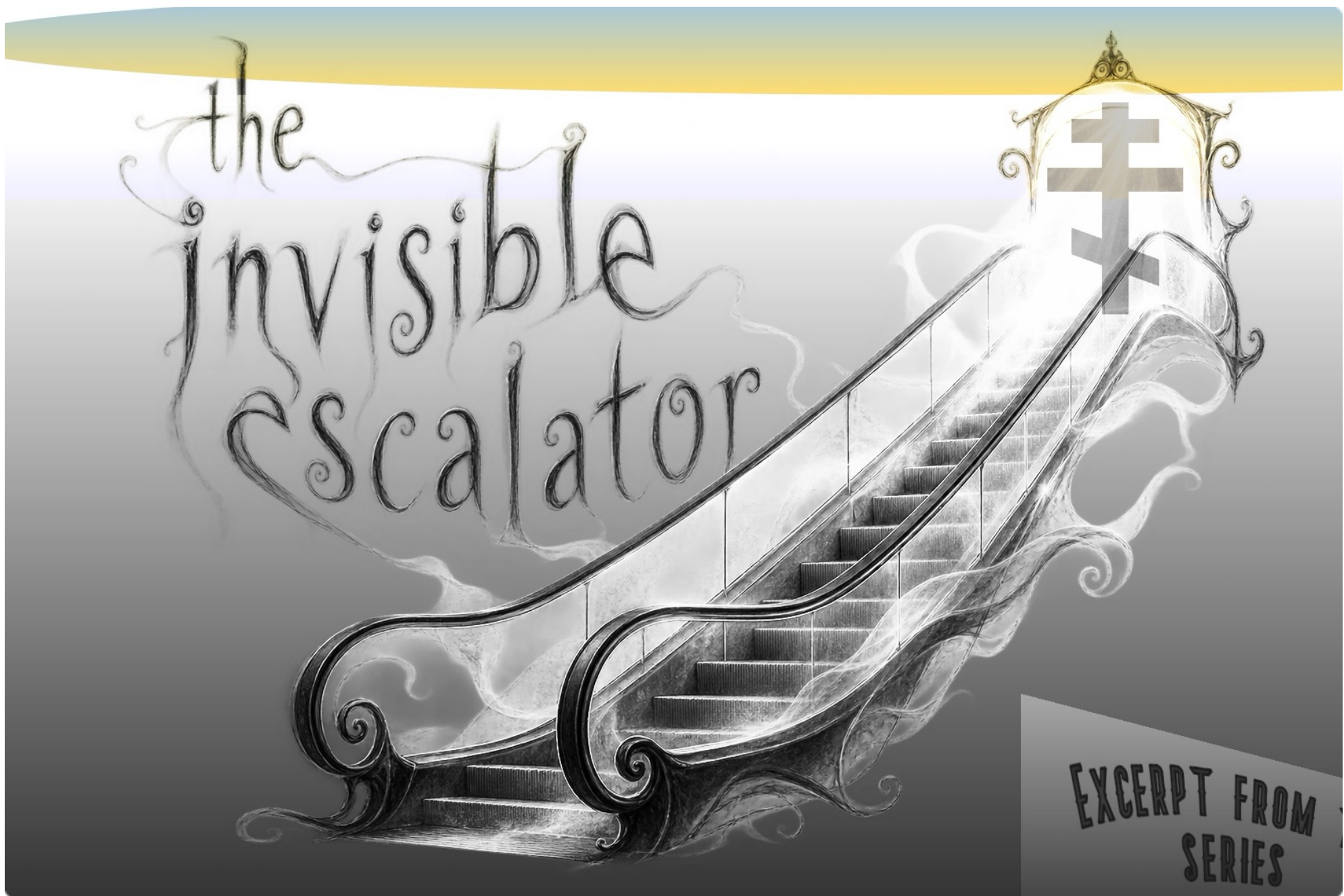


Dane DeLuca

The
Genie,
Mots



A short story and
excerpt from
“The Invisible Escalator”
Series.



Against Jim's better judgment, he agreed to hire his new roommate, Duke onto the catering crew he managed.

Jim swore time and again that he would never hire a friend or roommate or work in middle management again either, yet there he was, doing both these things...

Jim was a humbled man whose whole demeanor was underscored with an air of kindness and though the world around him had at times been treacherous and burdened him with great pain, one could tell that Jim valued all life as precious and had a near infinite patience for the foolish people that he, like us all, frequently encounter.

At least Duke wouldn't be among the foolish, Jim thought, or more correctly, had hoped.

Duke was a whole two heads shorter than Jim.

Jim never really thought about the difference in height but as the two got to know each other better, Jim realized that Duke was clearly intimidated by his height and ashamed of his own. Jealous even.

Duke had made a great first impression on Jim. He presented himself as incredibly considerate and helpful as well as politely mannered. Jim was aware however, that sometimes the most lacking individuals make the greatest first impressions – he was always ready for the old “bait and switch” when getting to know someone.

As time went on, and as Jim and Duke became more familiar with one another, Jim realized that he had made a mistake in bringing Duke on.

Every instruction that Jim would give to Duke, Duke would respond with a question that was designed to poke holes in Jim's command, presenting his thoughts and opinions on why said command would lead to problems in the future. For example:

“Duke, could you mop up this dirty water in the office?”

“Oh, you don't want me to squeegee it instead? I mean I could definitely use the mop but it's pretty dirty and when was the last time you changed the mop head? This seems more like a squeegee job, don't you think?”

Shortly after Jim had instructed Duke to dry the floor he walked towards the refrigerator for more limes to cut. He slipped on the muddy water that was still on the office floor.

“Duke! Why is the floor still wet?”

Kimaya, the other employee who was working with Jim and Duke, told Jim that Duke had left a little while ago and didn't say where he was going.

Jim considered that maybe Duke had some sort of emergency that he had to leave for and rationalized that his absence would be justified. He sent Duke a text, calmly asking where he had gone as he searched for the mop. The mop was nowhere to be found. He ended up using the squeegee which was old and hardly worked and wasn't used because the linoleum tile made the ground too uneven for a squeegee to be effective.

“Hey roomie. I'm at the laundry mat washing the mop head. 😊 I'm also washing your work shirt. It had a little stain on the front.”

Jim then called Duke and told him to come return to the crew and not to wash anything. It was too late however. Duke had washed both the blue mophead and Jim's white button-up dress shirt together, staining his shirt a sky-blue color.

Duke returned triumphantly to the office with the ruined shirt and the mop-head that, though now clean, was tangled too severely by the wash cycle to be reattached to the mop-handle.

Instead of scolding Duke, Jim politely explained that Duke needed to stop questioning his commands and taking matters into his own hands. He told Duke that, though he may have good intentions, his behavior was quite disrespectful and borderline insubordinate.

“Imagine that we are working on a puzzle together. I give you a piece and instruct you on where to put it, and then you follow through with that task. Don't worry about the big picture of what the puzzle will end up being, whether it's a scenic view of a mountain, or Spongebob Square Pants. You just focus on placing the piece where I ask and I'll focus on the big picture, because if all of us focused on the big picture, we would lose sight of the little pieces that we need to place to reveal the greater scheme.”

Duke wondered what the hell a “SpongeBob Square Pants” was and responded with “If I hadn't of done that, you would have washed it later at Tiffany's Laundry mat for almost double the price! I found better spot that's a few blocks further west that charges half the price!” A beaming Duke produced a receipt that was from a place called “MC's Laundry.” it was slightly cheaper, yes but Shane's business had an account with Tiffanies and he and his staff were not allowed to pay out of pocket for dry cleaning as his boss didn't want to handle reimbursing his staff.

Duke told Jim he can “hit him back whenever” In regards to the nine dollars he had “fronted” to wash the mophead and ruin Jim's shirt.

Jim blew it off but Duke asked him for the money every shift henceforth, more and more aggressively each time.

The next shift, Jim had Duke unload the van and to bring the product from the previous event back into the office and then put the products and equipment away for the next gig.

Jim explained to Duke that he wanted him to simply do two things: One, unload the truck and two, place the items back on the shelves they came from. In that order.

Jim was exhausted from working almost a month without a day off, so he relaxed on the couch in the office and caught up on some paperwork. Jim was so happy to feel tired and pain again.

An hour passed and Jim went to check on Duke to see if he had begun making the pre-batched cocktail mixes for the next event. The Cargo van was still full of equipment and liquor bottles. Duke was in the bathroom, rinsing empty juice bottles out by hand for some reason even though they had a dishwashing machine.

“Why is the van still full?” Jim patiently asked.

“Oh, well I figured that you wanted me to clean the dishes?”

“At what point in my instructions did I tell you to do the dishes? Please, would you get back to unloading?”

Another hour passed and Jim went to check on Duke. About half the cargo van had been unloaded. Duke was polishing wine bottles that he had removed from their cases and was placing the loose bottles on the shelf, with a proud and self-satisfied grin.

“Oh my gosh. Why is the van still full of crap man? You’re not supposed to remove the wine from the cases, I don’t have enough empty milkcrates for these bottles and they are in the box still for a reason.”

Duke wondered what the heck a “gosh” was.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” Duke said accusatorially

Jim took a deep breath went outside to finish up the task himself. The van was still full of junk and there was a broken case of beer on the asphalt of the parking lot. The glass of the broken bottles had been dragged about with the squeegee, making deep scratches in the lot that his landlord was sure to complain about.

The most disappointing part of this scene however, was the fact that Dukes 83 Mustang 5.0 was parked in the lot next to the work van. Jim had told Duke a number of times that his landlord would fine him if they took up any more parking spots than the one that was allotted to his company that was reserved for the cargo van.

“Duke! Why the heck is your car...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m moving it!” Duke snapped back.

Duke climbed into his obnoxiously loud muscle car, fired it up, setting off the car alarms of the other cars in the lot, then paused to smoke some weed out of a bong and after 30 seconds of hotboxing his vehicle, sped off of the lot, peeling out and making permanent tire marks in the company lot that his landlady fined his boss for.

Jim beat himself up for making such a blundering move, hiring Duke.

Chapter Sixty-Four

The big day of the annual Rose Bowl party that Jim’s company catered to, had finally come.

Both the client and Jim’s boss neither wanted to pay for anything more than eight bartenders, though Jim protested; saying that the size and conditions of this event required a minimum of a dozen seasoned workers. It was forecasted to be 105 degrees in Pasadena that day and Jim had become very sensitive to hot climates and was prone to crippling sun burns as well as heat stroke.

On the day before the event, Jim, Duke and Kimaya took two trucks to the stadium with all of the catering supplies. Jim had hoped that Duke was lying about how many push-ups he had done that day before heading to work. If he was telling the truth, he would be no use setting up for the party.

It appeared that Duke had told the truth and ultimately, Duke was of no use to anyone.

Jim didn’t know or care to ponder whether it was physical fatigue inhibiting Duke or was it just a general lacking of his mental faculties?. He didn’t have time to consider anything other than how to navigate through the constant unnecessary extra work that Duke’s presence seemed to always entail, on top of ardently trying his best to please the absolute monster party planner, who could never be happy with anything anyway.

It should have been a six hour day but Duke made it all the more challenging.

At one point Duke was tasked to load beer crates into a confined and cramped wooden storage area. Half a minute into the task, Duke screamed like a new born and started swearing with the most manly sounding curse word combinations he could think of in order to mitigate the fact that his initial cry was nothing short of wimpy.

“Ah! Suck it nail!” Duke said to a newish looking nail that was just sticking out of the also newer looking wood. Duke spit on the nail and swore some more as Shane came near to see what had happened.

Duke had apparently grazed his arm.
The nail left a painless white line that was a bit red and puffy surrounding the mark.

Duke made it clear to Jim that he thought that loading anything else into this particular storage area was a risk they simply should not take. Jim needed the space, so he climbed in and began stacking boxes in the room at a rate of about four boxes to Duke's one. Duke couldn't let his friend risk himself on his account, so he did the noblest thing he could in the moment and joined Jim in the room. Duke placed his body between Shane and the nail.

"I got you bro..." Duke said.

Jim told Duke that it was cool and to hop out and he'll finish up the task. Duke refused and Jim shrugged and continued loading product into the room. Jim forgot how close Duke, the human-shield had been to him and he accidentally bumped Duke and Duke fell back into the wall and this time the nail stabbed him in his lower back.

"Awwwww! I need a first aid kit!! Horses ass, that bitching hurt!

"Sorry Duke, I don't have one with me. Kimaya, do you have anything?"

"Always"

Kimaya opened his backpack and produced the kit. He offered to bandage the wound for Duke but Duke said he was good on that.

Jim praised Kimaya for his reliable and hard working character and Duke was visibly upset that he never received such praise from Jim.

Duke asked if he could take a break to recover from the minor injury he had sustained. Jim figured he could do more without Duke around, so he offered Duke a free pass to leave the ballpark and go home.

Duke felt like it was necessary to tell the crew that he would be in the van trying to get through to his doctor's office. He went on to explain that he was 92% certain that he had gotten his tetanus shot a year back, but not entirely certain of that.

"Better be safe than sorry. I'll let you know if they clear me to finish up the shift or not. I'll text you guys in a group chat if I can come back. Either way, I'll text you if not too. I'm probably going to walk to that food truck we saw... yesterday? Or was that today? Anybody?"

"Do your thing man. We got to get working. See you later." Jim trailed off.

There was a suspicious looking vehicle in the parking lot and Jim swore that he saw the same car parked outside of the office the other day. It was a navy blue 1993 Dodge Shadow with double limo-tinted windows.

"About like what time later? Just so I know. I have to have my creatine and high protein shake every four hours. But that's okay, I'll be fine, though sometimes I feel like hypoglycemic and I get super-super hangry while others I..."
Jim and Kimaya walked away at about "I have to have my creatine."

Rose had known Duke all five years that she had been unhappily married to her boring husband. Duke was friend-zoned by Rose very early on in their friendship. She was only into confident men who simultaneously are not embarrassed to have a heart and exhibit softness. Duke was none of that.

Duke suggested that Jim hire Rose so that he could have a chance to be around her more and so that she could see how tough and assertive he could be in the workplace. He would be a force of leadership and cool competency.

She would fall for him yet.

The moment Jim met Rose via a Zoom interview, they clicked and by the end of the interview, Rose was hired. They were both left smiling and bedazzled by the other's presence.

Jim shrugged it off and before any fantasies concerning Rose entered his mind, he stopped and reminded himself that he is now her boss and should respect the professional and plutonic arrangement that they now have. For Jim, trying to be a good person gave him a satisfaction that was; due to his troubled past, more rewarding than living out any adolescent fantasies that a woman like that could inspire.

Saturday was hell for Jim and his crew. The four sided-monster of a bar that the client has built for Jim and his bartenders was out on the thirty yard line, devoid of shade. He had already contracted a mild case of heatstroke within the first hour of the event.

The client deliberately sabotaged the event on account of the event organizers being an ex jilted lover of the owner of Jim's company.

Upon arriving at the ballpark, Jim found that a broken ice machine on an old wooden pallet had been dropped in front of the doors that led into the storage area they had brought their equipment to the previous day.

Jim finally convinced a worker at the stadium to help unblock the door. He wondered if he ever would have retrieved his gear if he hadn't picked up a decent amount of Spanish.

None of the obstacles Jim faced were as impossible as working with Duke though.

With an hour left until they were to start pouring drinks, Jim's coworker Malcom, who was also Kimaya's roommate received a most unfortunate phone call.

Kimaya had been hit on his motorcycle on the 101 Pasadena freeway. He was in critical condition.

The crew completed the set up for the bar and retired to the hot and stuffy boiler room that the stadium provided them. Jim began writing the game plan of the night and discussed how they would get through the event. He did so almost like a quarterback or head coach would, writing on the whiteboard with squiggly arrows that attached to hurried X's and words that were hardly legible due to his shaky hands.

Jim couldn't hold his composure any longer and broke down in tears before his crew. He choked as he tried to explain that Kimaya had had a terrible accident.

"He's so young." He sobbed.

Jim then made cross with his right hand over his chest and prayed. This was a very strange gesticulation to the crew as no one had ever heard of Jesus or the cross.

Rose was full of sympathy and adoration for Jim in that moment. She was moved to tears and was not the only one either.

Jim pulled it together in a minute or so and asked for a moment of silence for their hurt coworker.

Jim finished his briefing with: "Let's keep our chins up and press on without dwelling over what's gone wrong."

Jim left the room.

Duke broke the silence by turning to his nearest coworker and attempting to gossip about Kimaya.

"So Kimaya, eh? Wowie. Just...yikes, right?" Duke said with an inappropriate smile.

The coworker simply stood up and left.

Duke approached Rose who was lying on the floor on her back, sweating. The set up phase of the shift which lasted 4 brutal hours of what ended up becoming a hellish 13 hour shift had really worn Rose and the others out. A lousy half hour break in a boiler room didn't do too much to rejuvenate anyone.

"So, Jim's a pretty cool guy, right?"

Anytime Duke felt like Rose had eyes for someone other than him, he would verbally prod an answer out of her.

Rose avoided the question because the true answer to Duke's question would not please him to hear.

"Yeah. That's what I thought. You're only in to bigger and more manly black guys usually, plus, between me and you, I can't believe he cried just now. Was I like the only one who felt like I was on a candid camera prank show? Super-super embarrassing, right? And what was the hand gestures he made? Weirdo!"

"Be nice! Most girls find sensitive men to be hot. I know I do at least."

Duke's heart sank. As soon as Rose sees Jim behind the bar, it was all over. If only Jim would let him tend bar instead of schlepping ice around like a fool.

Jim never listened when Duke stressed that he was the best bartender money could buy after his six month stint as a beer and wine server at a movie theater.

Duke found a plastic container with cut limes in the room. He went around a corner and squeezed lime juice in his eyes. He managed not to yelp from the stinging pain in his eyes.

Duke walked to the center of the room and fell down on his knees, tears streaming down his face. "Kimaya! Why? Why god? Why him? It should have been me instead." You could say that he definitely missed the moment and the others were suspicious of his random sobbing.

"He is so young!" Duke quoted.

Jim and Rose bartended together at one of the four bar tops. The other three bars were staffed with one or two each of Jim's crew who mostly were pretty new to the company and bartending in general, but had shown that they can handle it throughout previous events. Rose was the only one with zero experience, so Jim worked alongside her as support.

Everyone of Jim's crew were admirably composed, despite the tragedy that occurred earlier plus the brutal dry heat as well as the thousand-plus dehydrated partygoers returning to the bar every few minutes or.

Everyone except for Duke, of course.

Duke's only task was to bring as much ice as he could manage from the ice truck under the stands to the bar-island on the 30 yard line and to make sure the ice was broken up before he filled the various ice tubs the crew was using.

For some reason, It didn't occur to Duke to bring the ice behind the bar to fill the stations, rather he pushed and fought through the dense crowd to the front of the bar and majorly interrupted service. He asked Shane for a fruit knife to open the ice bag. Duke was clearly stressed out and in a flight or fight mindset.

"Just rip it open with your hands."

Duke managed to open the thin layer of plastic and placed, rather than dumped, a virtually solid gigantic chunk of ice in the ice bin and ran away before Jim could tell him to break it up next time.

Eventually Jim was able to instruct Duke to break up the ice each time

Duke asked Jim if he had a hammer.

Jim explained that no hammer was needed and to simply toss the ice on the ground twice to break it up.

Duke returned forty minutes later wearing thick gardening gloves and holding a hammer. He angrily smashed up the ice on the customer side again, while swearing inappropriately at the ice.

Jim had had enough. He told Duke to switch jobs with him and tend bar.

"I thought you'd never ask. Oh my, it's so hot. Do you think they would care if I took my shirt off?" He was asking Jim but his eyes and a wry smile were directed piercingly at Rose who was too busy to notice.

A customer ordered a vodka soda from Rose. Rose was pretty sharp and the hour that Jim was able to instruct her during was well absorbed by her spongelike mind.

"I got it, Rose. I know you're still learning. Allow me." Duke bellowed, half to the crowd and half to Rose. Duke addressed the customer.

"I want to first say, great choice ordering a vodka soda! You will be happy to know that we carry Tito's brand vodka which not only is very smooth, but made entirely out of organic potatoes and is 100% gluten free."

"Actually, the gluten-free vodka we carry is Smirnoff." Rose interrupted

"That's what I said! Smirnoff brand potato vodka. The gluten-free choice for those watching their figures."

Duke said this while turning his complete attention to the annoyed customer.

"Not that you need to watch your figure ma'am. You're in good shape for your age. Maybe you could lose a few pounds but in that case the only answer is a high protein diet and monster workout "seshes" daily."

"Vodka soda, please." The customer repeated.

"Coming right up! Now, do you prefer cola soda or something more akin to sprite? I think I have Diet Coke around here somewhere and I want to say that we have diet sprite. I'm like, 92% sure that I saw maybe two or three cans somewhere."

Rose interjected by sliding the annoyed customer a vodka and club soda with a lime garnish.
"Thanks!"

Duke laughed and told Rose that she'll be back for the correct cocktail as soon as she figures out that it was made with club soda.

"Who would ever want plain old soda water in their drink? It's alright Rose. I think that that's super-super cute, actually. Adorable. Geez, I wish I could take my shirt off."

Needless to say, the whole event was botched and Jim felt pretty crushed that all his hard work had been to no avail and even though the event coordinator would have complained no matter how they performed, Jim was painfully aware of the many shortcomings that were on his end of the bargain ultimately.

Finally, they called last call and broke down the bar and began loading "gator" carts with the remaining liquor and equipment:

During the last golf cart load of their gear was ready to be driven to the cargo van for Jim and his crew to unload, the vengeful client had her crew round up all the garbage bags on the ballpark and dump them onto the gator that had the rest of their gear on it.

The client started commanding Jim's crew to help take down stations and decorations that had nothing to do with the bar.

"You! Empty this bucket in a drain somewhere."

"You got it!" Duke replied.

Jim inserted himself into the interaction that Duke was having with the client.

"Duke, just meet me at the van to load up. Don't listen to her. None of this was in the contract."

"Ten-Four, good buddy!"

"What did I say about the buckets? Get to it!" The client demanded.

"Absolutely." Duke responded.

“Duke! Come on man. See you at the van.”

Jim followed the gator to the van and the rest of the crew, excluding Duke, loaded the van up. Jim returned to the field and found Duke doing everything the client told him to do enthusiastically.

“We’re leaving. “

Duke wished the client well and followed Jim to the van.

Duke opened the passenger door to the van and produced a bar towel and a small bottle of sanitizer. He wiped the seat down thoroughly and began organizing his bags in a tidy manner within the van. Jim accelerated with the doors still open.

On the way home, Duke was feeling defeated. Sure, he had done a great job bartending, but what was the use if Rose still liked Shane more than Duke, he pondered.

Silently Duke said to himself: “I would sell my soul to be more like Jim.”

Suddenly, Duke had the strongest and most random craving of his life.

He wanted...no. He needed apple sauce, specifically Mott’s-brand apple sauce

Chapter Sixty-Five

Jim was usually a good and attentive driver, but he was worried about making it home because towards the end of the event, he was so sun burnt, hungry and dehydrated that for the first time in his life he felt like he would faint at any moment and was experiencing actual tunnel vision and not just metaphorically like he assumed that phrase meant.

It was almost 1am and Jim hadn't eaten a thing throughout the day. He managed to eat half an orange during the shift, but the heatstroke made him sick, and he painfully threw up the only contents of his stomach – half an orange and some foamy green bile. He threw up several times after, but it was more like a dry heave, because, though he was constantly chugging water, he would sweat it all out before it would hydrate his body.

Jim considered having Duke drive them back, but thought that may be more dangerous than driving in his condition.

“Can we stop at the grocery store? I need applesauce.”

The question annoyed Jim. Nobody needs applesauce. What a stupid thing to say, he thought.

Jim finally had somewhat of an appetite and agreed to stop at Ralph's to snag a quick meal. It was his only option at that hour anyway.

The two entered the store and Duke went straight for the applesauce isle while Jim shopped for food to last the next few days.

Jim never typically used a shopping cart. but he was using a cart this time as a walker. His dehydrated muscles burned, and his knees kept giving out on him.

As much as Jim wanted to just grab something easy and leave quickly, he had the foresight to know that he would be bedridden for the next couple days due to his weakened condition, and therefore stocked up on canned soup and Pedialyte.

Meanwhile, Duke was perplexed by a single container of applesauce that stood out from the rest to him. The container was missing a “t” in “Mott's” and though it was a normal 24-ounce plastic container. “MOTS” – all capital letters, it read.

When he lifted it off of the shelf, it easily weighed as much as a gallon of milk.

Duke figured that the container only felt heavier than usual because he was weakened from his shift but dismissed this theory after lifting some of the other containers on the shelf. They felt like the normal weight and the brand name included both “t's.”

Duke decided that he would leave the strange, misspelled container and purchase one of the regular ones on the shelf but suddenly found that he was at the checkout, purchasing the unusual applesauce container. Jim wasn't surprised that though he had done a substantial amount of shopping, somehow Duke took twice as long as he did to buy only one item.

Jim was well aware that finding a parking spot in East Hollywood for the fifteen-foot Uhaul he had rented for the event, would be a major challenge.

Jim pulled up to their building and told Duke that he doesn't need to go with him to find a most likely nonexistent parking spot.

“Keep driving. I'm coming with you. We're in this together roomie.”

Jim's heart sank and the two of them roamed the neighborhood until he parked in a red zone; hoping that he would only get a parking ticket and was banking on the hope that no parking enforcement would be zealous enough to tow a 15-foot vehicle. Just in case though, he set an alarm for 5am so that he could hopefully find a proper spot after people started to leave for work.

Duke fumbled his keys and they fell unto the ground in front of the main door to their apartment building.

“Oops! You know what that means?” Duke said

“Ten pushups!” He answered himself.

Before picking the keys up, he did ten of the wimpiest push-ups Jim had ever seen. The weight of the many grocery bags Shane was carrying made his arms burn and his tunnel vision darker. There's no way that Jim would have been able to sense that he and Duke were being watched and that there was a navy blue Dodge Shadow with dark windows parked directly across the street.

Jim wearily pressed the button on the elevator for the 3rd floor with his foot and accidentally hit the buttons for the basement level as well as the 2nd floor meaning he would now have to wait for the elevator to go to the two unintended floors.

As the doors shut Duke said:

“Hold the elevator!”

Jim didn't move a muscle.

Just before the doors shut, Duke stuck an arm between them.

"Wait up. I have to check the mail!"

He placed his double-paper bag containing the applesauce in the elevator and ran over to the mailbox in the hall.

"Oh my god. Screw the mail man! I'm dying over here."

"I'm waiting on my disability check! Shoot! My mailbox key must be upstairs. Do you have your key on you?"

"You know what? Mines upstairs too."

"Nice! Do you mind grabbing it and coming back down?"

"Sure Duke. I'll get right on that."

The doors shut and Jim considered screaming the duration of the ride. He was too tired to and was also mindful of his neighbors, otherwise might have lost it.

Jim quickly put away all his groceries and hobbled up the stairs with sushi and several bottles of electrolyte solutions.

The moment he sat down, his phone dinged.

"Did you find your key? Should I come up and get mine instead. LMK?" The text read.

Duke hadn't received any mail.

This made him angry, and he stomped from the elevator to the apartment door, slamming it and then swearing loudly in the kitchen. Duke decided to take the applesauce up to his room to eat. He almost never ate in his room for the fact that eating in the apartments common areas meant a higher chance of seeing a roommate and talking to them. Unsurprisingly, Jim never would eat in the common areas because of that.

At first glance. The container appeared to be completely empty.

"Horses ass!" Duke shouted.

"Well... I suppose that I've been called worse things before."

Said a male voice in Dukes head.

The room started to smell in a way that Duke couldn't quite put his finger on. He knew he smelt the odor before at some point in his life, but for the life of him he couldn't place what it was. All he could say for sure, is that that smell was an attached to some old memory from childhood.

Duke stood over the open container of applesauce and suddenly he remembered what the smell was. Silkworms...

"Aw! Gross!" Duke yelped as he impulsively leapt backwards.

He gained the nerve to peer inside after a moment of collecting himself.

He was half amazed and half disturbed by the spectacle within.

A few dozen silkworms stood erect at the base, reminding Duke of tiny meerkats. Duke didn't remember the silkworms he had cultivated for a science fair demonstration having eyes. Beady black eyes like that of a rabbit with the same placement were on the heads of the worms. An eye on each separate side of the face.

"Definitely not a Horses ass but, sure, we're pretty gross. We can live with that."

A jaw dropped Duke felt his heart plummet when he realized and accepted that the voice he had been hearing was coming from the colony of worms...only he didn't hear them with his ears, the voice was within his mind only.

Telepathic communication is just one of many anomalous powers the worms possessed. Duke would learn of the entity's other abilities quite soon.

"Who...what are you?" Duke thought.

"Can't you read? Our name is MOTS; MOTS the genie." An unmistakable voice within Dukes mind replied.

It sounded like Howard Stern.

"What do you want with me?" Duke thought.

“Haven’t you ever seen a movie or read a book about genies? Your species got most of the details right except of course, we’re not a blueish green middle eastern, mermaid looking thing with a dark goatee and big gold earrings. I don’t know where that all came from. People always try to anthropomorphize things they don’t understand like angels and the devil and god. The Dali Llama is actually a Llama. Etc. All these things look way different than what you all are thinking.”

“So, God and all that is real?”

“Nothing gets past you Duke. Or I mean “The Duke” that’s what you call yourself right?”

“No. That’s my nickname.”

“Come on. No, it’s not. Nobody calls you that but yourself. Anyway. You get to make a wish, just like in the fables.”

Shane didn’t need time to think about what he would wish for.

“I want to be taller and stronger than Jim.”

“You got it! Just make sure the last thing you think of before you fall asleep is about your wish and we will do the rest.”

Duke asked a million questions internally until the voice interrupted him with: “Enough! We’re a busy pile of worms. We don’t have time for this.”

Duke said good night to Mots.

“Night. Good luck with your stupid-ass wish...We mean, um. Actually, that’s pretty much what we meant. Go to bed and relax. We promise it will be everything you hoped for and totally isn’t going to suck...”

“Sweet!” Thought Duke as he began to place the lid of the container back onto it.

“Dude!” Said Mots.

“I know, I know. Leave the lid off. I was just, you know...maybe you wanted some privacy kind of thing.”

“Holy Christ you are dense!”

“What’s a “Christ”? Duke thought.

As instructed, Duke laid in bed forming a mantra for his wish.

“Bigger, Taller, Stronger than Jim. Bigger, Taller, Stronger than Jim. Bigger, Taller, Stronger than...”

Chapter Sixty-Six

Duke awoke in the late afternoon. His body ached and cramped. He had a dozen or so Charlie horses in his muscles that were tighter than they had ever felt before.

He tossed his comforter off his body and gasped at the sight of himself.

He was taller and stronger than before, but in all the wrong ways.

His legs were as they were the night before, but his torso was another foot and three quarters longer. From his hips to his chest was thinner than his legs and there was barely any muscle left in his midsection.

From his pectoral muscles to his chin had five or maybe ten times the muscle mass than before. Even his neck had a massive amount of muscle now to the point where turning his head was practically impossible.

He tried to rise but his atrophied midsection simply could not lift the weight of his hulking upper body. He flopped to the hardwood floor.

More Charlie horses twisted throughout his body.

He crawled across the floor to his desk where the applesauce container was. He pulled at the desk until the container fell in front of him. Applesauce exploded everywhere but especially in his face.

Though the room was filled with a pungent silkworm smell, MOTS were nowhere to be found and the container now read “Mott’s – the correct spelling of the brand.

What’s more is that Duke had absolutely no recollection of his interaction with MOTS the previous night.

His shrieking and the magnificent boom of his plummet to the ground had alerted Jim who was baking a pizza downstairs.

“Hey Duke. You okay? Can I come in?” Jim’s muffled voice sounded worried through the door.

“No! Don’t come in I don’t.... Agh!”

It was as if the various Charlie Horses throughout his twisted body had networked into one contortion of blinding pain. He couldn’t stop screaming.

Jim flung the door open and gasped.

The doctors were baffled and intrigued by Dukes unfortunate condition. This was certainly not a covered topic in med school.

Weeks passed painfully for Duke, and he was tired and humiliated from becoming a spectacle in the medical world and was at his wits end with doctor after doctor visiting him and asking the same questions to no avail.

He tried to remember what had happened but the memory of his encounter with the anomalous worms was reduced to the remnants of an intense dream that quickly disappears upon waking.

All he remembered was that smell but again, couldn’t place what it could belonged to.

Duke thought he would never get out of the hospital. He also never thought that he would be bound to a wheelchair either.

It had been over a month bedridden at Kaiser.

Jim pushed Duke’s wheelchair into the lobby of their apartment building. He checked the mail for Duke and there were a few more letters to add to the stack that had collected during Duke’s time as an inpatient.

Duke went through the mail methodically, appreciating the mundane task more than ever before.

Three-quarters of the way through the stack, Duke noticed a thick envelope from the disability office.

The letter stated that Duke’s disability checks would stop coming and that he now owed the social security office thousands of dollars for faking a disability.

Several photos were xeroxed onto sheets of paper within the envelope. They were pictures of him doing pushups at his front door as well as pictures of him unloading the van at the Rose Bowl and finally, him loading the van at the office in Culver City.

The letter also stated that there is a 3 year prohibitory period before he would be able to apply for any other government assistance including food stamps, health care, etc.

Jim tried to help Duke by giving him hours at the office helping with preparations for events but Duke was unable to perform any of the tasks Jim gave to him.

As much as Duke had irritated Jim, Jim felt awful about his roommates Bizarre twist of fate and he had tears in his eyes when he broke the news to Duke that he was renting his room out on the first.

It seemed like in a blink of an eye, Duke was now living in a dormitory-style halfway house for the disabled.

He hadn’t noticed how much he had changed as a person during this horrific portion of his life, but he was no longer boastful and cocky at all. He had no energy or will to respond to the needs of his ego, and instead responded to the immediate needs of his body and mind.

Duke had also developed a broader understanding of himself and a keen awareness of his actions.

Where had things gone wrong? He thought.

His mind drifted to his childhood and for the first time in a decade or so, he allowed himself to think about his parents.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Duke’s father was a policeman who was greatly respected in the community.

His mother was a painter who never really made a substantial income.

Duke’s father was a tall and barrel-chested man, while his mother was very short and frail looking.

Duke’s father lamented and resented the fact that his only son had turned out to be skinny, short and lame. He blamed Duke’s mother’s weak genes and sometimes if his father had enough to drink, he would make her pay for it physically. Other time’s he took it out on Duke.

Duke was almost relieved when his mother told him that his father had been shot and killed while patrolling the beat. The life insurance policy paid out handsomely and if Dukes mother hadn’t had become a junkie, they would have been set for life. Duke’s mother got into a bad car wreck that was a drunken suicide attempt shortly after the passing of His mother. She was hospitalized for a few weeks and became addicted to painkillers.

Duke’s mother made a full recovery but despite this, she worked the system to receive disability benefits indefinitely.

The moment Duke turned 18 and his portion of his father's insurance payout was deposited into his bank account, Duke kissed his apathetic mother goodbye and headed to Hollywood seeking the approval that he never had from his parents, from the whole world now instead.

He blasted through his inheritance and had no concept of value or what earning money really felt like and how difficult it is and how fortunate he was to have had a decent amount of it.

As he lay in bed at the shelter, tears rolled down either cheekbone and his heart welled up in his throat. He thought of how his mother simply faded away from this world, like her life force was set to a dimmer switch, and it broke his heart. He didn't even know if she was alive or dead anymore.

For a while, Duke had given up.

He was going to die in that roach hotel.

He hadn't left his bed since he got there three days before. He refused to eat or even drink water. He didn't have to get up to go to the bathroom because of the various tubes attached to him that took care of those needs.

The only pleasure he had was picking out a new book or short story to read each day. He hadn't been much of a reader before but in his situation, it was the only release that kept him sane.

Duke had always thought that he was someone with no special talents though he had never attempted to create anything before.

He had a dream one evening and woke up and hand wrote a story that had come to him called

"The Little Seed."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Betty June loved all her flowers with all her heart and that love did not stop at the seeds. She knew that each one of the seeds had a special gift stored inside and she was overjoyed to see the gifts they gave each time one would grow.

In Betty's flower shop, it was considered cruel to keep seeds within pouches to sell to the customers. Instead, they were contained within clear jars, so they may gaze in wonder about the flower shop at all the plants that used to be little seeds just like they were.

Jeb was especially eager to grow as soon as possible. As far back as he could remember, he had always desired to become a rose. He was not like most other seeds in the jar who had not figured out what they wanted to become yet. Jeb wondered how the other seeds could have any doubt about what they should become in adulthood. Roses were beautiful and cherished as gifts of affection from lover to lover. They also had thorns which could prick those who we're not delicate enough and do not appreciate their beauty. The goal for Jeb was to be chosen as a flower that will be gifted to someone to show affection. Jeb considered that life would be easy for him, seeing as he already had the answers to his future, or at least an idea of what he will become.

One day a man came to Debbie's shop and purchased a handful of seeds from Jeb's jar. Jeb was one of the lucky ones to get picked. He squealed with joy the entire ride to his new home where he would turn into a beautiful Rose.

Jeb was given his own pot with rich soil. The other seeds from Jeb's jar were in the garden too; each having their own pot to grow in.

Jeb joined the conversation his neighbors were having around him and soon found himself bragging about how quickly he would turn into the most wonderful shade of red they had ever seen.

One neighbor expressed that he could not understand why Jeb wanted to be a rose so bad.

Another seed told Jeb that he doubted that anyone of them would turn into a rose at all, nor did they want to. They went on to say that it would be embarrassing having to deal with all the attention that roses generate.

A few weeks passed and one morning Jeb noticed that nearly all the other pots in the garden had budded. Little green leaves could be seen on the tops of all the pots surrounding Jeb. This worried him deeply. Why had he not started to grow yet? He was exhausted from trying so hard to grow each day. He would stay up at night later than the others and stare at the moon, hoping it would help him grow.

A few months passed and now it was clear to Jeb that the other seeds were turning into blackberry bushes. Every one of them had begun to produce their first berries.

Jeb was not a berry bush. He knew that. How could he possibly become something that did not even have a flower? Sure, they had thorns like roses, and that was sort-of appealing to Jeb, but

it was simply not what he wanted to be all in all.

A year passed and Jeb had not grown into anything.

He hadn't given up on becoming a rose and knew he never would. This thought scared him. If all he wanted to become was something that he could not be, then would he turn out to be nothing at all? He would even settle for becoming a blackberry bush. They were not adored

such as roses and no lover would ever give one as a gift, but they sort of looked like Roses and at this point it was about survival for Jeb.

Jeb pictured all the other flowers besides Rose's that he used to see at the flower shop. He tried with all his will to grow into a morning glory for a few days and then after that decided that he was to flower into a daffodil; that phase lasted for a few weeks. He even tried to talk to the bushes about his new identities as various flowers and pretended to have as much enthusiasm about being a lilac as he had shared about becoming a rose. The bushes ignored the tiny sound coming from their former peer and around that time, most of the bushes had resolved to flat out ignore Jeb when he spoke.

The man who's garden they lived in came out one day and picked the season's wealth of berries from the bushes around Jeb and the bushes were all very pleased that their fruits were being so thoroughly enjoyed.

Finally, the man came out to the garden again one day and looked down into Jeb's pot. He grabbed Jeb and placed him in a tiny jar and put the jar in his car. Jeb was nervous at first but soon ecstatic to be in Betty June's flower shop once again.

The man complained to Betty that this seed had not grown into a bush. Debbie exchanged Jeb for another seed. Jeb could not return to the jar with the other seeds, he knew that. He was too old and didn't grow. He was certain that he was to be thrown into the trash.

He gazed at the Roses that he grew up admiring within the flower shop and he wept.

Betty loved her seeds too much to just throw Jeb in the trash. She tried a few different

mixtures of soil and exposed Jeb to different amounts of lights each day. Jeb sat in his new pot and thought to himself that Debbie was sure to give up trying to make him grow, but sure enough, suddenly Jeb began to sprout little green leaves.

Within a month, Jeb was a full-grown Marigold.

Betty said to herself that he was the most beautiful Marigold she had ever grown.

A young man came into the shop shortly after Jeb had grown and asked for the most beautiful flower he could buy for his wife. Betty didn't need any time to decide which one to send the man home with. The man agreed with Betty that Jeb was certainly the most beautiful flower he had ever seen.

Chapter-Sixty-Nine

Duke contemplated on the correlation between hardship and creativity. Most of the world's greatest artists were and are tortured souls. This gave him a glimmer of hope that all his suffering would lead to more creativity and at least there was some direct reward for all the hell.

Duke mustered up enough motivation to force himself to do a single sit up. It was terribly painful. His back audibly cracked and there were knife-like pains in his shoulders and neck.

The next day, Duke did another sit up and found that he could actually do two of them this time.

This process went on until duke was doing a hundred a day.

Duke's midsection began to fill out and he was confident that it would now support his heavy upper body. Like Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, Duke placed one foot on the floor and then the other and stood on his own two feet. Duke's sleeping roommate woke to a loud crackle, like the sound of a stiff piece of wood split by an axe, followed by a shriek of vocalized intense pain.

Duke's lower spinal cord was sticking out of his back and he was face first on the floor, now unconscious.

Chapter Seventy

Now that Duke was paralyzed from the waist down, he would need special care for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, he had no money or insurance so there was still a dreadful fear of what will happen to him next. He had no certainties of the future and was free-falling into circumstances that he could not predict.

Despite having no insurance, he was taken in at the ER once more.

Just like his mother, he was soon addicted to the morphine drip and was now a crippled junkie. This was an ultimate defeat. He hated drugs and alcohol and swore them all off because of what his mother went through and now there he was, in the same situation, though his was somehow exponentially worse.

He managed to eke out another creative piece, despite his condition. It was a poem.

No more lies
Just this last one
How many more times
Can you come undone?

No more lies
I'm right where I should be
Just tell them the truth
Don't you want to be free?

No more lies
But for old times' sake
I'll tell you one more
And say that I'm okay

Stealing a glance
Skating on through
Whenever you look back
You only see you

It's hard to measure
The things we all do
But it ain't a contest
I just hope that I pull through

No more lies
There's more than seven sins
I been in and out
Of each one of them

Broke but not broken
Crooked at the hip
I've never walked a straight line
Or even dreamt of it

In the very thick of it all
And piano wire thin
He who lies is he who tries
And amongst the best of them

So I set my things down
And take a spam risk call
I bend an ear again
And I tell them it all

Fifty-one-fiftied
Fifty-one times
I'm becoming my mother
People tell me left and right

It feels good to say the truth
That I should have said in my youth
I've Settled scores

Got a big red door
Behind a picket fence

So no more lies here henceforth
You can put it all to rest
The Merchandise
Ain't worth the price
Of a porous Blow up bed

No more lies
I know it's all been all but said
The difference is
about this time
something I forget

Broke a champagne bottle
On the side of a boat
GPS says I'm here
But I still feel so remote.

From the bottom of the deck
I called a spade a club
Then I went all in
And built the jackpot up

I was having your arm
But wound up with your fist
Relying on a charm
That's growing like a cyst

No more lies
Stopped spinning yarn
There's a catch to each misstep
And People are catching on

Duke asked himself what it is about a poem that makes it any good. He realized that the answer to this question can be distilled down to a single adjective. "Honest" - good poetry, is honest.

For the first time, Duke didn't need anyone to validate his worth. He was contented with being the only one who ever reads his writings, it was reward enough that he was even able to write at all, both in the sense of having something to say, as well as having the use of his arms to physically put the words onto paper.

The food at the hospital was God awful but he was thankful for the food anyway as he could not feed himself or provide himself with his own nourishments. For some reason though, he was craving some applesauce and asked for it every day.

Finally, a nurse cheerfully brought in a tray of food and on that tray there was a single-serve applesauce. It was his favorite brand, "Motts" though he noticed that it was spelled with only one "t" and all the letters were capitalized.

The nurse left the room and Duke skipped the meal and went straight for the long awaited applesauce.
The container was surprisingly heavy.

"That smell again?" Duke thought.

Then he remembered it was the smell of silkworms. He also remembered his last interaction with the genie, MOTS.

Chapter Seventy-One

“Hey kiddo. Let’s make this quick, as we said before, we’re a busy-ass pile of worms.”

Duke tried to respond verbally but talking hurt just like anything else he was still able to do.

“Look Duke. I’m sorry I went so hard on you but you were the biggest douche ever before and now, I’d crack a few beers with you, you know... if you weren’t hooked up to several machines in a hospital and dying. Oh yeah, by the way, you’re dying.”

Suddenly Duke was back in his room at the apartment he shared with Jim. He was exactly one year in the past. His body was back to normal and he was not addicted to opiates any longer.

“Hey Duke!” The worms said pleasantly within his head.

“Just call me Dillan. That’s my real name. Duke is dead.”. Duke responded internally.

“Oh, thank God! That was so embarrassing for everyone.”

“God”? Duke wondered.

“Time to hit or stay. You can either make another wish or you can choose not to.

“I wish for humility.”

There was a heavy pause.

“Love it. Really, I do, only one thing...why wish for something that you already have. Why not just choose to not make another wish and simply retain the hardships that have made you so much better?

“Because I wish for humility but to forget the trauma that afforded being humble to me.”

MOTS was taken aback and paused for a moment and then said:

“Wisdom is trying to not be foolish, rather than trying to be clever. Don’t forget the moral of the story.”

“Moral of the story...MOTS!” Dillan exclaimed.

“Look at you and that big brain! You are the first person ever to get that. You are actually listening now instead of waiting for your chance to speak.”

“My mind is made. Please grant me my wish.”

Jim and Dillan were training a new employee how to bartend.

The new hire received an order for a vodka soda and the trainee asked the customer if they wanted sprite or coke for their cocktail.

Dillan, who now called himself Duke once again said in front of the customers:

“Oh my! How do you not know what’s in a vodka soda?”

Jim jumped in and nicely explained how to make the drink and the employee thanked Jim and called him boss.

“She never called me boss before”. Duke thought.

“I would sell my soul to be more like Jim.”

He wanted...no, he needed apple sauce...specifically Mott’s-brand apple sauce.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Jim had taken to sitting under trees in wooded areas and meditating.

Even though he was nearly in an absolute trance and his eyes were closed; The brightest light Jim had ever witnessed; brighter than the light that spewed from him when he was put into “the hole” by Shooshi and Takumat suddenly appeared, coupled with a deafening crash. It was so blinding that he saw it through his eyelids.

Just as the blast was cascading to Jim’s face, existence was paused.

Jim was disappointed, he smiled at the thought of being obliterated by a nuclear misled but his suffering was not quite over.

An angel of heaven came to Jim. He introduced himself as the Archangel Micheal.

“You’re almost done, Jim. You saw the old world destroyed and have lived millenniums since to see this one destroyed as well.”

“So let me die with it! Please Micheal, I am begging you.”

“Follow me, Jim.”

Jim knew better than to argue with an angel of God, so he took a brave step forward and suddenly he was on what felt to be an escalator, though he was unable to see it.

