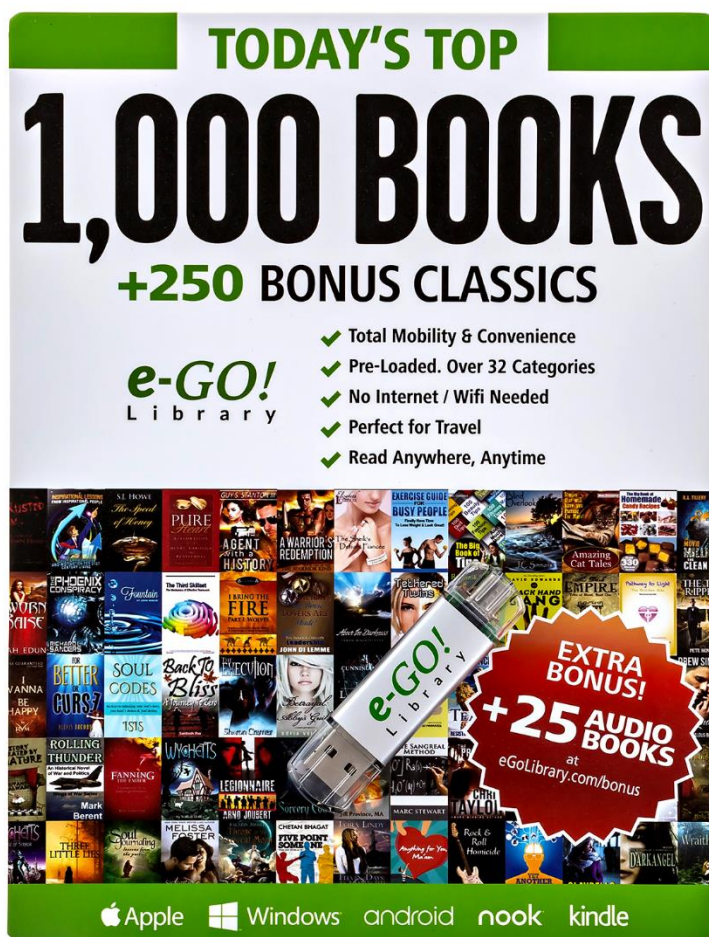


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Angels Against Virgins

Bryan Murphy

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Angels Against Virgins

Lee was dying to see the Angels. He was not the only one.

When the tall, thin teenager arrived outside the club's headquarters, the queue was already a long one. From the Bishop's Offices, it snaked along the lawn in front of the Anglo-Saxon castle that stood next to the Offices, down to the river, and along its banks to the High Street, from which the usual light traffic had been diverted. The pulsating mass of people gave the old town a human heartbeat.

A group of Sikh football supporters wearing turbans added variety to the Kentish scene, as did a few Raelists in the kind of outfit people back in the 20th Century imagined people today would be wearing, though they could not have foreseen how youngsters would change the colours and patterns at will. Ahead of Lee, a woman sported a black burqa. Lee appreciated the way its soft fabric clung to her body, especially when the queue moved forward. Most folk, however, wore standard Christian garb, reflecting the identity of a club sponsored by the Church of England. They might have been modelling for a Grant Wood painting like *American Gothic*, which Lee's class had studied. In the best tradition of provincial British teenagers, Lee loved that retro American look as much as fish and chips.

In the Spring sunshine, beside the sparkling river, nobody worried that the queue advanced slowly. Good humour hung in the air; a feeling of unity pervaded this group of people edging

toward a season ticket to a theatre of dreams, dreams they shared. Lee drifted into conversation with an elderly man who was just ahead of him.

“Do you reckon we’ll get tickets?”

“Should do. We’re quite well up in the queue, aren’t we? As long as they haven’t got anything on their files against us.”

“Me, I’m a regular Pioneer. Out of the stadium and straight into church. I’m clean.”

“I know it’s hard for you youngsters. In my day, there was more to do. More that was allowed.”

“Here, don’t talk like that. Walls have ears.”

“And rivers, too?” the old man chuckled. “Luckily, I’m too old for them to care much about what I think.”

With the ice broken, they indulged the usual banter about the football season that was coming to an end: nothing more on offer in the Conference than a decent mid-table finish by the Angels. The big hope for the club was the Anglo-Scottish Chalice. Against the odds, the club had reached the semi-finals, where a tough tie away to St. Mirren stood between them and an unprecedented appearance in the final itself, in Glasgow. It might not be a sell-out, but treading the turf at The Hallows would live in the memory forever.

“They go on about refs being biased in our favour,” the old-timer snorted. “Did you ever? Does the Almighty prefer Angels to Saints? Why us rather than St. Albans?”

“Impossible,” agreed Lee. “And that penalty they gave against us in the first round? There’s proof that we’re nobody’s pets!”

“Great save by Gabriel. What a boy!”

“Fantastic!”

Neither man mentioned that Gabriel had saved a re-taken kick. The first shot had gone in, but the referee had disallowed the goal for an infringement that he alone saw.

The religious renaissance in Britain had indeed been kind to teams with names like Tonbridge Angels. They suddenly found that referees made dodgy decisions in their favour; players yearned to don their colours; companies and institutions clamoured to sponsor them. Tonbridge Angels had moved up in the soccer world from the wilderness of the provincial Bishoprics, through the Flock South to claim a place in the National Conference. Being a small-town team, they could never realistically hope to make Council I or Council II, but one more promotion would take them into the Football Congregation – their historic, unfulfilled ambition throughout the 80 years of their existence – and within sight of the glittering prize of a place in the Football Synod.

It was Sunday afternoon. The people in the queue could have been at worship, or gainfully employed in some other way. What had brought all these good people out here was the chance to guarantee themselves a regular place in the new stadium that

was to open in August for the coming season. The old man's eyes glistened as he recounted the story Lee knew so well and loved both to hear and to tell. How the politicians had turned a blind eye as the graceful old Angel Hotel, which had given the town's soccer team its nickname, had been demolished. How the local authorities had forced the club out of the nearby Angel Ground so they could sell the land to a supermarket chain, and moved the club from its prime central location to a flood-prone field on the outskirts of town. How the team had come good during the Religious Renaissance. How the rise of God and the decline of Mammon had left the supermarket more than willing to make the site a gift to the Church. The Church had immediately set about demolishing all the commercial buildings, some of them in truth already abandoned, and then building a new Angel Stadium for services, revivals and soccer.

"Hallelujah! God is great!" the old man chanted, as he finished the history lesson. When he saw they were now near the head of the queue, he fell silent. Tension entered his face and etched its lines deeper. Not everyone who applied for a season ticket got one. There could be "philosophical" problems. When his turn came for the interview, he did not speak to Lee as he shuffled into the Bishop's Offices.

Five minutes later, the old man burst out clutching an Angels 2031-32 season ticket, threw himself at Lee and hugged him hard, intoning "God is great!" as though he meant it.

Lee prised himself free. "See you at the New Angel Ground," he said. The old man's joy failed to dispel Lee's own tension, now that he was so close.

"I'll be there, God willing. Look out for O'Murchu. What's your name, son?"

"Lee. Lee Soylent. Angels for ever!" He pushed his way through the door into the ticket office.

A grey-faced official in standard Christian clothing, plus dog-collar, pushed a form across the table towards him before Lee had a chance to sit down. "Name, age, address, marital status, job if any, religious affiliation, ID number, credit guarantor," the official intoned.

Lee sat down, took out his best antique pen, filled in the form, pushed it back across the table.

The man glanced down it. His grey face turned ashen.

"Religious affiliation!" he snapped. "You've missed out your religious affiliation!"

Silence filled the air.

"Heavens above! What is it?"

Lee hesitated.

"None."

The ashen face turned puce.

“Don’t fuck with me, son! If it says religious affiliation, you write in a religious affiliation, got it? Then we give you a season ticket. Maybe.”

He pushed the form back to Lee. Lee swallowed hard, then wrote in the blank space and slid the form back across the table. The die was cast. He felt empty. The red-faced man pored over the form. The colour first deepened, then drained from his face. There was sadness in it as he raised his head to stare at Lee.

“Atheist is not a religious affiliation.”

He sighed and rang an ornamental bell next to a pile of forms on his table. Two heavy-set men dressed like friars came into the room from a side door.

“Take this boy down to Registration. Tell them to persuade him to declare a religious affiliation.”

Lee was on his feet before they could lay their hands on him to haul him up, or do something else to him.

“Wherever you say.” His body might belong to God, but he wanted it in good shape for his ordeal.

The friars only roughed Lee up a little as they took him below. The few times they forced a cry of pain out of him, they giggled. Then one of them hit Lee hard on the back of his neck, and the world went black.

When Lee came to, he saw that he was in the presence of the Bishop’s Secretary. Like everyone else in the town, he knew that ‘secretary’ might be a euphemism, but her power was real enough.

Lee was in a wooden armchair, unrestrained. The two friars stood behind his shoulders. He could feel the heat of their glowers. Football fans and bureaucrats did not mix well. The secretary paced up and down in front of Lee, her eyes fixed on his application form, which she grasped in her strong hand.

“So, what challenge are we addressing at the present moment in time?”

“Calls itself an atheist,” said one of the friars. His face contorted.

“Impossible. No such thing. Category mistake. No atheists in foxholes. No foxholes like the Inquisitions. However, we must be positive. My mission, as we all know, is to realise the added value of a pre-trial conciliation resolution, optimising the benefits to our constituents.”

Lee did not understand what the Bishop’s Secretary meant. He could not think what to say. His neck hurt.

She continued to explain.

“Your completion of the request module is sub-standard in the graphological elaboration of one or more response nodules. You are pleased to be informed that external evaluation of the margin of error is open to the possibility of being forestalled by counter-deviancy operations. Such as crossing out ‘atheist’ and inserting ‘Church of England’.”

She paused, then trudged over to a computer that someone had linked to a projector.

Lee wondered how the woman had managed to seduce the Bishop. He thought she was a bit ugly for a lesbian. Nothing like the ones in the bootleg vids that he once used to watch. He felt a tinge of nostalgia. No, he had given up that rubbish for good. He would soon have the real thing, in quantity and quality beyond any teenager's wildest dreams. That would make all his suffering worthwhile.

The Secretary resumed her speech.

"Of course, in a personalised learning question and answer session, erroneous auto-definition is not necessarily sustainable beyond a short term timeframe."

She pressed a few keys, and the projector cast a series of pictures on to the wall in front of Lee. Torture scenes flashed before his eyes. He found he could not swallow. *Oh God.*

The Secretary was staring at him. A beatific smile appeared on her rough face.

"We have a vision," she intoned. "A world of believers. Different in belief, united in faith. Obviously, faith in Tonbridge Angels is not enough. All you need, everything you need, is a religion: simple, it is so simple. As you saw, we have access to an array of key modalities for promoting your allegiance to a preconfigured belief orientation scheme. Should you prove recalcitrant collaboration-wise, we shall initially outsource your realignment to the Law Enforcement Programme. Should their output prove inconsistent with the expected adjustment, it will be

desirable for what is left of your evidently fragile body to be reintegrated among us and placed at the disposal of the Inquisitions. After which its tenuous linkages to the world at large shall be, at best, subject to maintenance by an audience representing a set percentage of all viewers. I can't get clearer than that, so would you please tell me your religious affiliation?"

One of the friars shook Lee's shoulder roughly, to prompt him. Lee felt tears bubbling toward his eyes, but his training, his faith, cut in.

"Atheist," he answered. "I don't believe any of your rubbish. You're all fucking mad."

"That's not a word we use any more." The Secretary's tone was icy. "People are *different*, not *mad*."

"Well, I'm *different*, then," Lee shouted. "I'm an atheist! What's it matter? Why can't you leave me alone?" He already knew the answer.

The Bishop's Secretary shook her head.

"Young man, when you were born by God's grace into our society, you were made signatory by proxy to a social contract, the other partners in which made the unassailably sensible demand that, *inter alia* and *sine die*, you subscribe to a religion. For the purposes of the heretoforementioned contract, all religions assist you equally in complying with the conditions therein elaborated. You can invent your own damned religion if you want. Do it! Just give it a name. Write it on the form!"

Lee had no doubt that she was right. He would throw his life away by not calling himself a Buddhist or an Episcopalian or a Falungong adept or even a Leeite. But life was illusory, brutish and short. Moreover, the sight of an aroused woman, however plain, reminded him of the joys that awaited him on the other side.

“Watch my lips,” Lee said. “A-the-ist.”

After another spell of giggling, the friars put him in the back of a van and drove him down to the Prescott Stadium in Falmer, on the edge of Brighton. It was handily placed for an interrogation centre: near two universities.

The local soccer team had changed its name from Brighton and Hove Albion after Hove had become disreputable. Brighton had always been a party town, with adjoining Hove a retirement haven. Perhaps because of their contiguity, and a reasonable climate by British standards, Hove had started to attract hordes of “silver surfers” eager to party away their golden years along with their kids’ and grandkids’ inheritances. Church attendance had fallen. To forestall guilt by association, the club gave itself a makeover. It now called itself simply Brighton Alb, played in an all-white strip and changed its nickname from “Seagulls” to “Virgins”, a dubious reference to a local music label. It had secured the religious sponsor it was after, but no great luck: the Inquisitions evicted it from its shiny new stadium without a qualm when a rash of dissent brought a need for bigger interrogation

premises. Brighton Alb now shared a ground with St. Ives, in Cornwall.

Lee was dumped in one of the rooms the Inquisitions rented out to the Church's Law Enforcement Programme. Serial interrogation was an expensive business, and the rent was high. That was one of the bones of contention between the two institutions.

Lee sat in an ordinary chair, facing a seated Law Enforcement Programme officer, with a desk between them. He tried to breathe normally, to stay calm so that he would not be tricked into betraying himself. The cop's expression flickered between despair and boredom.

"You know, I'd much rather not hand you over to the Inquisitions. *You* are just a confused youth, and *they* are some of the meanest bastards on the face of this earth." He spat on the floor. Then he sighed. "But it's the price we pay for stability. All religions are equal, and each one has an equal right to vent its displeasure on someone who rejects religion outright. However young they are. Come on, son, just spit out one little lie, and live."

Lee knew that all religions were *not* equal. For thousands of years, people had believed that theirs was the one true religion. There could only be one true religion, and Lee knew it was his. This equality crap was absurd, a pathetic British fallacy. If his martyrdom would expose the fallacy, then he was ready, more than willing, to die to do so.

He forced the words out. "No religion is true."

"That wasn't the lie I had in mind," said the cop. "Just write the name of a religion in the box, sign the form, and you can go home. With a season ticket."

The offer almost worked. Lee could not contain his anguish at what he was going to miss.

"I tell you I'm an atheist," he sobbed.

"Yeah, and I'm the Bishop of Tonbridge. Really, this is what happens to a diocese when you appoint someone like her. Thirty years old! Stupid bitch! Far too young for all that responsibility."

The cop gazed sadly at Lee and waited for the young man's sobs to subside. When they had, he said softly, "This is suicide. You don't have to do it."

"What's wrong with suicide? Besides, it's not suicide." He faltered, his thoughts swirling. He thought he could see them in the air in front of him.

The older man's voice was soft "What is it then? Martyrdom?"

Lee did not know what to say.

The cop read his face. He sighed heavily.

"I see. You're one of those. A real heretic. Ready to die to damage the status quo. Let's not waste each other's time, then. I'll read you your rights. You have the right to choose the order in which the religions shall inquire as to your beliefs. You also have

the right to choose the background music. If the list inspires you to choose a name to write in the box, I shall be more than happy. You may do so until the first interrogation starts. Even then, you may recant at any time. Should you do so, and I sincerely advise it, we shall immediately rush in doctors who specialise in the best prayers for pain relief. The interrogation shall also cease if at least twenty-three per cent of a television audience with a share of fifteen per cent or more shall phone in to demand it. That has been known to happen. When you choose the order, then, balance the benefits of a quick end against the remote possibility of favourable audience intervention. But I advise you to recant. Preferably now."

Lee stayed silent. There were better things after life than football matches. There were better things than life. He was on his way to them.

The cop stood up and turned to four men in uniform hovering in the shadows behind him.

"Deliver this heretic to the Inquisitions!"

As they strode in unison towards Lee, the cop slumped into his seat and muttered, as if to himself, "Get the kid out of my sight."

Lee screamed as they embedded the miniature camera in his eye. It would give those watching at home the chance to see the interrogations from his point of view. This added a dimension to the meaning of 'show trial' and generated good audience figures.

That's enough, he thought. They'd break my will before they broke my body. No more!

Lee bit into the capsule. His church commander had given it to him when he volunteered. Metamorphine and cyanide concentrate flowed into his mouth. He swallowed. The metamorphine acted immediately. His mind floated free of his failing body. His last feeling was sadness at missing the Chalice match at St. Mirren, tempered by the hope that they'd let him watch it from Heaven, perhaps in the company of some of the Martyrs' Holy Virgins mmmmm. Now *that* was worth dying for.

Lee was not sure whether he was in Heaven or in Hell. He was in pain, but it was not excruciating. He opened his eyes and realised that he had normal, earthly vision, although his left eye was sore. He was in a bed. His left arm was immobilised by a cast, as was his right leg. He could feel bandages around his head, and he saw more around his chest.

The door opened. A female vision drifted into the white room. She wore a pure white uniform. When Lee reached out his to touch her thigh, she brushed it away and gave him a frosty look. An Angel, not a Virgin. His pain faded: metamorphine and finding himself in Heaven made a powerful combination.

When Lee next awoke, he was flabbergasted to see the old policeman who had consigned him to the Inquisitions sitting in a

chair beside his bed. Had he died, too? Only if people could smile after death.

“Disappointed, son?”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in one of the hospital rooms below the Bishop’s Offices. Known to the populace as the Torture Chambers. We encourage them to use their imaginations.”

Lee began to cry, but soon stopped. *He was still alive!* That was bad, but a relief in a way.

The policeman plucked a glass of water from Lee’s bedside table and helped him to drink it.

“Easy does it, son. Now, cast your mind back and see if you can find an explanation.”

“The poison didn’t work.”

“So it seems. And why would you say that was?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your church commander knows. He gave it to you.”

Lee was silent for a while. Then it hit him.

“He lied to me! How could he? What I did was for the glory of God!”

“Lee, you’re going to have to get used to a few truths. I’m going to tell you things you’ll find hard to believe, but I can assure you they are true.”

“Why should I believe you?” Everything was a web of deception.

“That’s a good question. You don’t have to believe me. No-one has to like the truth, or believe it, but I would like you to listen to it. I mean, it’s not as though you can go anywhere else just now, is it, son?”

Lee looked around him, as far as he was able. The cop was right. He could not try to give himself to God again right now.

“How is it possible that he lied to me? My own commander!”

“Well, one reason is that gods, and those people who command in their name, don’t really want you and I to kill ourselves. What would be in it for them?”

“Glory!”

“I think they’re beyond that. We certainly are, and we’re just mortals.”

“We? We who?” What was the man talking about?

“We who govern. We just want people to get along. Things are hard enough these days without people killing themselves for the sake of gods.”

“There is only *one* God!”

The old policeman did not seem to hear him.

“We started to let people pump themselves full of whatever religion caught their fancy; we just insisted they had one. We

forgot that religion has always been the perfect excuse to kill your neighbours. We're now trying to limit the consequences of that mistake. You can help us."

"Me? How can I help you? You make true believers sound like heretics!"

"We quite like heretics, in a way. They tend to do what they're told."

The nurse came back into the room carrying a syringe. It was time to top up Lee's metamorphine, or whatever it was.

"Sweet dreams," said the policeman. "I'm sorry if we hurt your eyeball when we put that ridiculous contraption over it. It was only your brain that imagined it going inside. Amazing what people will believe, isn't it? Anyway, we'll medicate it while you're under. With real medicine, not prayer." He stood up and left.

Lee slept deeply, woke, ate some bland food that another nurse brought, then slept fitfully. His dreams told him nothing. When he was awake, he thought. Eventually, he noticed the old man sitting beside him once more.

"Are you ready to help us?"

"What's in it for me?"

The old man's smile made him look younger.

"Now you're talking. Here's the deal."

"Deal?"

“You can’t suddenly reappear on the streets of Tonbridge. That would give the game away. We’ll relocate you to Scotland, give you a new identity, a proper education, a decent job. In return, you join a church and keep an eye on true believers for us.”

“You mean, infiltrate and report?”

“Exactly. Help us to nip intolerance in the bud.”

Lee was sorely tempted. Then a dreadful thought crossed his mind.

“What happened to that form I filled in. The incriminating one?”

The policeman gestured like a stage magician.

“It went up in a puff of smoke. Disappeared. These days, we burn forms, not people. For the sake of decorum, though, it would help if you were to fill in a new one, properly.”

Lee tried to put on a surly expression beneath the bandages.

“What’s the point of applying for a Tonbridge Angels season ticket if I’m going to be in Scotland?”

“It is a mere formality. We shall, however, give you a ticket to the Chalice final in Glasgow, though I’m sorry to tell you Tonbridge Angels will not be gracing The Hallows on that occasion. And we’ll give you a season ticket for whichever club in Scotland you end up supporting.”

“I’ll never give up the Angels!”

“You don’t have to. Just stay away from Tonbridge, or anywhere people might recognise you.”

Lee felt very tired. He closed his eyes. The left one did not hurt so much.

“All right, I’ll think about it.”

The next morning, Lee filled in all the forms they brought to him, in precisely the way they asked him to. After lunch, the old policeman came to collect them.

“When am I going to Scotland?”

“As soon as the Bishop deems you fit to travel. In any case, before the Chalice Final.”

He dug in an inside pocket and pulled out an envelope, which he opened to show Lee what was inside.

“As a sign of good faith, here’s your ticket for it. Executive suite. You won’t get one of these for every game at The Hallows, though.”

Lee was overwhelmed with gratitude, but tried not to show it.

The policeman placed the ticket on Lee’s bedside table, then looked at Lee.

“Oh, there’s something else for you.” He took another envelope from the same pocket and placed that, too, on the bedside table.

With an effort, Lee turned his head and read the name embossed on the envelope: *Hell Fire*. He felt sick.

“Don’t worry, Lee, the name’s just a joke. It’s a set of vouchers you can use in the best brothel we run in Glasgow. Might change your ideas about the sexual superiority of virgins. My treat, son.”

With that, the old policeman left Lee alone with his new life.

* * * * *

About the author:

Bryan Murphy travelled extensively as a teacher of English as a foreign language before settling in Italy, where he worked as a translator for a United Nations agency. He now concentrates on his own words.

Bryan Murphy's stories have gained an international following, and his poetry has appeared in places ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Brighton Evening Argus, as well as a multitude of literary magazines. His first novel, *Revolution Number One*, set in Portugal in the 1970s, is available from Amazon – take a look: **myBook.to/zin**

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Now enjoy Bryan Murphy's horror story, *Hellogram*, first published in *Fright Night III*: <http://bit.ly/hellogram>

Hellogram

I didn't know it was going to turn out like that. I mean, usually I just set things up so that it all runs smoothly. I had no inkling that the event in Tunbridge Wells would be any different.

We got there early, me and the boss – The Channel, as she's known in the business, like she's the only one. Do you know Tunbridge Wells? It's a pleasant little town, struggling between a time warp in the gentle hills of Kent and the encroaching modern world, a place where New Age and new money meet solid tradition and blind faith. Ideal for us.

The venue was a pub on the road to London: The Scrivener's Arms. It was next door to a school designed by the Brothers Grimm. We'd scouted for a room *there*, but the interiors were too modern: no atmosphere, whereas the pub had offered us a

smallish room with peculiar furnishings and creaky floorboards, just the job, as well as the electrical fittings I needed to lay out our gear just right.

The Channel usually brings back two or three of the Dear Departed in any one evening's work. Any more than that is too much of a strain. It stresses me out, too. This evening, though, she was serving just one punter: Jade Pankhurst, a retired advertising executive, we found out later, who'd come up with the cash for us to pipe a single tune all evening. She arrived with a retinue of a dozen men and women, presumably as well heeled as they were well dressed. Tammy, our MC, greeted them obsequiously, plied them with prosecco to calm them – of course I'd backed that up with Empatheeze™ in the incense – and got them seated where I'd worked out each of them would have a clear view.

I could see the standard array of emotions on their faces, from eager expectation to skepticism to bemusement: nothing The Channel's skill could not turn into wonder and belief.

Tammy took the microphone and got the ball rolling. She was quick: we don't bother with the bells and whistles of our

predecessors: they're seen as an affront to the intelligence
nowdays, and besides, we don't need them.

'My fellow Seekers, we all know why we are here. The
Channel will be with us very soon. Please greet her with silence.'

I doused the lights: a few aspects of the old rituals still help.
I'd sound-proofed the room and spiced up the resonance filters so
that when the audience's eyes adjusted to the darkness, they could
hear their breathing, which, I noted with pride, was rapidly
synchronising.

The Channel's empty chair was in front of the audience, of
course, with its back to the wall on their right. A minute passed.
Someone coughed. Without warning, The Channel appeared in
her chair, perched rather than seated, illuminated by her own
aura. Perfect. Her lined face radiated serenity. A smile played on
her lips. She turned to look directly at her client.

'Call him.'

Jade Pankhurst struggled to get the name out.

'Wayne.'

'Wayne!' The Channel echoed, adding force to the invocation.

Nothing happened.

The Channel repeated the name at twenty-second intervals.
Nothing happened. She looked at the whole audience.

'Together, please. Wayne!'

The audience's reaction harmonised until a rhythmic chant of 'Wayne!' emerged. After ninety seconds of this – I counted – The Channel's body flopped backwards in her chair. She raised her left arm, palm outwards.

'Thank you. He is near. Now you alone must call him, Ms Pankhurst.'

The tension in the woman's voice was palpable as she called the name of her Dear Departed.

A point of light appeared on the far wall in front of her. There was a collective intake of breath in the room.

The body of The Channel seemed to diminish as the point of light very slowly grew into a tiny figure, approaching as if from a great distance.

Jade Pankhurst was on her feet.

'Wayne! My love!'

The figure stopped, head bowed, then came on forward, limping, hobbling as though in pain.

'Wayne! What has happened to you?'

The bowed figure halted, then turned away.

'Stop! Wayne! Come to me!'

Wayne hesitated. The audience could now make out his clothing: the fashion of twenty years ago. He turned back and again hobbled in their direction, leaving a trail of small footprints. The audience stirred, as though it felt something was amiss. I realised they were right: this was an anomaly. The vibes were all wrong; the undercurrent of joy was absent.

The figure grew nearer and larger. We could see that Wayne's dark red clothes were drenched, wet enough to cling to his thin, crooked frame.

Wayne stopped. He and The Channel let out a loud moan at the same time. Wayne raised his head. Jade Pankhurst screamed. Wayne's face was a mass of suppurating scar tissue. Blood and pus filled his eye sockets. In the space where his mouth might have been, a severed tongue struggled to form words without the aid of lips or teeth.

'Eehhhl!' he bellowed.

The Channel writhed in her chair. Then she interpreted for the audience: 'Hell!'

'No!' Jade Pankhurst's scream pierced my brain and iced my blood. She screamed until she could scream no more and collapsed to the floor.

I brought the lights back on. Two people who were not in shock moved towards Ms Pankhurst, to help her. There was no trace of Wayne. A tall, thick-set young man moved toward The Channel. She was limp in the chair, unconscious but breathing. I reached her first, cradled her grey head in my arms and whispered to her gently, 'Come back to us. Please, come back to us.'

Before she stirred, I became aware of the hubbub behind me. The screams had brought in the bar staff, followed by several of the pub's regular patrons. A cacophony of recriminations, threats and counter-threats reminded me of the aftermath of traffic accidents in Naples. Fortunately for Tammy and I, an ambulance arrived before the verbal violence toward us could turn physical, and both Ms Pankhurst and The Channel were taken to the local hospital, with the poor lady's entourage in their wake. I knew that Tammy and I could collect our boss later, once the coast was clear.

I seethed inside as I explained to the pub's manager what The Channel had done, without, of course explaining *how* she, or rather we, had done it. After that, Tammy and I cleared up and cleared out: a taxi to our hotel. Tammy was as angry as I was, and she fizzed throughout that night, which is another reason why I remember it. The next morning, I got on the phone to the hospital, made sure Jade Pankhurst had been revived, nursed and discharged, then Tammy and I took another taxi through the never-ending small-town rush hour to collect our boss and bring her back. I would torture her, if I had to, to get an explanation.

She still looked drained and frail, as though she had aged overnight, when we found her, but she was dressed to leave the hospital.

'What the hell?'

'Precisely.' The Channel smiled weakly.

Tammy echoed my question. 'What the hell were you playing at?'

'Metaphysics, my dears. Have you noticed how no one believes in Hell any more? They cling to their Heavens, though. I just thought I'd even things up a tiny bit, if you see what I mean.

Inspire them to ethical behaviour with a bit of fear, remind them not to cherry-pick their religious beliefs, if they still have any. It might not have been nice, but I'm willing to bet you it was effective.'

I spluttered. 'But – but that's insane! You could have killed that poor woman!'

'Well, I didn't, did I? I didn't kill anyone: just played with them a little.'

'I think that's disgusting!'

'It was horrible,' Tammy put in. 'You frightened the life out of me! Thank goodness no children came.'

The Channel pouted like a teenager.

'Oh, come on, my ethical-wettical *accomplices*. Can't a girl have a little fun any more?'

Well, in the end it's not my job and not my responsibility. I just set the holograms up and run the programs. I don't write them: The Channel does that. I thought of erasing this particular one – I could manage that all right. But bookings went up, so I thought: *If it pulls 'em in like that, I might flog a copy of it to one of the Channel's competitors, together with the hologram specifics – make*

myself a load of money. But a nagging doubt at the back of my mind
stopped me from doing that.

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