

Not Quite Paradise

By:

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Shawn Clemens, alcoholic, homeless and petty thief, watched with envy as a man came out of a liquor store carrying a large bag in his arms. The man, apparently wealthy, entered his Cadillac and laid the liquor in the passenger seat. He had just started the car when his cell phone rang. Answering it, the man left his expensive Cadillac running and got out to walk around the parking lot while he talked.

Idiot! Shawn thought, laying down behind his current residence, a dumpster near the back door of a restaurant. *Probably not bright enough to talk on the phone and drive at the same...*

"Hey, buddy! Are you here again? I told you before, you can't sleep behind that dumpster! The garbage truck will run you over one of these days! Get outta here and go find a homeless shelter, or something!"

Shawn looked up at the owner of the restaurant with resignation in his eyes. *Hmmm, getting run over*, he mused, the wheels in his head spinning. *That might not be so bad... At least a hospital would be warm!* "And just where am I supposed to go? The shelters are all full. The gutter maybe?"

"I don't care. Just park it somewhere else! Now get outta here!"

The restaurant owner accented this with a light kick to Shawn's ribs.

"All right! I'm leaving! No need to get hostile about it!"

As Shawn left, he overheard the voice of the man talking on the phone and noticed he wasn't even watching his car. This got Shawn thinking. *You know . . . that Cadillac would make a nice place to sleep tonight. So what if I get caught tomorrow, or maybe even next week? What are they going to do, throw me in a nice warm jail cell?*

Taking a quick glance over at the man again to make sure he was still looking away, Shawn ran over to the Cadillac and jumped in. Within moments, he was screaming out of the parking lot and already eyeing the bag full of liquor.

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Shawn awoke from what he thought was a deep sleep to discover that he was in a totally unfamiliar environment, somewhere he knew he had never been before. Shaking his head to clear it, he tried to remember how he got to this strange place, where he had been the night before. The last thing he could remember, however, was driving that stolen Cadillac on some deserted country road . . . drunk out of his mind.

Somewhere outside the city limits of Jamestown, wasn't it? he wondered, rising from the bed and glancing around. *How much did I drink last night? And where am I now?*

Shawn took a good look around to see if he could get a clue as to his whereabouts. It looked like he was in some sort of hotel room, but one much more elaborate than anything he was used to. There was

expensive wooden furniture, a large crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, red roses in vases everywhere and soft organ music coming from somewhere that was just loud enough to hear. *This place is like a funeral home!* Having lived the life of a poverty stricken drunkard, the room smelled too much of luxury for Shawn's taste. He would have preferred waking up to empty beer bottles in his bed and wallpaper peeling from the walls. Over the years Shawn had become contemptuous towards luxury and to all those who could afford it.

Determined to leave this extravagant layout and find his way back to his friends on the street, Shawn walked over to the door just to find out it was locked from the outside.

"Hey! Anybody out there?" he yelled, hoping to grab the attention of anyone who might be on the other side. Seeing there were no other exits, not even a window, Shawn began beating on the door and screaming for assistance at the top of his lungs.

Suddenly, there was a voice from behind him.

"May I help you, sir?"

Startled, Shawn spun around to see an older gentleman standing in the center of the room. He was impeccably dressed in what appeared to be a tailor made, black suit. His manner suggested that of a servant of some sort, possibly a valet.

"How'd you get in here? And where am I?"

"I am always here, sir. My name is Mr. Beel and my purpose is to serve. As for where you are . . . well, let's just say you are where you belong."

"Knock off the 'where I belong' crap and just tell me! Where am I?"

"This is your new home, sir. Room Seventy-six."

Room Seventy-six? Then this is a hotel!

"Look, I want to check out of this dump. I want you to..." Shawn stopped when he noticed the strange look on the man's face.

Beel's expression was one of amusement, the kind of look a parent gives a child when it asks a totally innocent, but potentially embarrassing question. "I'm afraid that is impossible, sir."

"What do you mean 'impossible,' buddy? What's so damned difficult about checking out of a hotel?"

"We haven't had the chance to discuss this yet, sir, but the fact is . . . you are dead. This is the 'afterlife' as you might call it and this room is where you will spend eternity."

Dead? Me? No way! I'm alive . . . I can feel it!

"You're out of your mind, Beel! Now stop the games! Whoever put you up to this is going to pay! Trust me on that!"

"This is no game, sir. You may not remember this, but you had an accident while driving that stolen car. While under the influence of alcohol, you ran into another automobile, killing all its passengers."

Pieces of that scenario came flashing back into Shawn's mind. He *did* remember being awfully drunk, and remembered driving that Cadillac when he was too drunk to think straight. There was also a brilliant flash . . . then nothing afterwards until he woke up in this room.

Could it be true? Am I really dead?

Shawn asked, "So this is eternity, huh? A place where I can have anything I want?"

"Exactly, sir. My purpose is to serve. Anything you require will be granted and delivered to you. The only restriction is that you will

always remain in this room alone, with the exception of myself, of course."

Wanting to give Beel a small test to see if the story was true, Shawn made his first request. "Then the first thing I want is a bottle of your very best bourbon." Thinking that it was at least going to take a few minutes for Beel to find and bring back the bottle, Shawn was already thinking of what he would want next if the man's story turned out to be true. *Maybe I could use a...*

"Will there be anything else, sir?" Beel asked in an emotionless voice.

"Not right now. I'll decide after you bring the bourbon."

"On your bedside table, sir."

Turning slowly to where Beel was pointing, Shawn was astounded to see a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and a shot glass sitting on the table. *Was that there earlier? If so, I sure as heck didn't see it!*

"That wasn't there a minute ago, was it?" Shawn asked, already knowing what Beel's impassive reply would be. "How did you do that?"

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

Reality hit Shawn like a runaway train. From that moment on, he knew that he had died in that automobile accident and had somehow made it to Heaven.

* * *

After a time, Shawn found himself bored beyond belief. It was one thing to have everything a man could ask for, but it was quite

another not to have anyone to share it with. Something else was bothering him too . . . Beel was driving him nuts! That subservient attitude of his and that total lack of emotion were both grating to the nerves. The way Shawn was seeing it, he had nothing to look forward to but an eternity of loneliness. All he could do was sit in this room, trying to enjoy all the things he had asked Beel to bring.

And it was quite a collection. There were bottles of the finest bourbons and wines everywhere, most of them nearly empty. A refrigerator in the corner held better food than anything Shawn had ever eaten before. Hanging on the walls, were portraits of all the TV celebrities and pictures of all the places Shawn had grown to like. Bars of pure gold were stacked to make a set of end tables... And still Shawn found himself wanting.

Yeah, everything a man could want . . . just by asking. This is bull!

"Beel!"

"May I help you, sir?" the servant asked, once again materializing soundlessly in the center of the room.

By this time, Shawn was used to Beel appearing out of nowhere. So, he simply stated, "I want company. Maybe a woman. I remember what you said about remaining alone, but I need someone to talk to besides you. Anyone would do, just bring me someone."

"I'm afraid that is impossible, sir."

"What kind of place is this anyway? Whoever would have thought Heaven would be this boring . . . and have such dumb rules? I think I would've been happier in Hell!"

"Who said anything about this being Heaven, sir?"

"You mean this is... "

"That is correct, sir. This is Hell."

* * *

Shawn had no idea how much time had passed since he found out that he was in Hell instead of Heaven. It already felt as though it had been an eternity. He no longer felt like calling Beel for anything. *Why? Being dead, I don't need food, water... All I need is to somehow get outta this madhouse!*

"Beel!"

"May I help you, sir?" the man replied, once again appearing suddenly.

"Yeah. I want to ask a couple of questions. First, has anyone ever left here, or been allowed to return to the mortal world for another chance? And second, if anyone ever has, what are the odds of the same for me?"

Beel seemed to think about this for a few moments. Finally he replied, "There is a way, sir. If you are sure you really want it... "

"Anything would be better than this, Beel. Just get me outta here!"

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"Hey, buddy! Are you here again? I told you before, you can't sleep behind that dumpster! The garbage truck will run you over one of

these days! Get outta here and go find a homeless shelter, or something!"

Shawn didn't even bother to look up at the restaurant owner. Just the sound of the man's voice and his belligerent attitude were enough to tell Shawn where he was. *I'm home! I'm right back where I was before I stole that car! Okay, I'm homeless and poor again, but that's all right! I've got another chance!*

"Yes, SIR! I'll be happy to leave!" he replied, still not looking in the direction of the owner. Shawn was so happy that he was released from the depths of Hell, all he could do was marvel over his fantastic luck. Shawn was absolutely ecstatic over being back home with another chance to turn his life around. He knew being homeless, a drunk and a thief would all soon be things of his past. If Shawn was lucky enough to escape Hell, then he was going to make the best of it by making sure he wouldn't wind up there again. *Yeah, one time in Hell is enough for anybody!*

Assuming the restaurant owner had already gone back inside, Shawn rose from behind the dumpster and began walking away from the restaurant. He decided the first thing he should do is somehow find a job. *Any kind of job, just as long as it's good, honest work.*

As he walked through the parking lot Shawn noticed something very strange. It was the absence of people. Knowing that normally this area between the restaurant and liquor store was pretty busy this time of day, a knot began to form in Shawn's stomach. *Something is wrong here, he thought. Where is everybody? Besides the restaurant owner, who I never actually saw, the only person around at all is that guy who got out of his car to talk on the cell phone!*

While he was contemplating how this lack of people on an ordinarily busy street could possibly be explained, something else caught Shawn's attention. It was the guy talking on the cell telephone. *His voice! It sounds so familiar...*

Looking over to the man, Shawn tried to place exactly where he had heard that voice before. Stoic . . . totally emotionless. Suddenly, he remembered.

"Beel!"

Lowering the cell phone, the man looked over to Shawn and asked, "May I help you, sir?"

Shawn was nearly in shock. He just stood there staring at the man for a few seconds, unable to speak, unable even to think. "What are you doing here?" he was finally able to ask. "What are you doing on Earth?"

"Who said anything about this being Earth?" Beel asked, his voice deeper now, more contemptuous. "You are still in Hell, human, a place where there is no escape, no deliverance. And from now on, I believe it would be more appropriate if, instead of 'Beel,' you would address me by my full name."

"A-and that would be... ?"

"Beelzebub."

The End