transformed into a joke by the residents of Heaven and would then be repeated over and over again. Everybody would laugh at his expense, and the Devil could not allow that. It was an ignominy from which it would be impossible to ever recover.

"I thought we had a deal that clearly stated that you would abstain

from making sarcastic comments," said the Serpent pointedly as it raised its head above the ground some more.

"I have a suspicion you were the first to break the agreement," retorted Roy. "You said I was going to get company, and you sent me a gal without a head. That was terribly disgusting, because seeing her severed neck with all the blood, nerves and muscles sticking out was gruesome."

"There were no specifications over the type of person I would provide."

"True, but it was implied that it would not be a headless one. I wasn't expecting Socrates or a supermodel, but it was understood that it would be somebody in one piece. It could thus be said that you complied in that aspect to about ten percent of what was agreed."

"You are exaggerating. It was more than that."

"On the matter concerning the punishments, you conformed even less. The pain I experienced in this last episode was worse than in all the previous ones. You first put me in the body of a worm, after that you let me see how my whole family died, and then you scorched me. You have clearly not fulfilled the letter or the spirit of the contract, so why should I stick to my part of the deal?"

"This guy will never shut up," snarled the Monster. "Let's just kick the crap out of him."

"Wait," said the Serpent pensively as it saw the spider moving towards the attorney. The Monster immediately stopped.

There was a moment of stillness and then the attorney added, "Now, back to my question. What percentage of the world is selfish?" The three did not respond, so Roy uttered, "Wouldn't you say that almost one hundred percent of the Earth's population is egocentric? Who thinks about the welfare of others? I never knew anybody that did. The fact is that just about everybody is only interested in himself. There is a saying that has been making the rounds for centuries. It states that charity begins at home. That pretty much summarizes the idiosyncrasy of humanity."

"Don't lecture us," snorted the Creature. "We are starting to get fed up with your magisterial tone."

"People are selfish from their childhood," continued Roy, oblivious to the threat his foe had launched, "which means that they are born like that. If egocentrism is inborn, then we are not responsible for our acts. At the same time, your rules stipulate that self-centered people are condemned to come here, which signifies that everybody, or just about everybody, ends up in this place. That means that people are sentenced to Hell even before they are born and never really have a chance of getting to Heaven. It is like a setup. All the talk of free choice is bullshit. Who is the moron who conceived this system? Why should we be sent to the inferno for errors that are not our doing?"

"It is not for us to decide if the system is consistent," replied the Serpent hoarsely. "We like it as it is."

"Do you really? Do you like receiving orders? Or would you rather give them? Do you like being hated by everybody on Earth? Or would you rather be venerated? Do you like being in the dungeons? Or would you rather be at the summit? Do you like this stinking smell? Or would you rather have a perfumed one? Don't you see what is going on?"

"Nothing is going on."

"Oh, yes it is. You are being blamed for everything bad in the world, even though you are not responsible for the chaos in that place. You are not deciding a thing, but everybody sees you as the culprit. How can you live with such a situation? How can you put up with such injustice? Why don't you stand up and demand a reordering of things?"

"That is out of the question. The system is unchangeable. It is immutable."

"Nothing is unchangeable. Everything can be altered, but you have to work hard to achieve it."

"You make it sound as if it would be easy. Well, it is not. It is actually impossible."

"Nothing is easy, but if you toil, sweat and bleed you have a high chance of succeeding. What kind of creature are you? What kind of Devil are you? Only a weak, cowardly and inept conformist would put up with this situation."

The Serpent was struck by those words and could not recall anyone ever lambasting him in such a way.

"I am not a wimp, but the fact is that my powers are no match for those of God. I once questioned his authority and was banned from the good life." The Serpent paused, took a panoramic view of the landscape, and then added, "The truth of the matter is that it is not so bad here because I rule supreme."

"Do you really? If your rule goes uncontested, why is it that you failed to comply with our agreement? It was a simple transaction involving just you and me, and in spite of that you were not able to conform. You did not abide by the terms because you have no real decision-making authority. You have so little power that you only respected a tiny fraction of it. You are nothing more than a puppet, a marionette and a pre-programmed toy."

Confronting the Greatest Beast of All

Roy was about to continue lashing out at his torturers when, all at once, the Prince of Darkness and his henchmen disappeared. The blond swiftly turned around, expecting to see them in some other place, but they had completely vanished from the scene. The lawyer was pumped up and in a fighting mood, but everything suggested that the debate would have to be put on hold for the foreseeable future. It also seemed as if a horrible punishment would soon follow.

The attorney immediately noticed that there was something radically different. The stench of sulfur was gone. The landscape was the same as always, but the abominable smell of sulfur, which resembled that of rotten eggs, had totally dissipated. It was such an ignominious and horrendous odor that it had repeatedly driven him to vomit.

"Wow!" he muttered. "That is a profound modification. I was convinced that such a stench would accompany me for the rest of eternity. I wonder how long this situation will last, or what new ruse might lay behind it."

Suddenly, he noticed a figure in the distance. It was moving rapidly towards him, and the lawyer began to fear that it was his next castigation. Nonetheless, he decided not to move, and when it was about a mile away, he noticed that it was a man carrying a sword.

"Oh, crap!" he exclaimed frightfully. "That guy is going to slice me. I'd better get out of here." The attorney began to sprint, but he had only moved a few yards when he stopped. "There is no point in running because it is going to catch up with me no matter what I do."

When the man was thirty yards away Roy could distinguish his features. The fellow had flattened eyes, a small nose, white skin and long black hair. He carried a strange looking helmet made of leather and metal that had a pointed edge at the top, almost as if a knife was sticking out. The metallic part was silvery and the rest brown. The man wore a thick gray robe that fell to the middle of his legs, and rudimentary leather boots that covered up to his knees. The strange character had a long mustache and a goatee beard. His pupils were black and there was an unmistakable expression of ferocity in them. He carried a large knife on one side of his waist, a spade on the other and arrows in a leather bag on his back.

Roy was not a historian, but that was his passion, and he had read hundreds of books on the matter. When the man was several yards away, the attorney recognized him. The first photographic machine was invented in France in 1839, and before that date the only visual records of people were the paintings and sculptures that artists crafted. The region of the

world that was of most interest to Roy was Europe, and the period he most liked was the nineteenth century. However, he had a photographic memory and could easily see the resemblance between the approaching man and a thirteenth century painting of the Asian conqueror who created the largest empire of all time.

When the man was five yards from Roy, he stopped and asserted, "I am Genghis Khan. Who are you?"

The blond was speechless. "I can't believe this," thought Roy while he remained almost petrified. "I am standing in front of the Mongol king who began his warrior career in the year 1219 and, in the following decades, subjugated the biggest territorial dominion of all times, extending from the east of China to the frontiers of Eastern Europe. He subdued the bulk of Asia and slaughtered everybody who resisted, depopulating that continent in an unprecedented way. The Mongols not only killed and burned, but also raped. Young pretty girls were among the few who were spared from death. Genghis Khan copulated with seventy thousand women in the territories he enslaved, of which some twenty thousand became pregnant. He was the most prolific father of all times."

The lawyer was stultified and could not utter a word, but eventually he managed to recover his composure.

"I am Roy Johansen," he said timidly.

"You are the first person I have met since coming to this place," uttered Genghis sheepishly. "Are you here to give me my next punishment?"

Roy was taken aback by those words and said with a sympathetic tone, "Not at all. I recently arrived in Hell and have already received about a dozen castigations. I am as much a prisoner as you are."

"If you are not my punisher, why have we come together?"

"I don't know. I am as confused as you are."

"I have received thousands of chastisements and all of them were terribly painful, but one of the worst was solitude. I have been systematically kept alone. When I was king of the Mongols, I always had lots of people around me because I relished the socializing, I enjoyed conversing. I liked even more to flirt with women, and what I loved the most was to boss everybody around. After all this time, why would they be letting me talk with somebody?"

"Maybe it has to do with me. I can argue very persuasively, and it seems that the Serpent granted me a wish. I asked him to supply me with human company."

"The Serpent?" asked the Mongolian curiously. "Who is that?"

"It is the top boss here."

"In hundreds of years the only one I have met is the Creature. Have you met the Creature?"

"Oh, yes. I have dealt with that one, with the Monster and with the Serpent."

"Who is the Monster?"

"It is a sort of giant spider. He is the Creature's boss and the Serpent is the supreme boss of all."

"How come I have not met those two?" mouthed the Mongolian pensively as he took off his helmet and scratched the top of his head.

"I don't know."

The American knew, but he didn't want to boast about his superior brain and the benefits it had brought him.

Genghis decided to change the subject and commented, "You can't imagine the torments I have received. There have been thousands of them, but after the fiftieth I lost count."

"What sort of castigations were they?"

"Oh, it has been a pretty varied bunch, but the most painful ones were those in which I was sent back to Earth and got to relive the events that took place in my life. They reenacted the killings, the robberies, the rapes and all the other terrible things I did."

"Has there been any peculiarity about the way in which they have sent you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Because that's how it's been with me. They have dispatched me three times, and on each occasion there was something weird about my body."

"Well, in my case, I was always inside the body of the person I killed, robbed or raped."

"What do you mean?"

"I will give you an example. The first time it happened, I was inserted into the frame of an old man who lived in a village that I ravaged in the year 1220. The castigation started with Genghis Khan charging towards the old man, who was me, and then he sliced his arm, which was my arm. After that, he stabbed his chest, which was my chest, and finally he chopped off my ear to take as a souvenir."

"So you got to experience the same sufferings you inflicted on others by being the victims yourself."

"That's right. And there have been about nine thousand of those punishments. Every time it occurs, I am in a different body. I suspect they will give me one for every person I harmed, which means that there is still a long way to go."

"That must be pretty distressful."

"It is, but what can I do?" Genghis' tone of voice fell to a whisper,

and then he uttered with melancholy, "I am ashamed of my life. It was not just the physical agony that I caused to others, but also the senselessness of the acts. I wish I could compensate my victims."

He then began to sob, and Roy was unsure what to say or think. The lawyer felt pity, and although the Mongol had brought so much distress to the world, he still felt sorrow for him. Roy first thought that Genghis did not deserve his compassion, but then remembered what he had just told the Serpent. Genghis was born selfish and never had a chance to rise above such tendencies. The Mongol wept, and after a while he wiped his tears.

"So why are you here?" queried the barbarian, sounding like a convict asking his new cellmate to tell him about his delinquent career. "How many did you butcher?"

"I never killed a person in my life. I never raped anybody and never even punched or slapped a human being."

"Are you sure you belong here?" mouthed the Asian with surprise.

"That is what I have been saying all along," beamed the lawyer excitedly as he heard Genghis validating his ideas. "There is actually worse. They have not only sent guys like me to this place, but also people like the ones you tortured and killed. They even send poor and defenseless women who suffered all their lives, just because of a small peccadillo."

"Wow! I would have never thought those sorts of individuals would come here."

In a flash, the two men began to converse as if they were friends who had not met in years and had tons of things to tell each other. The Swedish-American was very pleased with the new situation. The attorney had always been a peaceful person who despised violence, and Genghis Khan was probably the most brutal individual of all times. However, he loved history and had always fantasized about encountering one of those characters who had left an indelible mark on the world. He would have much rather met those who improved the lot of humanity, like Da Vinci, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Watson, Darwin, Edison, Koch, Curie, Fleming, Saks or Einstein, but this situation was surely not without its merits. Roy always wondered about the way baleful people reasoned, and was particularly curious about those who had committed crimes against humanity. He wondered about their vision of the world and about the way their brains functioned.

After a while, the men began to walk through the desolate plain and, minutes later, they sighted two large, square rocks.

"This is the first time I have seen a stone," commented the attorney. "That's pretty odd."

"Yeah, that's unusual. But who cares? The bottom line is that we now have something on which to sit."

The American and the Mongol immediately did that.

"Why did you murder so many people?" asked Roy timidly, afraid that he might offend the Asian.

"Well, war was a constant in my time," replied the mustachioed man calmly. "Since I was a child, everybody spoke of it as something great. I also witnessed it from my early years. In fact, those are the first and most indelible memories of my childhood. I barely knew my father because he was always off fighting somewhere, and when I was eight, my uncle told me he had been killed in a faraway land."

"That must have been pretty devastating."

"It was, but there was worse. When I was ten, our village was raided by men from the north, and my mother got raped. I tried to defend her, but the guy who was trying to abuse her stabbed me. As I bled on the floor, I saw the fellow beating her so hard that she passed out. When the man finished, he left, and a few seconds later another came in and raped her too. I saw ten others do the same thing, and there were probably more, but after the twelfth, I blacked out."

"Good grief."

"Yeah, that was atrocious. When I woke up I was in my uncle's house, recovering from the wounds. I had been unconscious for several days and was told that my mother had died during the raid. She was a good woman who devoted her life to her children and her family. She didn't deserve to have been brutalized in such a way and to have died young. She was only twenty-five."

"Was that the reason you mistreated so many women?"

"I don't know," responded the Mongol pensively while he looked at the horizon. "Surely that played a role, but it was complemented by the habits of the times. In that epoch, men didn't ask for permission. They just took women, for the only law that prevailed was that of the strongest. If I didn't rape a girl, somebody else was going to do it. When I was a kid, all of the women in my family and tribe were taken by force. Sometimes it was bandits, sometimes conquering armies, and sometimes other men from the tribe."

"But I still don't understand the logic of the massive killings. You were so thorough in your murdering that much of Asia was depopulated in ways never seen before."

"Well, terror was a standard technique of warfare in those times. Before I raised a force, our people were constantly being terrorized by armies from the east, from the west, from the south and from the north. Conquerors would kill and burn even when their enemies had already been defeated, for it brought compliance with the paying of tribute. I just

pushed the concept a little further – and it worked.”

“But why did you rob so much? Didn’t it ever occur to you that work is a good thing? Why didn’t you till the land or raise sheep? That was surely an option.”

“No, it wasn’t. In my time, farmers would frequently die of hunger because the land did not produce enough. Rain was irregular, and one dry season, or one in which the fields got flooded, was enough to cause famine. Production was so small that even when the weather would collaborate, there was still very little for saving. The weather, however, was not the only wild card. There was no way of combating pests, and one single invasion of locusts or of some other creature would bring starvation.”

“Why didn’t you seek work in the cities?”

“There wasn’t any. There were very few towns, and on top of that they were small. To make matters worse, they had no jobs to offer. That is why the few people who had one, like in the guilds, protected them so jealously. The only alternative was to wage war and live off the loot. The unwritten law of the times was: rob or get robbed.”

Roy paused, rubbed his chin, and then uttered, “It is true that in your era things were difficult. There was no irrigation or anti-flooding technology, nor were there fertilizers or pesticides, and neither was there any farm machinery. They were centuries away from getting discovered.”

“What is that?”

“They are products of science and technology. Life for anybody in any part of the world is extremely difficult without those two. You know, it is very likely that if you had been born in the twenty-first century in Scandinavia or some other peaceful place and had grown up in a normal and stable family, you would have become an automobile worker, an engineer or perhaps a medical doctor.”

“What is an automobile?”

“That’s not important. What is relevant is what the twentieth century Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset affirmed.”

“What did he say?”

“He claimed that we are the result of circumstances, and the ones that surrounded your life were monstrous. As a result, they created a monster. You are as much a victim of circumstance as the four-year-old child who develops leukemia. What did such a child do to deserve such a terrible disease? Nothing. She obviously did nothing. She was just born with the wrong genes.”

“I am not sure I understand.”

“Well, it’s very simple. You lived at a time when poverty, famine and epidemics drove everybody to desperation. Was it your fault that the misery of the times pushed people towards violence, war and brutality?”

Was it your failing that schools did not exist, that ignorance prevailed, and that you never listened to the voice of reason? Of course it was not your fault. It is evident that you bear no responsibility.”

“Well, it is surely pleasant to hear that at least somebody thinks that I am not to blame.”

“You caused so much sorrow to millions of people, but had you not existed, somebody else would have done the same thing because the deplorable living conditions of the times impelled everybody towards a behavior that resembled that of animals.”

The two men went on dialoguing, and they did it for a long time. At a certain moment, Roy realized something. He was enjoying it. For the first time since his arrival in Hell, the blond was not enduring pain and was actually attaining something that was impossible on Earth. He was confronting history, and he was even psychoanalyzing it. By then, it was clear that no matter what happened next, the Serpent had kept its part of the deal.

Conflagration

Suddenly, there was a powerful noise that interrupted the conversation. It sounded like thunder, but it was louder and more intimidating than anything the attorney had ever heard, and it came from the upper part of the reddish world. It was so stentorian that the men had to put their hands over their ears. The Serpent, the Monster and the Creature all reappeared at once, and they were as surprised as Roy and Genghis. Together with them was an oriental woman in modern-day dress who was even more flabbergasted.

Then, the upper part of that world began to clear up. The reddish color vanished and a potent white light pierced through the ceiling. At that moment, the loud rumble stopped and the two men lowered their hands.

A second later, a strong and authoritative voice emerged from above. "You have disobeyed me. You granted a wish to one of the damned, and now you will suffer the consequences. This is the second time in the course of eternity that you have defied my orders."

The voice stopped and the silvery luminescence disappeared, leaving everybody shocked and confused.

"It seems as if we are now the ones who will get punished," uttered the Serpent tremulously.

Then, the sky opened again and from it came an army of white winged beings. They were bizarre creatures that had the head and wings of a swan and the legs and torso of a deer. Although they seemed to be a cross between two different animals, everything in them was hued in white, including their hoofs.

"What in the heck —," exclaimed Roy with atonement.

"Those are Palabos," said the Serpent tensely while staring at the intruders. "They are the cavalry of the Heavenly Armies."

The Palabos were huge, measuring about five yards in length and four yards in height, while their wings stretched over eight meters. They were larger than the Creature, but smaller than the spider.

The Serpent issued a command with his left arm and out of the ground emerged thousands of creatures and monsters. The snake then made another sign and his soldiers began to spit balls of fire at the flying beings. These immediately riposted by ejecting a sort of lightning from their mouths that was silvery in color and electric in form. When the projectiles of both armies collided in mid air they exploded, causing a deafening roar and a bright light. However, not all clashed in the air. Most of the shells from the Palabos hit the ground, and when that happened they detonated violently, leaving behind large craters. The shots of the infernal

army also missed their target most of the time and continued their trajectory until they reached the ceiling of Hell, where they burst thunderously.

"This is not for real," stammered Roy shakily. "A war. This is a war, and we are in the middle of it."

"Right," croaked Genghis while depicting an equal level of bedazzlement. "Look how they shoot. All the beings involved in the fighting produce the ammunition from within their own bodies."

"Yeah, that's pretty weird."

All of a sudden a bolt of lightning hit the ground some yards from them, making a big hole.

"Shit!" shouted Roy. "We'd better get out of here and take cover."

"But where?" groaned the Mongol while raising his arms in despair. "There is no place to hide."

Suddenly, the woman ran towards Roy and took cover behind him. She was trembling and looked very frightened. She was wearing light-colored clothes, sandals and a nice watch.

"Who are you?" asked the lawyer confused.

"I am Yoko," said the slim and pretty black-haired female. "I was getting punished by the Creature when, all of a sudden, I was transported here. Is this my new chastisement?"

"I don't know what this is, but it seems as if it falls into a different category."

"Hey, this is not the time to socialize," growled Genghis. "Run."

The three sped away from the area where the bomb had just fallen and took to the right, only to dash in a totally new direction once that zone also got hit. Minutes later, they saw a place where no lightning had fallen and rushed towards it.

After much crossed fire, both armies began to hit their targets. When the electric lightning thrown by the winged creatures blasted the giant spiders and the demons, they would instantly freeze. Seconds later, they would petrify and then collapse into small pieces, like a castle of dominos.

"Wow! That is some weird way of dying," said Genghis.

"Yeah, that is weird," said the lawyer. "Have you noticed that they miss most of the time? I would say that for every seven shots, they hit one."

"Are you guys enjoying this?" asked the woman annoyingly. "Because I am not. Let me remind you we are not on a couch watching a movie."

"I am not having fun, but it is hard not to comment on what is taking place," said Roy.

The shrilling detonations were incessant, and they seemed to be getting louder by the minute. It was one unending *boom-wham-bang*. The

balls of fire thrown by the armies of Hell would hit the wings of the Palabos more frequently than the torsos, and when that took place, the feathered appendages would burst into flames. The animals would then fall precipitously and smash into the ground. Many would recover, but before they could get on their feet, the giant spiders would stab them with their large tusks. When the Palabos were pierced, they would emit loud shrieks of agony that resembled the cries of a cow and a lion mixed together.

"Wow!" moaned Roy fearfully. "This barrage resembles that of the Second World War. The only difference is that in that war, the endless outpouring of projections came principally from the ground forces, because airplanes did not carry lots of munitions. In this battle, the soldiers in the air have the same shooting power as those on the ground."

"That war was obviously after my time," said Genghis.

"Yes."

"Hey, why don't we sit on the sofa and grab a bowl of popcorn to enjoy the spectacle so that we can chat further?" groaned Yoko caustically. "What is it with men and violence? Why can't you stop talking about it?"

"Look, lady, we are not responsible for what is going on, and we did not ask to be here," retorted Roy.

While they were talking, hundreds of Palabos were getting hit and were falling to the ground, making a cracking sound as they crashed against the surface. When they got blasted in their torsos, a round hole the size of a volley ball was left behind and they would then plummet lifelessly to the ground. Hundreds of Palabos were shot down and hundreds of Monsters and Creatures were also destroyed, but the Palabos were enduring more losses. Then, the opening in the heavens became much wider.

"Look," mouthed Genghis with amazement. "The winged beings are getting reinforcements and the new army is even bigger than the first."

Millions came in and the shots from above immediately multiplied, causing a rapid decrease in the number of hellish soldiers. The giant spiders were particularly easy to hit because of their larger size, and hundreds of them became petrified, crumbling instantly into little pieces.

"The balance of the war has shifted," said Genghis.

"Yeah, and the armies of Hell are beginning to look like sitting ducks."

Suddenly, a bomb fell close to them and Yoko squealed, "I am getting out of here."

She ran towards a crater that was two hundred yards away and the men followed her. The demonic soldiers continued to take heavy losses and, under such ominous conditions, the Serpent decided to change tactics.

It emitted a loud shriek and, in a flash, the Monsters and the Creatures vanished. The Palabos continued to shoot, but a few seconds later they stopped.

"Is it over?" asked Roy nervously.

"I don't have the faintest idea," commented the Mongol.

The three stared at the sky anxiously, and after a while it seemed as if the conflagration had ended. The lawyer turned towards the woman and said, "Who are you?"

"I already told you. My name is Yoko."

"No, I mean what is your story?"

"I am from Japan. I was born in Tokyo and lived there all my life. I got married at twenty-six and, by thirty-two, was a mother of two. My husband and I had a comfortable existence in a nice neighborhood and we were very pleased with our children. Everything was going well until that dreadful night of November 2006."

"You died in that year?"

"Yes."

All at once Genghis shouted, "Look. The winged beings are descending."

The three watched in bewilderment as the flying animals approached, and Roy said, "It would seem as if they have won. Look at those rhythmic swinging movements. It appears as if they are celebrating."

The heavenly cavalry flew in circles over the area where the armies of Hell had concentrated. They progressively came closer to the ground and saw the humans, but did not pay attention to them. Eventually, they descended to a level that was just a few yards above the ground.

Suddenly, thousands of Creatures emerged from the subsoil. They shot up with lighting speed, as if a cannon had thrust them, and before the Palabos could react, they were stabbed in the belly. Thousands of Palabos were surprised, getting brutally pierced by the pointed horns of the demons. Their death was so quick that by the time they hit the ground, most were already stiff. The remaining winged beings immediately flew higher, and soon they were out of the enemy's reach. However, as they picked up height, their backs became exposed and the hellish soldiers fired. A plethora of spiders emerged from the ground and began a vigorous attack, shooting down their opponents en masse.

"Wow!" hissed Roy, fully dazzled by the epic battle. "It is a one-way massacre, and the balance of the war has once again shifted."

"Yeah," said the Mongolian. "This thing keeps changing from one moment to the next."

The Palabos fell in droves, and in no time the majority had been slain. The remaining ones continued to pick up altitude, and then they exited Hell. The thousands of Creatures and Monsters watched motionless

as the enemy escaped. They had their sights fixed on the heavens, and in the crater further away, the humans were also gawking at the sky. All were expecting the ceiling to open again and a new force to arrive. But in the minutes that followed, that did not happen. After some time, the humans began to relax.

A Desperate Housewife

"I hate violence," blurted Yoko indignantly. "I dislike it so much that I usually got nauseated just by glancing at an action movie for a couple of seconds. This must be a punishment, because being in the middle of a war is a zillion times worse than watching one on television."

The attorney looked at her intrigued and then asked, "What did you do that got you here?"

"I really don't know," said the housewife thoughtfully. "I was a loving spouse and a caring mother who worked hard for the well-being of my family. Like all good moms, I was a law-abiding citizen who never even committed a minor traffic violation." She paused and then said huffily, "This is unfair, and it doesn't make any sense."

"Well, not much around here makes sense."

She then appended, "I lived in one of the most crime-free countries in the world and resided in one of the most problem-free neighborhoods of Tokyo. However, one night I was alone and heard a noise in the basement. I went to investigate and found a burglar. Before I could get a hold of what was going on, the man had stabbed me in the abdomen. When my husband arrived, I was already dead."

"You really had bad luck, because criminal activity in Japan is low, being just a fraction of that in the U.S."

"I know. That was bad karma. It must have been because of what happened at that New Year's party."

"What do you mean?" asked Genghis.

"There was this guy I met."

She paused, and Genghis queried, "And what about him?"

"I slept with him." The two men looked at her condemningly and she immediately added, "But it was just once, and only after having found out that my husband was doing a geisha. I wanted to punish him, although it was stupid because he never found out and never experienced the pain of the betrayal. Had he found out, he would have divorced me. Either way, I couldn't win."

"Well," uttered Roy gently. "You had your reasons."

The men glanced away and found it more convenient not to comment further on the matter, hoping that the subject would be put to rest. However, Yoko wanted to delve further into it.

"Japan might have one of the lowest levels of crime in the world, but the gender structure of unlawful behavior is the same as in the most mafia-infested nations of the planet," said the pretty mother. "It is men who commit ninety percent of it, and it is men who account for almost the

totality of the worse offenses. What is it with you guys? Why can't you behave peacefully? It is needless to mention that the fellow who stabbed me had a penis and a pair of testicles."

"Hey, don't look at me, lady," mouthed Roy defensively. "I have always repudiated violence and never even had a fistfight in my life."

She immediately looked at Genghis and asked, "Who are you?"

Just as the Mongol was about to answer, a potent roar was heard. The three turned and saw the Serpent and its two henchmen. It was the snake who had roared, and much suggested that the huge reptile was angry. Thousands of his soldiers lay dead, and the stench of death was so profound that it was even worse than that of sulfur. Both sides had butchered so many of their enemies that the two armies had been reduced to a fraction of their original numbers.

The American, the Mongol and the Japanese came out from the crater and marched towards the Serpent to find out what was going on. The snake was taciturn, looking intermittently at the sky and at the cadaver-filled landscape.

"It seems as if we have won, but in reality we have lost," moaned the Prince of Darkness dispiritedly. "Our forces have been reduced to a fifth of their original size, and it will take some time until we can regenerate and grow back to be a large army. They, on the contrary, can reproduce much faster."

Just as those words were being enunciated, a white light pierced through the ceiling of the underworld, leaving behind a big hole."

"Oh, no. Not again," said Yoko.

Then, a loud rumbling was heard and, some time later, thousands of beings started pouring in. At first, Roy could not distinguish their shape, but it soon became evident that they were not Palabos. These were wider, longer and taller than the previous ones, and resembled an elephant. Their bodies were pretty much like those of a pachyderm, but their size was much greater, being about thrice as big. That, however, was not the only difference. The beings had four trunks, and their bodies had an aqua hue. They had no wings, but could fly just as well as the Palabos.

As soon as they entered Hell, the elephants began shooting rounded balls that resembled compressed ice. The precise type of material from which the spheres were made was unknown, but it was extremely hard. It was so compact and potent that when they hit the ground, they would just go through it as if they were bullets piercing a watermelon. The rounded projectiles were about the size of a bowling ball, and they were white.

"What in the heck is that?" howled Roy astounded.

"This is the first time I have seen those beings," said the Serpent,

“but I have heard of them. They are Tabos, and their shooting accuracy is better than that of the Palabos.”

Those words proved prophetic because the balls of ice began to rapidly hit their targets. The infernal soldiers were repeatedly struck, and the spheres would just go through their bodies and then perforate the ground to an unknown depth. These new shells caused a different type of death, and when the hellish troops got hit by them, they would instantly turn into dust.

The humans immediately ran away and took cover inside a crater.

“The higher accuracy of the Tabos is delivering a heavy toll on the armies of Hell,” said Genghis.

“True, but that is only part of the reason explaining the higher number of hits,” commented the Swede. “The Tabos have the capacity to impel those balls without halting, and do it at such great speed that it resembles a machine gun. Worse still is that they shoot from four trumpets simultaneously.”

The hellish troops fought ferociously, firing everything they had. Many elephants got hit and fell dead to the ground, but the speed at which the armies of Hell were losing soldiers was much greater. After some time, the hellish forces had been reduced to only one-twentieth of their original size.

“Don’t lose faith,” shouted the snake. “We shall prevail.” And he gave the order to continue fighting.

However, the size of his army went on shrinking and, eventually, all that remained was the Serpent, the Monster and the Creature.

All of a sudden, the Tabos stopped their attack, but did not leave, and continued to fly at a high altitude. They cruised in circles, as if they were waiting for a final command. The Serpent raised its head above the ground in a more significant way than ever before and looked at the enemy hatefully. It then took a deep breath, opened its large jaws and expelled a giant ball of fire that began to grow as it advanced. The mass of flames rapidly got to measure hundreds of square miles, and it was so big that it even darkened the sky. The speed at which the gas traveled was supersonic, so swift that it left no possibility for the enemy to escape. When it reached the pachyderms, it engulfed half and instantly incinerated them. Their charred bodies immediately plummeted to the ground, causing a loud thumping sound as they crashed.

The remaining flying beings reinitiated their attack, and thousands of ice balls pierced the ground. But none hit the Serpent or its two deputies. The snake again took a deep breath and threw another high temperature emanation that reached the adversary in seconds. This one was even larger than the first, and in a flash it had scorched about four-fifths of the remaining Tabos. After that, the heavenly army retreated and exited Hell.

The Aftermath of the War

As they left, the gates of the underworld shut, once again, with a loud bang, and the white light vanished. What followed was the most absolute stillness. In a flash, the roaring battlefield had transformed into a sepulchral cemetery. The landscape was full with craters, corpses and body parts, and the place looked a lot more eerie than before the war.

Roy, Genghis and Yoko came out of the crater and went hesitantly towards the three hellish creatures. Soon, they were standing next to them. The six looked in awe at the horrible spectacle, and even the Serpent seemed dumbfounded.

"It took me thousands of years to create this army, and now it is all gone," moaned the dragon of fire. It paused, and then looked at Roy wrathfully. "All of this is your fault. Had I not granted your wish of having human company, we would have not been attacked." Only a second after having said that, Genghis disappeared.

The giant reptile then looked at the Japanese woman with surprise and asked, "What is she doing here?"

"I was tormenting her, when all at once I heard your call and took her with me by mistake," explained the Creature. A second later, Yoko was also gone.

The Serpent then affirmed worriedly, "It is not clear what will happen next. A new heavenly army could come in at any moment and kill my only two remaining companions." It then added with a sad tone, "What is the point of being the king of the underworld if there is nobody to command? Not to mention that the solitude will be painful, and that is unlikely to be my only castigation." He looked at Roy with bulging and hateful eyes and howled, "You have destroyed my world, and now you will suffer beyond the imaginable."

"Perhaps there is a way of avoiding the punishments," countered the lawyer rapidly, in a desperate effort to attenuate the ire of the Devil. "Why don't you send me to God to offer your capitulation and I will use the opportunity to negotiate something that will not be so disadvantageous to you."

"There is nothing you can do. Do you think that God is somebody who can be swayed by smartass arguments like yours? He is the embodiment of wisdom, of knowledge and of insight. He is infinitely smarter than anybody. He is beyond the understanding capacity of everybody. I once thought I had figured Him out and believed that He could be outwitted, but the whole thing backfired. Others in His kingdom

have also tried to contest His decisions, and they were demoted or dismissed.”

“But—

“Oh, shut up,” snarled the Creature.

“Why do you think I had such a large army?” asked the Devil. “Most of these beings were originally residents of Heaven and were sent here due to their insubordination. Nobody can outclass him. Nobody can outgun him. He is in a league of His own. He is the master of the universe.”

“If that is so, then I will get dismissed and be sent back, leaving us in the same situation as right now. That means there is no risk in this enterprise.”

“There is always a risk in everything.”

“Look, you have nothing to lose because you have already lost everything. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and this is as extreme as it can get. From what I heard, this is the first time you have been assailed here. Is that so?”

The snake remained silent for a few seconds and then responded, “Yes. I was once a deputy of God and the relationship went bad. He got pissed and sent several of His thugs to beat me up and throw me in here. That wasn’t a war but a fistfight. What we just experienced, on the other hand, was the mother of all wars.”

“I will surely not convince God of much, and perhaps of nothing, but it is worth a try. At the same time, you can send me as the person responsible for your disobedience and as somebody that God himself might want to castigate.”

“That is an interesting suggestion. But, on the other hand, we have never sent anybody from here.”

“Nobody has ever gotten out of Hell,” interjected the spider. “Nobody has even made it back to Earth. The only times we have dispatched people back to the world was to punish them, as was the case with you on several occasions, and we always got them back immediately.”

“The Monster is right,” mouthed the snake. “Sending somebody to Heaven is just unthinkable and could cause an even harsher assault from the heavenly armies. I think there are more liabilities than assets in that idea.”

“Tell me,” argued the attorney brightly. “How frequently have you granted a wish to a damned?”

“In all of eternity, you were the first.”

“And why did you do that? Wasn’t it because I debunked your arguments to the point where you gave in? Wasn’t it because I ridiculed you so much that you couldn’t take it any more? Wasn’t it because I so effectively debated that I pushed you into breaking the rules?”

“Well, yes,” said the Devil reluctantly.

"Don't you think there is the possibility that I might reproduce the same feat with God?"

"There is a small chance, but there are too many dangers."

"There are perils in everything, and the issue here is not if there is a risk, but if the risk is high enough to justify inaction. The evidence shows that it is not high enough."

"You are a good lawyer. Surely an impressive one, and perhaps the best that has ever dwelled on the Earth, but you have no idea how to confront a heavenly court. It is just out of your league. Your meager human brain will simply not be capable of grasping the complexity of the matter."

"Well, my meager human brain was supposed to be way inferior to those of your deputies, and you in particular. However, I nonetheless, trashed your arguments. The truth is that the structure of the world and the universe is highly controversial, and there is ample ammunition to develop a strong case against God."

"I don't know. The outcome of that enterprise seems too unpredictable."

"Look, this situation calls for radical action. You must rise to the occasion. Remember that only risk takers have the potential to cash in abundantly."

"I really don't know."

"What is the matter with you?" thundered Roy. "Don't you have the temerity, the nerve and the courage to do what is needed?"

"How dare you speak to our master in such a way," snarled the Creature.

Roy was not intimidated by those words and uttered, "This is not just any gamble. This is a rational bet. You should also not forget that at this very moment the heavenly armies are probably preparing a new attack and will be coming with more potent combatants than the last. That would mean your total destruction, or worse still. You might get demoted to the lowest servile position in Hell and be condemned to be nobody for the rest of eternity."

The dragon of fire felt overwhelmed by Roy's arguments. It meditated for some time and then distanced itself from the lawyer and its henchmen. It slowly snaked its way out of sight and, some time later, came back. When the reptile was close enough, it stopped.

It then took a deep breath and said, "Okay, I will send you to Heaven, and let's just hope you will not make things worse. Let's go."

The four immediately headed north and had to zigzag their way around the corpses and the craters. The place had been transformed beyond recognition, and for the first time since Roy's arrival in Hell, the valley of the damned did not look so monotonous. The whole site was

covered with bodies that were rapidly rotting and emitting a nauseating and revolting odor. It was a stench far worse than that of a sewer, for it was the scent of death.

“Can’t you do something about that smell?” said Roy to the Serpent while trying intermittently to hold his breath.

“I can’t believe this,” snorted the Devil testily. “Have you forgotten that it is because of you that these corpses are here? Besides, I am powerless when it comes to heavenly creatures. We are forced to wait until they have fully decomposed and become absorbed by the ground.”

They continued moving through the battlefield and, after a while, Roy started getting tired. This was by far the longest march he had undertaken since his arrival to Hell, and it seemed as if it would go on forever.

While passing by a huge crater he said, “Hey, why don’t you snap your fingers and transport us to where we are going?”

“You are really something. You know that? We just emerged from the worst war of all times, which was all because of you. Now, because of you, we are about to break the rules for the second time and Mr. Johansen still has the temerity to ask for special treatment. Perhaps we should get you a VIP card.”

“Well, it is just that ever since I got here, you and your deputies have been constantly snapping your fingers to convey me to many distant places. This looks like a good moment for such a rapid transport system to be used.”

“God construed this place in a way that it is impossible for any human to get out,” said the reptile irately. “Only I know the way. However, when I take this road, my powers evaporate. I am thus forced to walk the whole distance.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t get so heated up. It was just a question.”

Roy decided to shut up, and the four went on marching. They perambulated for a very long time, eventually reaching a region where the ground had a yellowish color, which marked the end of the area where the battle had taken place. From that point on, the terrain was free of corpses and craters, and the flatness of the land became all-encompassing again. They continued moving over a territory that seemed to be interminable, and the attorney got increasingly vexed. Ever since his arrival in Hell, all he had seen was an even surface, and the road that led out had that same structure. The homogeneity of the place was terribly monotonous, and it was so boring that there came a point when Roy began to regret that the cadavers had disappeared. The lawyer increasingly hungered for a change in the geography and, eventually, he got his wish.

The Mountain

On the horizon, he saw a mountain. At first it didn't look so large, but as they got closer, it became evident that it was huge. The monolith was gigantic. It was so tall that it was not possible to see the top, and its circumference presented similar endless characteristics. Some time later, they got to its base.

"There are only five mountains in Hell, and this is the grandest," explained the Serpent. "Climb it and then follow the next route upwards."

"The next route upwards?" asked the attorney.

"Yes. I have never seen it, but when you get there you will know."

"Is this the only way to Heaven?"

"Yes, and please don't ask for an elevator because I am starting to get fed up with your demands. Besides, this landmass is beyond my jurisdiction and I cannot conjure any magic in it. There is absolutely no other way, and you will have to strain yourself."

Without uttering another word, Roy took off his jacket and began to climb the cone-like structure of rock. It was very steep, and most of the time the inclination was totally vertical, but occasionally it would change, and it was only then that the lawyer could rest a little. It was exhausting and dangerous, but the lawyer was excited because, for the foreseeable future, he did not have to worry about what would be his next punishment. It was also thrilling to be climbing the tallest mountain in Hell.

"In a way, this is the Everest of the Inferno," thought the attorney as he slowly moved upwards. "While I was alive, I always wanted to take on elongated ridges but never found the time to do it. It was not exactly in a place like this where my first alpinist experience was supposed to occur, but things rarely happen in the way one plans them."

He moved slowly, but after a while a large distance had been covered. It was a perilous journey, but the man was grinning.

"I am getting out. I still can't believe it, but the fact is that I am getting out."

However, by far the most alluring part of what came next was the idea of meeting God. While Roy had dwelled on Earth, he had not believed in a superior being. He was somebody who had rarely been wrong, but on this matter he had been totally off track. Now that the lawyer knew the Almighty existed, he was thrilled about encountering Him.

He sloped upwards in a trek that seemed neverending. As he was going through a particularly steep part, he inserted his hand in a crevice and a piece of rock detached. He lost his hold and fell, but landed two

yards below on a mini plateau and just got bruised. It was painful, but the attorney soon pursued his journey. Further ahead, he reached a point where the rock was wet, which presented a risk. Roy carefully placed his hands and feet on the most secure places and moved slower than formerly. Despite his additional efforts, he slid and fell twenty yards, landing on a small flat area. The laws of gravity were as functional in Hell as on Earth, and the damage was severe. He broke his hands, his arms and several ribs. However, after much howling and groaning, his wounds disappeared and his broken bones got repaired.

"This place is really weird," he thought. "The laws of gravity might be the same, but those of biology are surely not."

He reinitiated the ascent and circumvented the slippery place where he had recently stumbled. Some five hundred yards above that site, he suddenly heard a rumbling in the distance. The noise was coming from above, but he could not see a thing because it was cloudy. Where he stood the air was clear, but two miles above a sort of fog inhibited the visibility.

"What in the hell is that?"

The sound got progressively louder, and then Roy saw it.

"Oh, shit," he shouted fearfully. "It is an avalanche."

His mobility was very limited, and before he could think of anything, a big rock hit him on the shoulder and took him down. The impact was brutal, and in no time he was brought to the base of the landmass. The blow came from a stone measuring two square feet, but a much bigger one, of about two square yards, came right after that one. A second after hitting the ground, the larger piece fell over him and broke every bone in his body. The lawyer groaned, growled and screamed and, after suffering for a long time, he passed out.

When he recovered consciousness he was in the same place at which he had departed company from the Serpent, but the large boulder was not on top of him. His body had fully recovered from the accident and his clothes looked impeccable. He rapidly got up, reinitiated the ascent, and in no time reached the areas from where he had slipped. He carefully hemmed around them and moved forward.

"I am now at the place where the avalanche occurred," he thought. "I hope that it does not recur."

The American thus concentrated on trying to recognize any noise that could suggest a mass of stones on its way down. Nothing, however, happened, and eventually he reached a much higher elevation where a large cave lay along the way.

"Great, because I am tired of climbing," he muttered. "I wonder what's inside."

He was panting, and after several minutes of resting, he entered the grotto. Only some yards into it and he noticed that the place was well

illuminated by a sort of radiance that was emitted by the walls. However, what he found further ahead was even more astounding. It was breathtaking.

“I can’t believe this,” he exclaimed happily. “The whole place is brimming with large tables covered with food of all sorts.”

There were pizzas, hamburgers, pasta, sandwiches, meats, salads, pastry, ice cream, fruit, chocolate, candy, sodas, milkshakes, tea and numerous other edibles.

“Oh, man. I am going to have a ball.”

Roy was hungry, because in Hell there was never a thing to eat and it was much easier to get devoured than to swallow something. Hunger was one of those torturing extras that were always thrown in together with other more painful woes.

“Maybe I have already reached Heaven,” he said jubilantly, and he hurriedly walked towards the table holding the hamburgers.

The Maid of Orleans

Suddenly, a sensuous voice said, "I wouldn't eat that if I were you."

Roy swiftly turned and at once saw a pubescent brunette standing several yards away. She was awkwardly clothed, wearing a gray, metal-coated suit that resembled medieval armor. The girl was pretty, but her hair was short, looking almost like that of a man.

"The food is delicious, but its price is prohibitive," she warned.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Roy bewildered. "Who are you?"

"Things are not always what they seem," said the strange female while calmly taking some steps towards the lawyer. "Everything has consequences, and the comestibles will produce a reaction."

"Look, I haven't eaten a thing since I got to Hell. I am not carrying any money, but there are so many edibles in this place that nobody is going to notice if I swallow a couple of burgers." He gazed around nervously and then asked, "Is there a monster in this cavern? Is that the reason why you are wearing that plated covering?"

"There are no beasts here, but there are other dangers that are worse than the ones you fear." She paused, and then her sight wandered off as someone whose thoughts had taken towards uncharted waters. "This is not the only place where perils lurk behind every shadow. In the France of my youth, the dangers also tended to pop up where you least expected them. I fought against the most powerful army of the time, and I was victorious, but my enemies were not the English. I was told it was them, and everybody believed it was them, but it was not them. My real foe was ignorance and religious fundamentalism."

"What are you talking about?" queried the attorney, fully astounded by the sweet-looking girl and what she was saying. "Who are you?"

"I am Joan of Arc," uttered the brunette dejectedly. "My life was a short one. I was born in 1412 and, before my twentieth birthday, I was already dead. I was burned at the stake, after having been accused of witchcraft by the same religion that I so ardently venerated. I fought to expel the English invader from France and was declared a saint by part of the French clergy. However, another part of the Church was salaried by a different French Prince and, when his forces, which were allied with the English, captured me, they accused me of serving the Devil. As it was to be expected, the British priests also claimed I consorted with Satan."

"That's the thing with religions. They are always swift to endorse whichever party will offer them the biggest pile of cash, and they will go as far as to justify violence, murder and even war."

"When I was twelve, I started having visions of saints who commanded me to rally the French in the war against the occupying forces. From that day on until the moment they set me ablaze, I sincerely believed the angels were ordering me to fight for the fatherland. However, since arriving here, I have learned the truth."

"What truth?"

"The visions and the voices were not real. It was all in my head. I was a schizophrenic, and the disturbances in my brain, compounded by the religious fervor of the times, created fictional projections before my eyes as well as delusional voices."

Roy nodded and affirmed, "Yeah, you are right. The medical science of my time fully substantiates what you say. Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines, computer tomography, magnetoencephalography systems, ultrasound devices, nuclear equipment, and X-ray apparatuses have delivered a wealth of information about the inner workings of the brain."

"What are those?"

"They are machines."

"And what do they do?"

"They tell us the truth. Through time, there were countless individuals in all parts of the world who insisted that they had seen God, while others claimed they had heard him. What those devices reveal is that all of those people were, in reality, suffering from neurological disorders that produced surreal images and voices. It was just a biochemical imbalance."

"That sounds complicated."

"It is, but that is the way science works. It doesn't have black and white explanations like the ones religions offer, but it brings clarity into the lives of people."

"I just know the basics of what occurred to me. Could you be more explicit?"

"Yes, of course. What neuroscientists have discovered is that the apparitions and the voices were, in reality, electrical signals that were wrongly sent by the person's neurons, due to deficient dendrite connections. It was like dialing your neighbor and the call getting erroneously rerouted to China."

"Huh?"

"Let's just say that your pretty head had a few bolts unscrewed."

"Yeah, that's what it was. There was never a divine call or a heavenly vision. All of those men who founded religions and called themselves prophets, messiahs and sons of God also suffered from those electrochemical disturbances." She lingered and then appended, "I wish I

would have found out that sooner, while on Earth. It would have spared me a lot of trouble.”

“I was lucky to have existed in a more rational epoch, but my period was still marked by the hysterical tantrums of religious people. When they felt that their god was being aggrieved, they would blow up abortion clinics, buses, trains, ships, airplanes, and even skyscrapers.”

She sighed and then said, “My ignorance also made me believe that problems could be solved with violence.”

“Right. Problems are never solved with violence. They are overcome with technology, and it is only with a lot of mental work that inventions come about.”

“I should have followed my female, non-belligerent instincts. We women are spontaneously driven to avoid lethal actions. We believe in love and in resolving matters by talking. I really don’t know what got into me to lead those men into battle.”

Roy made a small pause and then affixed, “I can’t understand why they sent you here. You were just a kid when they torched you, and you never killed anybody or said an untruthful word. You even died a virgin, having deliberately abstained from carnal pleasure for the glory of God.”

“That is true. I never carried a sword into battle. I just rode with the troops to inspire them. Neither did I have impure sexual thoughts, having spent all of my free time venerating God. I suppose it must have been because of my participation in the armed conflict.”

“But you were deluded by the religious beliefs of the times. It was not your fault. You were a victim of the ignorance of the times.”

“I guess those deciding who goes to Heaven are very picky.”

“To me, it seems more as if they have a system that runs on extremely awkward and bizarre rules.”

“Anyway,” said the girl sadly, “it is now too late. I am here for the rest of eternity, and there is no way out.” She lingered and then added, “Look, you seem like a nice guy. I wouldn’t want you to get into trouble. Beware of the food.”

“What do you mean? Why would —”

But before he could inquire further, Joan had vanished into thin air. Roy looked uneasily in all directions, hoping to see her again, but she did not reappear. The Maid of Orleans, as the French had named her after the breakthrough battle of 1429 in which her forces liberated the besieged town of Orleans, was gone for good.

“What could she have meant by that?” He paused and then affixed, “I bet she was talking metaphorically. Yeah, the girl frequently sounded philosophical in the choice of her words. What could possibly happen to me by swallowing a couple of sandwiches? Besides, there is nobody here to protest. I will just take a few.”

The Banquet

Roy first went for the pizzas and then moved to the table of hamburgers. Each was on wooden tables that were two yards wide and twenty meters long. On Earth, he had rarely consumed those foods because they were health threatening. However, if he was in Hell, it was because he was dead, and the subject of a good diet was no longer relevant. The blond thus began to fall ravenously over everything that was there. He swallowed one dish after the other, tasting all the different types of pizzas, hamburgers and sandwiches.

“Umm...” he mumbled while grinning. “This is wonderful. In fact, I can’t recall ever having ingested something so palatable.”

When the lawyer finished with the fast food, he went after the red meats, the fish, the lobster and other delicacies. Everything had a delightful flavor, and after several hours of binging on the salty comestibles, he paused for a few minutes in order to erase the savor of those plates.

“I will wash it down with sodas and wine,” he thought.

He did just that, and then Roy attacked the furniture holding the pastries. Hours later, he had gulped every one of the hundreds of cakes on it. He then moved to the one covered with ice cream.

He sampled the first and beamed, “Oh, man, this is good. This is really good stuff. I could take in everything.”

He did precisely that, swallowing up the last of the hundreds of gallons sitting on the table. Hours later, he had had enough, and moved to the table holding the chocolate bars. He popped them all in, and then did the same with the one that had candy on it.

The tables had a place to sit on both sides and resembled those used in parks for picnics, but they were all joined and were in a line that was almost a kilometer long. As Roy had started eating at the one with pizzas, he sat down at the beginning of the wooden structure and progressively slid to the next spot, where a new dish lay. He proceeded in such a way, moving from one table to the next. When he got to the last spot, he had had enough.

“Well, we are done here,” he said with a gratified smirk. “Now it’s time to move forward and get to the top of this mountain.” He immediately attempted to stand up, but couldn’t. He tried again, but his forces were insufficient. “I must be really tired from the climbing.”

However, when he looked at his arms, his eyes could not believe what they were seeing.

“Shit! They are thicker than those of a sumo wrestler,” he exclaimed. “And my legs are at least three times wider than they used to be.”

He had become monstrously fat, beyond all proportions. He had turned into a hippopotamus, a manatee, or perhaps a whale, weighing more than a thousand pounds. The lawyer at once realized something.

"I am trapped in this cave under the weight of my own fat. Now, I can't move forward." The blond could not believe what was happening and pondered over the matter.

"Well, the problem will be dealt with logically, and all I have to do is to abstain from eating. In no time, I will get rid of this lard."

Although there were hardly any sweets left, he turned his back on the comestibles so that he would not be visually tempted, and for a while it worked. But then, the American started smelling a delicious aroma of roasted candy and tried to resist, but he eventually caved in. Roy turned and, as that happened, remembered that he had eaten practically all of the sugary confections. That was surely going to help him maintain discipline. However, when his eyes fell over the furniture, it was fully covered again with thousands of them.

"What?" he exclaimed. "This can't be." He lingered and then said, "Well, I am only going to take one and that'll be it."

However, as he was swallowing the last bit of that one, the attorney felt the irresistible urge to go for another. Before he knew it, he had gulped about a hundred. The Swede had now grown fatter, and he understood what was going on.

"This is a sort of siren call that nobody can resist. If I don't take radical action, I could stay here forever."

Somebody would have thought that such a situation was not so bad because the food was succulent. However, it also meant that he would be glued to the candy table, because he would never manage to move more than a yard. Roy thus made up his mind and swung his monstrous body forward, landing softly on his fat-cushioned belly. He then crawled towards the entrance of the grotto. The blond moved slowly because his muscles could barely displace the vast weight, and as he passed the other tables, they were again fully covered with succulent foods that emitted an irresistible aroma. Roy held his breath and closed his eyes to reduce the temptation.

"I have to make it to the peak of the mountain. I have to make it to the peak of the mountain," he kept repeating.

The American managed not to stop for a bite and eventually made it to the entrance of the cavern. A few inches ahead lay the precipice.

There was only one way out of that impasse, and Roy decided to bite the bullet. He closed his eyes, moved forward and then fell into the void. Seconds later, he smashed onto the base of the mountain. The attorney was so obese that he bored a deep hole into the ground. As the blond lay in the hollowed-out space, he felt every one of his broken bones

sticking out of his body. He howled and screamed hysterically, but that changed nothing. Every single part of his skeletal structure was shattered, and every square inch of his frame hurt. The suffering was immense, and it lasted for a long time, but eventually he passed out.

When he woke up, he was again back to his normal weight, without a scratch, and with ironed clothes. The lawyer started to ascend anew, and slipped on several occasions, but managed not to fall. He was constantly worried about an avalanche, but none occurred. When he approached the cave, he took another route to avoid its temptation. It took him longer, but eventually he was over it.

He continued climbing, and the landmass remained almost as steep as before. It was not straight up, but the inclination was considerable. Eventually, the blond came upon a small flat area of about three square yards, and he immediately used the space to rest.

The Redhead

"Life is suffering," affirmed a strong feminine voice suddenly.

"Who said that?" asked Roy in bewilderment as he curiously looked in all directions.

"I am here, on the rock," said the voice.

Roy turned towards the grayish wall of granite and immediately saw the image of a regally-dressed woman who wore a long and bulky golden dress. She had orange locks and an extremely white skin. The figure was a meter tall, and the attorney had the impression that he was watching a person on a television screen. The bizarre figure was encrusted into the stone, yet not only could it move with dexterity, but it also protruded a few inches from it. It was as if a sculpture had been carved out of the mineral and then given life.

"Do you believe in reincarnation, Roy?" asked the weird appearance.

"What? Who are you? What are you talking about?" queried the lawyer, fully bedazzled.

"The Hindus call it transmigration of the soul, and the Buddhists, rebirth. They believe that our actions have consequences and, when we die, those deeds will have an affect on our following lives. I didn't have other existences after succumbing to pneumonia at the age of seventy, but what has happened to me thereafter fits, to a certain extent, into the beliefs of those two creeds."

"Who are you?"

"I am Queen Elizabeth I of England."

"No, you can't be her," said Roy while he looked carefully at the moving stone.

"Did you just win a stupidity contest?" snarled the strange figure acidly. "Do you think that you get prizes in this place for lying about your life on Earth? I died in 1603, and since then I have been stuck to this wall. You are the first person I have seen, and my sole occasional visitor has been the Creature, who only comes to inflict pain. You can bet your boots that I am not trying to make a good impression so that you will ask me out on a date."

The attorney stared at the odd image and noticed an extravagant dress, striking red hair and a stately air. Those were all hallmarks of the famous monarch. He also recalled having read that the sixteenth century ruler had a horrendous temper, and he had just gotten a taste of it.

"But your government has gone into the history of the Isles as one of the best. You are even seen by many as one of the most competent

European sovereigns of all time, and that is why they gave you the sobriquet of Elizabeth the Great. How could they have sent somebody like you to Hell?"

"Well, here they see things differently, and the truth of the matter is that I did a couple of nasty things."

"Like what?"

"Well, I slept with my stepfather, executed my cousin, promoted piracy and endorsed war. It is those things that got me into trouble. I once epitomized power and vitality, and now look at me. I have been reduced to being a worn-out piece of ore. For some religions, being reborn into an inorganic structure, such as a rock, is just about the worst possible downgrading that a soul can experience."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." She paused, and then added, "Buddha was right. Life is suffering, and there is no respite. I started enduring the torments of the world from when I was an infant. My mother was decapitated when I was only three and, to make matters worse, it was my father who did that."

"That must have devastated you as a child."

"Oh, yes, it did. It was terrible. I adored power, but if they would have given me the choice between it and having my Mom, I would not hesitate to take the second. I barely recall being with her, but I can remember enough to know that it was the most wonderful sensation of all."

"But things improved for you later, didn't they?"

"Not really. There were several assassination attempts during my early adulthood, and it was such a stressful environment that I almost went crazy. It was a rare night that I would go to sleep without the fear of getting murdered during my rest. Despite the wealth and power I enjoyed, I suffered all my life, and since the end of my Earthly days, the distress has been even worse in this prison. At my deathbed, I was assured by the Catholic and Anglican priests that the following life would be a wonderful one, but, as you can see, things didn't go that way."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Roy compassionately.

"Yeah, I am also sorry for what I will do now."

"What do you mean?"

"I was ordered not to let you through."

"Who commanded you to do that?" asked the attorney exaltedly.

"I am not allowed to tell you, but if I do my job, I will be put to lesser pains."

"But you are a rock. How are you going to stop me? You are not in a position to do that."

"You are right. I am not, but he is."

The Chimera

Suddenly, the lawyer felt that something was coming towards him. Roy could not see clearly what it was because he didn't have time to turn, but the blond had the impression the aggressor could float. As the attorney was gyrating, he fell. The American landed a few feet below, on a mini plateau, and just got bruised. That, nonetheless, saved him from getting snatched. The thing flew around and immediately charged again. On this occasion, Roy had enough time to see it clearly.

"I can't believe this," he groaned fearfully. "That thing looks like a giant crow with a twelve-yard wingspan. It must be at least thrice my size."

Its frame was like that of a crow, but not its head. That part looked like that of a wolf. The beast did not have a beak, but a mouth and its jaws were huge, with big and pointed teeth. On the head it had a thick fur, but on the rest of the body it had feathers. The animal was black all over, even its claws.

"That creature is a sort of sphinx or a chimera, similar to the ones found in the mythology of ancient Greece or Egypt."

The immense, swarthy bird approached at high speed, and Roy thought of jumping, because if he remained there, it was impossible to avoid getting grabbed. The blond, however, decided to stay, and managed to detach a rock the size of his fist. He was trembling, but he summoned all of his courage, and when the chimera neared, he threw the stone with all his force. The piece of ore went straight towards the enemy and hit him right between the eyes. The creature lost course and flew away. In a matter of seconds, it had disappeared in the distance.

"I got lucky this time," he moaned while gasping briskly. "I hope that thing does not come back."

He surveyed the horizon for a long time, until it became clear that the flying predator was gone for good. The blond then moved forward and ascended carefully, fearful that some new hindrance would appear. However, he had only climbed about ninety yards when, suddenly, he heard a loud shriek. He glanced back, and it was the sphinx. It was coming straight at him, and he desperately tried to look for a flat area where he could take position to throw a rock. However, before he could do that, the huge bird had nabbed him.

The large claws of the crow pierced his right leg, and the American felt as if he was being stabbed with several pointed knives. The thing lifted him up as if he was a five kilogram rabbit, and Roy was left hanging upside down. The New Yorker could see the ground many hundreds of yards below, and wished he would somehow fall. Not only was the injury

hurting terribly, but he was also moving away from his goal, because the chimera flew further and further away from the monolith. They traversed a large territory and then reached something that Roy had never seen before.

"That looks like a mountain, but it can't possibly be one," he thought.

The landmass Roy had been climbing was similar to the ones on Earth because it had its base on the ground. The one the sphinx was approaching, on the other hand, was not anchored to anything. It was floating in mid-air.

As they got near it, Roy saw an opening in the middle of the granite mass. It was a large orifice, and the giant crow flew into it, landing soon after. Once there, it continued to cling on to his leg, and dragged him for about twenty yards. Then, the black creature made a loud shriek and, some time later, other chimeras appeared. One was about the same size as the one holding Roy and the others were half as big. The giant animal then let the lawyer go, and the seven sphinxes surrounded him. Seconds later, they began to tear him apart.

"Ah, ah, ah..." screamed the blond. "No, please stop."

But his pleas went unattended. The birds with the heads of wolves were hungry and they plunged their jaws enthusiastically into his body, rending sizeable parts of it. Hands, arms and legs were taken off, making the lawyer experience a horror worse than all the previous ones. He bellowed, yelled and hollered, but nobody came to his rescue. Soon after, he could scream no more because there was nothing left.

When the American recovered consciousness, he was again at the base of the mountain. He was laying flat on the ground, and immediately stood up. Roy was badly shaken from the previous experience and could not get his thoughts straight.

After a while he said angrily, "I am starting to see a pattern. Maybe what I am going through with this damn monolith is just one more punishment and they are making me believe that it is something else. In the first castigations after arriving in Hell, I got attacked and devoured, and in this last situation the same thing happened. Even before I got eaten by the giant crow, I had been in constant agony." He then paused and uttered in a less exalted tone, "Maybe it is all bullshit, but for now it is better that I continue trying, just in case it is not."

He began to climb the landmass again, and succeeded in circumventing the cave. He was constantly in fear of an avalanche, but dreaded the sphinx even more. However, nothing happened. Eventually, he reached a large plateau.

"From the base of the mountain, it would have never occurred to me that there was a big flat area here," he muttered. "This thing must

measure about a square mile.”

The place was barren, like the rest of the mountain, and small rocks were the only thing that broke the monotony of the terrain. There was not the slightest sign of vegetation and, after catching his breath, he marched forward to explore the area.

The Blonde

"Hi there, stranger," said someone suddenly.

Roy heard the words coming from behind him and immediately turned around. The moment his eyes saw her, there was an instinctive refusal to believe what they were registering. Only a few feet away stood a gorgeous blonde wearing a white dress, a pair of silvery high heels, and a pair of snow-hued earrings. The dazzling girl had short hair, a mole on her left cheek, blue eyes, and bright red lips.

"You guessed correctly," said the beauty with a melodious voice. "I am Marilyn Monroe."

Roy was perplexed. He had seen numerous photos of her, as well as some of her movies, and from what he had seen it was evident that the Californian was an extremely voluptuous and gracious female. Nevertheless, he had once read that Marilyn had been voted the sexiest woman of the twentieth century, and recalled having mused that such a title was due to her tragic death.

"She couldn't possibly have been that exceptional," he had thought. "People who die young are always put on a pedestal."

Well, he had been wrong. Now he knew that the appellation of distinction was rightly deserved.

"I can't believe you were sent to Hell," stammered the lawyer.

"At first I couldn't believe it either. But what can I say?" mouthed Marilyn dejectedly. "It is actually worse than it seems. I am affixed to this monolith and can't move from here. This is called the Mountain of Doom because it is one of the most sorrowful places in the Inferno. The monotony of the same panorama and the solitude are devastating. It just kills you. I have heard that others go through an alteration of punishments. Here, nothing ever changes."

"That is true. Mine have taken place in many different locations. It has been no joyride, but at least the scenery has varied."

She paused for a couple of seconds and then said, "Catholicism and a few other creeds believe that if you commit suicide you are irrevocably sent to the underworld. The truth of the matter is that if I had died from a car accident or of old age, they would have sent me here anyway."

"I know. In this place one finds mass murderers as well as adulterers and even shoplifters."

"There were several moments in my life that were glorious, but on average, it was mostly a mortifying existence. Had I been happy, taking an overdose of sleeping pills would have never crossed my mind. I took them, on that dreadful night of August 5, 1962, because the grief pressing over

my heart was excruciating, and I thought that in such a way the pain would disappear. I was wrong. Ever since coming here, I have been put to worse woes."

"You shouldn't be here," affirmed the lawyer airily. "You were a great actress, a wonderful singer and a delightful person."

"Thanks, but I don't want to become friends with you because you were exactly like the men who broke my heart on several occasions. Your seduction tactics were based on deception, and you deluded countless girls. Now, I will take revenge for the ones you mistreated. I am afraid this is the end of your journey."

Before the attorney could say another word, the blonde clapped her hands and, a second later, Roy heard a noise that came from below. Then, from under the ground, something emerged that sent a chill down his spine.

Human skeletons surged all at once, and as soon as they got out of the soil, they began to advance menacingly towards the lawyer. There were twenty of them, and the white figures moved in unison, marching like a platoon of fearsome warriors. In a flash, Marilyn disappeared. Roy grabbed a rock and threatened the bony beings, but they continued to come closer. The blond portended and menaced, but the enemy was not intimidated and kept approaching, so he threw the stone and hit one of them. To his surprise, the skull splintered and the being collapsed.

The others stopped at once.

"It seems as if they got the message," thought the New Yorker.

However, instead of retreating, the rigid creatures kneeled and pierced the ground with their hands, taking from beneath it swords that were more than a yard long.

"Oh, damn. Why couldn't they have just gone to have a cup of coffee?"

Roy rapidly grabbed another boulder and threw it at one of the skeletons. The rock broke the spinal column in two, making the enemy fall apart. The others instantly started to run towards the attorney, and he sped away. The adversaries moved swiftly, and soon they began to catch up. In no time, several had cut him and the Swede stopped. The bony beings circled him, they then lifted their swords and began to hack.

Swoosh, swoosh, and then more of the same. "Ah, ah, ah..." shouted Roy stridently.

They swung incessantly at him, and did it with such force that Roy's arms and legs were cut clean off. It was as if they had been sliced with an electronic saw. The white creatures grabbed his four extremities and his torso, took them to the edge of the mountain, and then tossed them over. Roy was no longer a unified piece and was bleeding profusely, but he did not die.

"This is crazy," he shouted as he fell to the base of the mountain. "This has to stop."

Seconds later, all of his parts smashed into the ground. The attorney lay there for a long time, howling and moaning until he eventually lost consciousness.

When the blond recovered his senses, he was again in one piece, as if nothing had happened. The lawyer immediately reinitiated the odyssey towards the top, and when he approached the grotto, he successfully circumvented it. Roy also avoided the plateau and, once over it, he thought that the summit could not be far away.

"I don't know why, but for some strange reason I have a good feeling about this one," he thought. "I bet that on this occasion I will succeed."

As he approached the clouds that seemed to be forever encircling the landmass, his triumphal grin rapidly disappeared and he halted.

"That thick fog seems to harbor dangers. There is probably a nasty surprise waiting just around the corner. If I was constantly caught off guard with clear visibility, the more so in this area." He lingered and then said, "Let's think positively. There are surely no more obstacles."

To his amazement, once he entered the condensed vapor, the steepness of the monolith began to significantly relent.

"I was right," he muttered gleefully. "This is a better terrain than all the previous ones."

From one moment to the next, he was no longer under the threat of falling and could even walk. It was far from being a flat area, but it was the sort of inclination that boy scouts did not find exhausting. Once inside that new territory, he noticed that the visibility was not that bad, and it was possible to see up to forty yards ahead. He soon started feeling chilly, and as he sloped upward, it got colder.

The Empress

The novel terrain was as barren as the rest of the mountain, but suddenly he saw a plant. It stood all alone and swayed lightly, giving at times the impression it was dancing. The vegetable was a meter tall and had an erect green stem. On its top, there was a rounded purple flower that looked like a ball. The strange vegetable immediately caught the attention of the lawyer, but he was not about to stop, and he just glanced at it.

As he was passing by its side, somebody said with a feminine voice, "Why the haste?"

The attorney halted on the spot, knowing that it had been the blossom which had spoken.

"I need to get to the top of this landmass," said Roy hesitantly, unsure of why he was talking to a plant.

"There is no need to run," affirmed the flower. "We have all of eternity before us. Time is the one thing you have in abundance here."

The lawyer approached and immediately saw a face in the lilac, spherical mass. It was clearly the visage of a woman and, more particularly, that of an Asian female.

"You are the first piece of vegetation I have seen since coming to Hell," uttered the blond astounded.

"The guys running this place are real professionals," lamented the shrub. "They punish you in the way that most hurts. I was once considered the prettiest girl in China. My beauty was so striking that the Emperor's men kidnapped me and took me to the Forbidden City, so that I would become one of the king's concubines. I was radiant and splendorous, and now look what they have made of me."

"Well, you are an attractive blossom, and your human face is also pleasing."

"Are you blind? Are you not aware what type of plant this is? I am an opium poppy. This is not exactly a glamorous inflorescence. I am the raw material for the making of one of the most pernicious drugs in the world."

"Is there a particular reason for that, or was your form chosen at random?"

"Here, nothing happens by chance. During most of my adult life I was a heroin addict and smoked that stuff regularly. I once governed China, and neglected my duties as a ruler, spending more time indulging in drugs, parties and luxury than in pondering over state matters. I transgressed the key maxim of Confucianism by lacking morality, and now the taxman has come to collect the dues."

"Who are you?" asked Roy intrigued.

"I am Tzu Hsi, the Empress Dowager who governed China from 1861 to 1908. I am the only woman to have ever held sway over the Middle Kingdom."

"Of course," said the attorney, as he rapidly recalled having read something about her. "You were nicknamed the Old Buddha."

"That was clearly a misnomer, because my years in power held nothing of the rational, ethical or divine. I got to the throne by having been the only concubine to have given a son to the Emperor. When he died, by means of treachery and murder, I took over. My behavior was irresponsible, and I remained indifferent to the problems of the nation during my whole regency."

"Why did you behave in such a way?"

"I guess that in a man's world, a girl must become as heartless as them in order to get ahead in life." She lingered and then added sadly, "But it was a big mistake. Not only did I betray my people, but also my gender. It was an error to have imitated men in their violent ways. Our peaceful nature is the one thing that makes us women superior to males."

"That's all very interesting, but I am afraid we will have to put an end to our conversation," said the attorney impatiently. "I have to go. I am on my way to Heaven."

"You've got to be kidding. Nobody has ever gotten out of Hell."

"I don't know about that, but I know that not trying would be the worst of possible errors."

"You are not going to make it," warned the poppy.

"We'll see," said Roy boldly, and he immediately left.

As soon as he started marching, the rudeness of the cold temperature began to be felt again.

"This is starting to get pretty uncomfortable," he thought while trembling lightly. Eventually, he saw snow under his feet and immediately sensed the softness of the new terrain. "I must be getting closer to Heaven. For the first time, I really have a good feeling about this place."

He accelerated his pace and, with every new step, his excitement grew. As his walking quickened and the snow got higher, he stopped noticing what lay on the floor. In his hurry, he tripped and fell. The lawyer did not get hurt, but as he got up, the ground began to tremble. The shaking got progressively stronger and he gazed anxiously in all directions.

"What is that?"

Seconds later, he saw it.

"Oh, no. Not again," he moaned tensely.

From the area above, a giant ball of snow came rapidly rolling down, and before he could try to avoid it, the white mass had knocked him down and sucked him into it. He started bowling downhill and was unable to see a thing due to the fast speed at which the sphere was moving. At first, he was on the edges of the snowball and got severely bruised against the underlying rocks, but then he was drawn inside and the material swiftly began to constrict him. With every yard that it descended, the mass tightened its grip around him and he felt like he was being encased in concrete. Once the globe overcame the foggy area, it made a free fall to the base of the mountain and, seconds later, it smashed against the floor. The forceful collision splintered the ice, thus liberating the New Yorker, but it also finished grinding him, and the lawyer was left squealing and shrilling.

“I can’t take this any more. I can’t take this any more.”

The distress was atrocious, and it was worse than in the previous incident. Worse still was that it had systematically increased ever since he had started to climb the landmass. Then, he blacked out.

The Orange Fish

When he recovered consciousness, he was again in perfect physical condition and with perfectly ironed clothes. After checking his body, Roy began to think about what had happened.

"I am getting fed up with this stuff," he croaked virulently. "I am almost sure those assholes are fucking with me. I wonder if the war between the armies of Hell and Heaven, as well as everything that followed, was a ploy to torture me in a new way. They probably just acted the whole thing so that I would have false hopes about a better future. Ever since I began going up, the pain has progressively increased, just like in the situation before the war. It would seem as if nothing has changed."

He lingered for a few minutes and then reconsidered.

"On the other hand, the truth is that I was granted a wish and I enjoyed it. But, then again, who says it is true that I am the first person to have ever received a privilege. They have probably deluded many others with the same story. There is simply no way of corroborating that."

He was confused and exclaimed dispiritedly, "I am falling into the absolute doubt of which the seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes talked about. In his book, *The Discourse of Method*, he said that the only path to follow when confronted with numerous doubts is to adhere to the most exacting logic. Logic, therefore, says that as Hell is reputed for bringing total suffering to its residents, it is thus highly possible that the wish they granted to me was a transgression of the laws of this place. If that is so, then everything that followed was true, and rising to the top of this mountain is my only chance of decreasing, or perhaps even eliminating, the terrible sufferings that I have been enduring."

Roy thus began to mount the mass of rock again, and some time later he was in the foggy area. The visibility was the same as last time and, as he moved forward, he encountered more and more snow. When the white substance was at knee level, he relented and moved slowly for fear of tripping and causing another avalanche. He got to the place where the accident had taken place, and nothing happened. The lawyer thus pursued his journey, looking nervously in all directions. As he advanced, the inclination progressively decreased and, eventually, he was almost on flat terrain.

"This is good," he muttered. "This is getting better by the minute."

There was a haze that gave the place a lugubrious atmosphere. The light vapor swirled in the air in very strange ways, sometimes going in one direction and the next moment in the opposite.

Suddenly, he heard a growl, and it was one that was different from

anything else he had ever heard. He froze, and all that moved were his eyeballs, searching nervously in the frontiers of the fog for the source of the noise. Then, he heard a roar.

“Those were two different sounds,” he thought uneasily. “There are probably two creatures in the vicinity.”

His heart was thumping three times faster than normal, and Roy was sweating despite the coldness. Moments later, he saw what was behind the strange disturbances.

“Oh, no. This can’t be,” he mumbled fearfully while slowly retreating.

Some forty yards ahead stood a five-yard tall creature with the body of a polar bear and the head of a piranha. It had the frame of the most dreaded carnivore of temperate zones and the head of the most feared predator of the rivers. The being had thick white fur that covered everything with the exception of what lay above the shoulders. That part was orange, and instead of hair it had scales.

The half-fish monster stood on two legs and looked menacingly at Roy. The thing had the body of a bear but not its height, being much taller. It was bulky and muscular, giving the impression of possessing a tremendous force. It was evident that a single blow from one of those paws was enough to tear Roy’s head apart. It was an awkward and frightening looking animal with long claws and sharp teeth. For a few seconds, it just remained motionless, but then it began to move speedily towards the lawyer.

“Shit,” groaned the blond as he turned around and began to run. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Roy started fleeing downhill, and the beast fell on its four extremities. On all of its limbs, it moved much faster and it was rapidly catching up. The blond dashed frantically, constantly turning his head to keep track of the distance between him and the beast. The frightening creature was getting closer, and Roy tried to accelerate but his legs wouldn’t go any quicker. At a given moment, the space separating them was only ten yards, and seconds later it was just ten feet. The gap kept shrinking, and then the bear fell onto him. In a flash, it had torn off an arm. The piranha wasted no time in munching the limb and, while it did that, it kept one of its giant paws over the lawyer.

All at once, a distant noise distracted the bear. The animal got off Roy and walked towards the source of the sound. The attorney used the opportunity to escape and sped away. It was very difficult to run without an arm because he couldn’t balance his body well, but he managed not to stumble. Unfortunately for him, a few minutes later the piranha became aware that its meal was getting away and started to chase the Swede. Roy had distanced himself considerably, but he had left behind a trail of blood

that was easy to follow. On top of that, the fish could gallop almost as fast as a horse.

“This will probably end like all the previous incidents,” thought Roy, “and when I get back to this area, the beast will still be here. I have to think of a plan that will give me a good chance of avoiding this monster.”

The piranha was rapidly catching up because it could move five times faster than Roy, and just as it was about to bring him down, Roy reached the edge of the nebulous area. He jumped into the precipice and fell. The New Yorker plummeted with the speed of a rocket and, seconds later, smashed into the base of the mountain.

The moment he hit the ground, an immense pain overtook him. It was so atrocious that it felt as if he was going to explode into a million pieces. He bled, cried and screamed, and then he agonized some more.

“What have I done to deserve this?” he moaned. “What have I done?”

It was terrible, and he wished it would soon end. Some time later, he blacked out.

Motherhood

When the American woke up, his body was in one piece again, and he was standing in the same place from where he had parted company with the Serpent. He was sweating and trembling, and his mind was in total disarray. The systemic failure to ascend the mountain was rapidly wearing him down. It seemed as if the behemoth of rock was an insurmountable barrier.

However, he at least now had a plan, and just as Roy was about to begin the ascent, a tender voice said, "Don't even bother. There is no way you can overcome that monolith."

The attorney swiftly turned and saw a gorgeous dark-haired woman who was elegantly attired in a multi-layered long robe that was colored pink, brown and green. She had an abundance of jewelry over her body and her face looked familiar, but it was not Cleopatra. The oval-visaged lady wore a strange crown, which was beautifully adorned with glinting precious stones. The woman was exuberant, and she gave off a nice flowery smell.

"You are wasting your time," she said gently while striking a regal pose. "This mass of granite is insuperable. It was designed to be the ultimate barrier."

"Why bother to build it if the intention was not to let anybody out?" asked Roy shrewdly.

"The heavenly architects made it in case God demanded the presence of the Serpent. He has never called him, but the Devil is the only one with the knowledge and the power to make it through. That is, of course, as long as he gets an invitation. Without an invitation, not even he can overcome it."

"That changes nothing about my situation. I must try again and again, even if the odds are one in a trillion. Hope is the last thing that one should abandon." He lingered and then said intently, "Can you help me? If I make it, I will lobby hard to get you a better deal."

"I know many things about Hell because I have been here for a long time. It was the year 1631 when I died, and since then I have been in this joyless place. However, what I know is not related to this landmass. Sorry, I can't be of any assistance."

"Who are you?" queried the attorney curiously.

"I am Queen Mumtaz Mahal."

"I have never heard of you."

"Have you heard of the Taj Mahal?"

"Yes."

"Have you really?"

"Yes. It is the most architecturally beautiful tomb in the world, being considered one of the seven wonders of the planet. The edifice is so enchanting that an English poet once described it not as a building but as the proud passions of an emperor's love wrought in living stones. It was build by the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his beloved wife and is situated in the north-centre of India, not far from New Delhi. The palace was completed in 1653 and it was a tribute to a beautiful woman and a monument to enduring love."

"I am the one who inspired the emperor into making that giant structure."

"So you were the one?"

"Yes."

"I can see why he did that."

"I was a Persian princess, and my parents married me to the son of the Indian king when I was a teenager. Some years later, the king died and my husband ascended to the throne. Yes, he adored me, and my death crushed him so much that in just a few months his hair and beard had turned white. He never stopped loving me, even many decades after I had passed away."

"Well, you really deserved that monument. Your beauty is breathtaking."

"Thank you. But more than physical charms, I personified motherhood. I had fourteen children. Being a parent absorbed practically all of my life, and just the process of procreation consumed half of it."

"Fourteen?"

"Yes. It was hard work. In my time, women were taken for granted and seen as dispensable bearing machines, giving us hardly any merit for the travails of pregnancy and the pains of parturition. However, if a child died during birth, in particular if it was a boy, we would get reprimanded and, sometimes, even murdered. We were accused of incompetence. I ignore the era from which you have come, but it wouldn't surprise me if the women of your time were also treated badly."

"I dwelled on the Earth almost four centuries after you, and in many poor countries females continued to be treated in a similarly unfair way. I agree that women should not be blamed when something goes wrong with the baby, but it doesn't seem to me as if giving birth is such a big deal."

"You should try taking something the size of a melon out of your ass," snapped the queen tartly. "I can tell you, it is no party, and I did it fourteen times. It was never easy. I thought that with time there would be less woe and it would be quicker, but it was always a terribly exhausting

activity. It was so fraught with grief and peril, that on the fourteenth occasion I expired."

"That's how you died?"

"Yes. Through the centuries, millions of women have perished during childbirth, but nobody has ever thought of making monuments for our work. Had it not been for my dazzling beauty, the emperor would have not even bothered to build me a meter-tall tombstone. It is funny, because men who are successful in the battlefield receive glamorous gratifications made of precious metals. More still is that the best warriors even get their faces immortalized on statues and coins."

"It's interesting what you say, because in my time, military violence was still glorified in such a way."

"Ironic, isn't it? You get trophies for killing and we get nothing for giving life. While we create, you destroy. While we produce, you annihilate. That really makes a lot of sense, don't you think? It makes so much sense that stupid, unfair and moronic are words that don't even denote half of its inconsistency."

Roy had never meditated over such a subject, but he immediately realized that her arguments were very coherent. However, he didn't want to spend time discussing a world that he had already left behind. His only concern was getting to Heaven.

"You would have been a good lawyer had you lived in my time, and you are without a doubt a great discussion partner. However, I can't stay any longer in this place. I must go on. Goodbye."

And he immediately reinitiated the ascent.

The Long March

Roy's alpinist abilities had steadily improved since his first attempt to climb the mountain and he now moved twice as fast. Contrary to the first time, however, he was not cheerful about the enterprise but looked stern and calculating. It was the visage of someone who would stop at nothing and who had carefully pondered the obstacles that awaited him. When the cave came along, he circumvented it, but when the plateau was near, he went straight towards it. As soon as he set foot on it, the lawyer started to collect fist-size rocks and took off his shirt to stock them. He moved cautiously, but eventually he came upon the skeletons.

"This time I am not a sitting duck," he growled.

The moment they appeared, Roy started bombarding them with stones. Twenty emerged, and he destroyed six as they were coming out of the ground. While the remaining took to extracting a sword from the soil, he used the opportunity to break the skull of eight more. The remaining six ran towards him and the Swede got away as fast as he could. At a certain moment, he swiftly turned and assailed them anew, knocking down two more. The lawyer darted towards the precipice, but the four enemies were rapidly closing in and he no longer had any rocks. Just as they were about to fall onto him, the attorney reached the edge of the plateau but did not jump into the void. He made a sharp turn towards the left and three of the skeletons plummeted into the abyss. Roy dashed to the place where he had knocked down two and grabbed their swords from the floor. He rapidly gyrated to confront the remaining foe and, in seconds, the two began to exchange blows.

Wham, bang, clang, came the sound of the swords as they clashed in mid-air. Only a few minutes into the combat and the adversary's weapon scratched Roy on the forearm, making him bleed lightly.

"Ah," he yelled angrily while staring hatefully at the bony opponent. "I will make guacamole out of you." The battle continued and the blond fought energetically, but then he got a cut on his chest, and a moment later a snip on the abdomen. "Damn," he bellowed.

Roy knew nothing about dueling, but he was determined to overcome the monolith, and for that he needed to defeat the enemy. He thus put all of his energy and concentration into the fight. The swords collided again and again, making strong metallic noises and, at a given point, he lost one of his weapons. They fought for a long time, and Roy became increasingly tired while the skeleton seemed to possess an unlimited stamina. The attorney knew he had to change strategy or he would soon be doomed. He thus took a deep breath and sprinted towards a

place where several rocks lay. He grabbed one and lobbed it at the adversary. The bony creature dived and avoided the object, but while it did that, Roy threw his sword. The weapon flew towards the enemy, making a light hissing sound as it cut through the air. Its trajectory was precise, moving almost as steadily as a missile and, in no time, it slammed against the spinal column of the creature. It broke it in two and the opponent immediately collapsed.

“Finally,” croaked Roy while gasping hastily.

Roy was exhausted and sat for a while. He then grabbed the two best cutlasses and looked for his shirt, which had fallen somewhere. Immediately after, he reinitiated the ascent.

When the blond got to the foggy area, he unpacked the two blades attached to his belt. He marched slowly and remained vigilant, looking incessantly in all directions. Eventually, he reached the area where the terrain was almost flat and the snow was at knee level.

Then, he heard the terrifying growl of the beast and, seconds later, it was standing some forty yards away. This time, Roy did not run away but laggardly marched forward. The large polar bear with the head of a piranha did likewise and began to advance in an erect position, displacing slowly on two legs. When Roy was ten yards away, he hurled one of the swords. The metal artifact flew speedily through the air and pierced the belly of the monster. The beast roared thunderously and the attorney dashed backwards, retreating several meters. The animal then took out the sword, shoved it aside and charged Roy as if nothing had happened.

“Damn,” moaned the New Yorker. “It is useless. These machetes are like needles to him.”

However, it soon became evident that the monster had suffered more than a scratch. The beast was bleeding a green liquid and its movements were somewhat haphazard. When it was six yards away, Roy threw the other weapon, which went straight towards its chest. The creature tried to evade the object but failed, and the sword perforated the upper part of its body. The white and orange creature growled horribly and flailed its arms in the air with uncoordinated violence. It stopped advancing but did not fall dead, and immediately tried to remove the sword. Roy used the opportunity to run towards the place where the first artifact had fallen. It had landed in the snow and could not be seen. The bear pulled the metal from its body and marched towards the lawyer, but its gait was slower and even less orderly than before.

“Where in the heck is the damn thing?” mumbled Roy desperately as he scrambled to find the elongated device.

The beast came ever closer, and when it was two yards away, Roy felt the arm. He grabbed it, turned and swiftly stabbed the monster in its belly, pushing the blade as deep as he could. The huge animal slapped Roy

with one of its giant paws and he flew twenty meters in the air, landing on a pile of snow. Roy was now unarmed, and he was also badly shaken. The heinous being made efforts to take away the rapier from its frame and it eventually succeeded. The creature moved towards the American, stumbling and trembling, and just as it was about to slice him in two, it fell dead.

The attorney crawled away from the enemy and remained on the ground for a while, trying to recover his breath.

“I hope that was the last of these monsters,” he muttered.

Minutes later, he collected the two swords and went on with his journey. He marched for a significant amount of time until he reached a totally flat terrain where the fog began to dissipate. The American stopped for a while and then he went on some more. Soon, it became clear he had reached the summit of the mountain.

“I made it,” he exclaimed excitedly. “I finally made it.”

He looked around with a satisfied face, but there was only empty space in all directions.

“Which way should I go?”

He didn’t know, so he just marched forward, looking constantly in all directions and hoping that something would come up soon. As time passed, his grin slowly vanished as he was unable to find the entrance to Heaven. After much wandering, he shouted angrily, “Where in the hell is the damn door?”

He continued searching and, eventually, came upon a large and strange metallic-looking staircase that had a snowy color. It had the form of a double helix, similar to the molecular structure of DNA. The spiraling structure was huge, and it was so tall that it was impossible to see its end.

“It has to be this,” he beamed keenly.

He started going up and immediately began to feel a fresh and pleasant air that gently caressed his face.