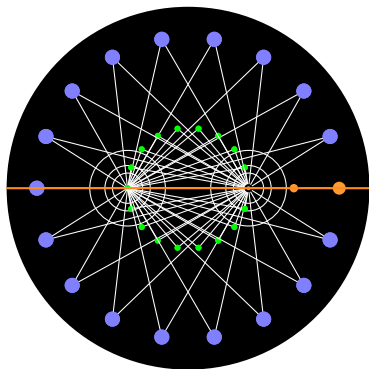


STARS
AND
STORIES

STARS AND STORIES



FRANK HUBENY

All Bible quotations come from the King James Version (1987 printing) as presented on Bible Gateway.

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To my family, Xiaoyan, Sophia and Isabel

PREFACE

THE motivations to write these one-page stories came from two sources.

One motivation was Denise Farley¹ who offered bloggers a challenge to write six sentence stories based on the word prompts she would provide. I posted stories with photographs on my blog² in response to these prompts. These were the original versions of most of the stories in this collection. I also added one, *Afterwards*, on page 76 as a conclusion to a short sequence of stories based on her prompts.

The other motivation was a submission call for stories of no more than one hundred words to be published in *Whispers and Echoes*³. Four of the stories in this collection, *Detour on the Merry-Go-Round*⁴, page 88, *Moon Song*⁵, page 90, *Spotting the Heretic*⁶, page 30,

¹<https://girlieontheedge1.wordpress.com/>

²<https://frankhubeny.blog/?s=six+sentence+story>

³<https://whispersandechoesmag.home.blog/>

⁴<https://whispersandechoesmag.home.blog/2022/06/17/detour-on-the-merry-go-round-frank-hubeny/>

⁵<https://whispersandechoesmag.home.blog/2021/02/12/moon-song-frank-hubeny/>

⁶<https://whispersandechoesmag.home.blog/2022/04/25/spotting-the-heretic-frank-hubeny/>

STARS AND STORIES

and *Unexpected Call*⁷, page 32, were originally published in this online journal. I am grateful to the editor, Sammi Cox, for selecting them.

The “stars” referred to in the title are my name for the illustrations throughout the book based on lines and circles. In the Appendix I listed the main tikZ code that I wrote to construct them.

None of the names refer to actual people. If they point to anyone, they point to myself and my preoccupations with certain themes. Some of them involve deliverance, not by means of psychology, self-help techniques or New Age religious practices, but by relying on the blood and the name of Jesus.

In this book you will encounter demonically influenced characters from a confused dragon to characters suffering from addictions. I have no intention of glorifying any of these. With deliverance, should it be accepted, comes peace that overflows into gratitude and praise that the miracle of deliverance happened at all.

Since this book is full of words may they be a blessing to you. If there is anything in this book that is not, may those words be forgotten.

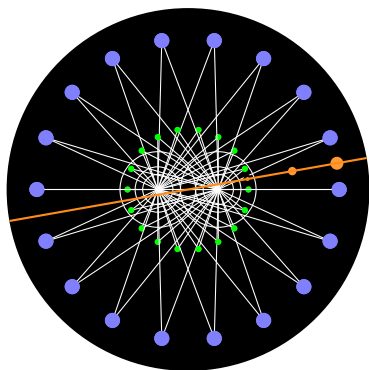
FRANK HUBENY

March 2023

⁷<https://whispersandechoesmag.home.blog/2020/11/02/unexpected-call-frank-hubeny/>

CHAPTER 1

NEIGHBORS

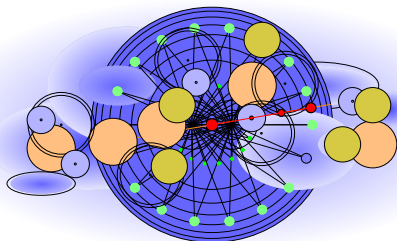


CARD HOUSE

ON A TABLE in his hotel room Simon began building a house of cards carefully laying each one next to or on another lest the structure fall showing the futility of his addiction. Meanwhile the full moon rose over the Sea of Galilee sparkling light on calm water.

After he used up all his cards he opened the door to the balcony to breathe in the cool air. He saw the moon, higher now but still beautiful, and he wondered why he wasted his time with those cards.

While Simon was wondering one card in the house he built gave up supporting the others. With a swoosh all of the cards lay flat on the table.



LEVITATION

THE MERELY ORDINARY smeared Shawn's view of reality like a greasy film making him discontent with what he saw. To brighten his spirits he tried all sorts of gimmicks. His current desperate attempt included taking a challenging course in mind over matter levitation where each student was required to either levitate or produce a creative alternative.

One student wrote an essay arguing how going on keto would lead to less matter for the mind to lift. Another drew a self-portrait entitled *If God Had Wanted Me to Levitate, He Would Have Made Me More Like This Hot Air Balloon*.

When it was all over each of the submitted stories, essays, songs and paintings received an *Award of Outstanding Excellence* and Shawn tried to decide which was worse: dealing with his unsatisfying view of reality or signing up for the second level of the course.

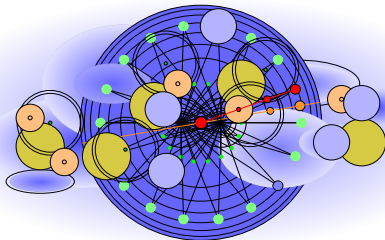
UNDESERVED MIRACLE

BELIEVING the best way to deal with someone was not to beat him over the head with a club Ian manipulated Silas with psychology. Silas preferred the club.

Over the years these two friends found lovely brides and got married raising children who had children until Ian died which made Silas wonder if he should have used the club less often. Without Ian's subliminal influence Silas felt the only thing left to do was grow old.

That was when an undeserved miracle gave Silas a wallop knocking some sense into him and letting him know he wasn't quite dead yet.

After that the grandchildren eagerly heard his tall tales. His own children listened as well. Even his wife respectfully responded to his loving touch which frankly shocked him but not as much as it pleased her like an answered prayer.



IRON BARS

THE ENTRANCE from the street was locked long ago still Steven waited for the iron bars to rust away.

Perhaps the dark spirits were right, though everyone knew they were liars, that one day the doorway would collapse letting the riffraff in. No one but Steven expected that would happen.

Steven remembered how that door swayed open allowing anyone ready to enter to do so. However, that was when he didn't have oil in his lamp. That was when his clothes were stained.

When the door shut he demanded management give him more time to get ready. He got so, ever so, demonically annoyed upon hearing a strange voice say, "I never knew you," that the iron bars had to be added for his own protection.

"And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." **Matthew 7:23**

FELICITY

EACH TIME Jerome tried to spark vitality into his life reality blew it out.

His dietitian suggested replacing stuff that went into his mouth with other stuff, but he didn't like that other stuff. Counselors suggested he forgive his wicked sister Felicity, but that wasn't going to happen. His anxiety over unlikely disasters refused to leave no matter how many shrinks he paid to worry about them.

Reality refused to repent of its evil ways. Over the years all it did was add to Jerome's baggage until he could not get a good night's sleep even after wicked Felicity preceded him in death.

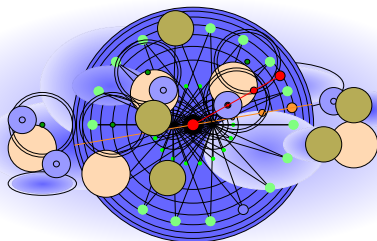
CRACKS IN THE CANVAS

MARTIN did not realize how messed up his world was until he saw for himself the cracks. Meanwhile Kate itemized the consequences he would have to face if he didn't get his head screwed on right.

Fifty years from now, perhaps, they'd wish they did things differently, but now, to stop the throbs of screaming, Martin and Kate let the demons win and split up.

Kate met a succession of shining knights. They were full of possibilities. Then their dragons (or hers) appeared.

Martin covered the canvas with snowy pigment to hide the cracks. He hoped it would also bury the sound of a voice coming from a source deeper than his own distracting addictions.



FOUNTAIN

DAVID WAS TOLD that the fall colors this year were particularly beautiful near the nature center and so he went there. He followed a trail leading from the picnic tables by the river.

He hadn't thought that he had ever been there before, a place where parents would take young children, but then the fountain of his memory opened. He recalled that there should be a loop up ahead of this trail leading back to the center and sure enough there it was with the remembered rustic rail fencing and signs. He also remembered his father and uncle slowly walking behind him while his mother and aunt were waiting for them with sandwiches and pie.

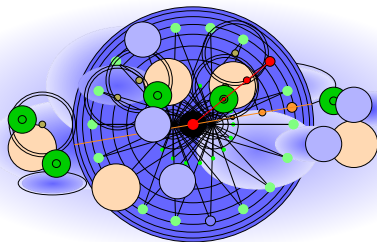
As David returned to the nature center, forgetting the foliage, a rush of regret led to repentance, something he should have expressed decades ago, for all of his idle words and rebellious deeds directed against his family. Leaving the center he felt a burden lift from his heart opening a future he had not imagined was even there before, but which had been waiting for him all this time.

LOST COMPANION

WHEN DEAN saw his friend, Bart, go through the narrow entrance way showing him how to get in if he would bow down a bit (actually quite a bit) Dean realized he could not fit at least not with all the baggage he had. After yelling at Bart to come back calling him an idiot for going through that hole in the wall and seeing its door close Dean gave up on his companion as lost.

Later he saw Bart through a bright window at the very wedding feast they were both originally planning to attend. He went back and found the door banging on it after he, Dean, of all good and worthy people was refused admission by the doorkeeper.

Dean flipped from indignation to gnashing of teeth, futile rebellions at this point. The fire burning inside him synchronized with the growing darkness as he uttered ineffective curses against those at the wedding feast, a feast he declared he wouldn't attend now if they paid him.



THE BLOOD

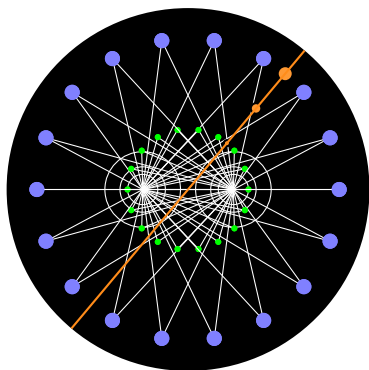
OLIVER pestered Theodore, a fellow member of the congregation, proclaiming him unregenerate, unworthy of heaven and heading down the highway to hell. Although he did not see himself in the witch and warlock business his words witlessly activated curses. If he had to excuse his behavior later on, without actually apologizing, he might say that his blood pressure was on the verge of exploding justifying him running his mouth leaving no unkindness unspoken.

Under his own state of demonic influence Theodore wondered if Oliver, who often went over the top, might this time be onto something admitting that he indeed was unworthy of heaven, but then who wasn't? Given a recent diagnosis of terminal kidney disease Theodore momentarily felt like a failure both in his present life and, should Oliver's prophecies by chance come true, the next.

Since he could think of nothing better Theodore wished Oliver the mercy of deliverance that he himself longed for saying, "If the blood of Jesus is not enough to cover me, may it at least cover you."

CHAPTER 2

BLISLISNIS

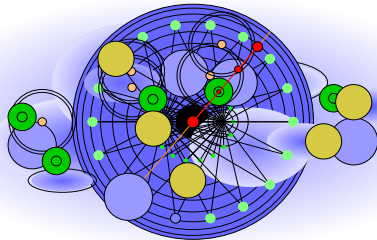


THE CHURCHYARD

ALTHOUGH impoverished Jeff found a ride out of Blislisnis to attend his mother's funeral held in the rural town that he left decades ago teased by vanity that never bore fruit. A former classmate carrying an oxygen tank with nasal tubing who came to offer his condolences surprised Jeff with how old he himself must now look as did other former companions who proudly told him of their grandchildren.

The pastor asked him if he would care to say a few words in memory of his mother. Standing near the casket with nothing to say he tried to form words, but the only thing people remembered him saying was "I'm sorry".

Friends of his mother offered Jeff a place to stay and work to do giving this prodigal son an opportunity to forget Blislisnis. At the grave site he prayed for the privilege of a few years of usefulness, of blessing not burden to others, before finding a spot of his own somewhere in that churchyard, out of the way perhaps, but hopefully not too far away from his family.



FLOATING GURU

“**T**HE Good Spirit knows all about you. He’s apt to forgive you, but you have to submit to him,” the ancient guru who lived only on air and was said to float about the temple high in the mountain above Blislisnis explained.

I was still curious. While seated at his feet I asked him, “And what about the Bad Spirit?”

“The Bad Spirit knows a good deal about you as well, but he’s only interested in what he can use as blackmail to keep your mouth shut.”

He did not seem to have anything more to reveal. I could not think of anything more to ask and so I lowered the volume of the sound of my breathing while I sat in a numbing state of mindlessness.

After the sun completely set he twisted his head unnaturally in my direction showing two horns extending from his head. I rose and backed away from him. I wished I never risked the arduous climb up this mountain. I wondered how I could find my way down in the dark.

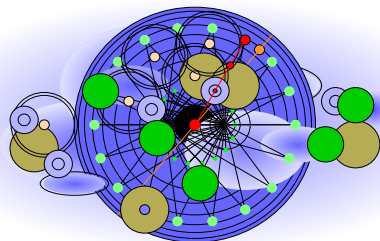
“In your present circumstances, boy, which of those spirits do you think it is now safer to serve?”

REPUTATION

PHIL finished replacing the faucet, turned on the water supply valves and got off the floor to try it out all while listening to a commercial promoting his hometown as the best little Babylon in the country.

“There’s sin aplenty in Blislisnis! We have everything from soul scorching addictions to petty titillations all at discount prices! Our wormy delights are the tastiest in the nation. Our deep caverns await you. Let us pump your darkened heart into a foolish frenzy.”

After turning the handles Phil watched the water leak from the drain pipe. While cleaning up the mess and fixing the leak he told me that my story made no sense and he rarely, if ever—no—he never *EVER* went to those sin arcades in Blislisnis.



POWER GRAB

WHEN WALTER got the city to install the voting machines at the Governor's request he beat all contenders by an overwhelming majority to become and then stay the Major of Blislisnis.

Knowing Walter had never even come close to winning anything before drove conspiracy theorists nuts.

However, the average citizen had other worries besides caring that Walter got richer and richer without explanation as the years went by. Although few admitted that they themselves voted for him they all assumed a large number of the electorate must have.

Talk went wild when Walter decided to run for Governor in a power-grab that would take out his former ally.

A week later the morning news reported that Walter had been arrested for voter fraud while technicians reconfigured the voting machines all of which convinced those nutty conspiracy theorists that the Governor would win re-election with more votes coming from Blislisnis than people living there (which he did).

DARK SPACELESSNESS

TRYING to find something impressive to say the guide told the group he was leading through the cave that some of the mineral deposits they were looking at were as old as the most ancient graves directly above them in Blislisnis, but none of them were impressed.

He then asked them if they ever experienced darkness blacker than a demon's heart before? Hearing only snorts of ridicule he waited till they were walking down a precarious set of metal stairs to turn off the lights without warning. Although the space in the cave collapsed abruptly onto their eyes the echoes of their screams convinced them it was still there.

When the guide let the light pop reality back into place with its expected ups and downs and rights and lefts the group plotted in whispers to get even, should they ever get out, by filing complaints to the proper authorities of Blislisnis. The guide knew their hearts, but he also knew there weren't enough truly live people left in the ghost town above them to care.

DANGLING KEY

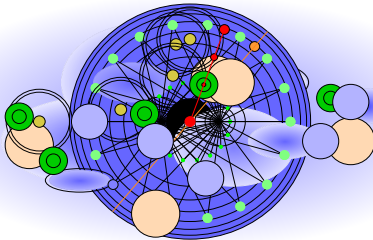
THE ONLY THING Gerald wanted was that key dangling from the neck of the sorceress who said as she offered him an apple squishing the worm popping its head from the core: “Take another bite”.

He tried to remember just what he was doing there. She charmed him with reason: “Gerald, you know you’re addicted. It’s time for your medication”.

To prove her point she unlocked his chains with the key to show him just how pathetically weak he had become. She loved watching her victims go through the agony of deciding what they really wanted: freedom or wormy delights.

Thankfully for Gerald the fog cleared in time for him to remember why he entered this godforsaken kingdom of enchantment in the first place. Unchained he rushed off to resume rescuing his wife kidnapped by Snakindegras, an ornery dragon he could not wait to get his hands on.

The witch still holding the apple screamed in the distance: “*Run, Snaky! Run!*”



DRAGON ITCH

GERALD outran Snaky, the dragon who kidnapped his wife, Miriam. He told Snaky to gently, very gently, open his mouth and set her down. After Snaky did she went to Gerald's side putting her hands to her hair to stroke it back in place wiping off the dragon slime.

They gave Snaky a piece of their minds: "*What has gotten into you?*"

Raising his chest with snorts of toothy pride and dripping dragon boogers, Snaky bellowed that he wanted to offer them as sacrifices to his master, Illuminatus Illuminati, Supreme Serpent for whom he'd gladly lay down his dragon bones and die.

As Gerald and Miriam laughed even Snaky blew some spooky grunts at his own expense. Pointing out that Snaky had rubbed his rear in what looked like dragon-itch poison ivy they figured it was time to leave before they started itching as well.

As they turned from the deluded rainbow kingdom of mischievous idiocy, ever troubling the visions of wayward youth and the dreams of the witless old, it faded exposing an underbelly of demented fantasies and wormy delights.

CREATION ORDER

GERALD ANSWERED the doorbell. He saw Snaky, a dragon from the Land of Wormy Delights who earlier had tried to kidnap his wife standing in front of him with a sheep-eating grin.

One of Snaky's mentors explained, "Regardless what we've addicted humans to think is true, demons have to take creation order seriously." That meant Snaky had to ask the husband's permission before running off with the wife.

So Snaky asked Gerald, "Can I borrow your wife as a sacrifice to my lord, Illuminatus Illuminati, Lucy Satanus, Supercilious Serpent Maximus, et cetera, et cetera?"

Gerald played along: "Will you bring her back in one piece?"

Although Snaky knew that lying was a great way to blow up the sanity supporting rational communication he feared that such an eruption right now might diminish the value of the blood sacrifice in some mysterious way only those who knew better could comprehend.

To be safe, to make sure the super serpent he served wouldn't kick his butt later, Snaky took the sheep out of his mouth to respond without mumbling, "No."

"Then, no. You can't borrow her," Gerald said.

"And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." Genesis 2:18

ITSY-BITSY BIT

MIRIAM'S mother, Jennifer, answered the doorbell to find a dragon from the Land of Wormy Delights disguised in a tailored suit asking her if he could borrow her daughter as a sacrifice.

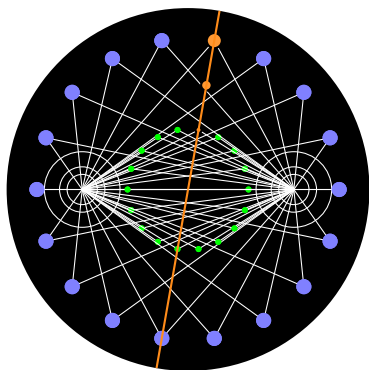
In a loud voice Jennifer called to Miriam, "There's a young man here who would like to borrow you as a sacrifice to his lord of the 33rd something-or-other (*degree*) degree lucywoosi (*Illuminatus*) illumination (*Illuminati*) latiwhati." (*palm slap*)

When Miriam heard the word "sacrifice" she grabbed a can of *Dra-Gone!* dragon repellent, the brand with the slogan *You'll never know when you'll never need it.* Rushing to protect her mother she shook the can to charge it for a direct strike onto Snaky's snout. As soon as Snaky saw the can he ran.

That stuff must really work, thought Jennifer, wondering if they might squirt just an itsy-bitsy bit of it as a test in the street in spite of a warning on the can to never *EVER* even think of doing something like that. After the two adventurers took deep breaths and Miriam gingerly touched the sprayer to release an itsy-bitsy bit they rushed back inside gagging, bolting the door and sealing the frame with duct tape while the neighborhood dogs went bananas.

CHAPTER 3

GROUCH

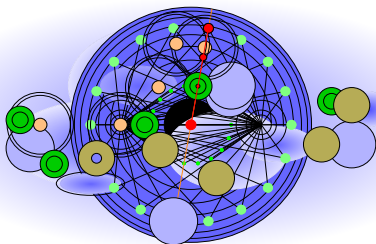


INANITIES

THE squirrel rushed to the other side of the tree along a branch far from Peter as he grouched his way down the path. There was no need for all this grumbling, but being thankful he could walk seemed like a waste of time since he had no trouble walking.

The sunrise was peaceful. The sea was calm, but he was entertaining enough demonic influences to have a whole Halloween party by himself.

Unless the slippery slope had its way Peter would tell those demons where to go, but he did so much enjoy a fit of righteousness. Like other inanities he tolerated they came to spoil the day under the pretense they were making it better.



PARTY

THOMAS longed to live in harmony with his neighbors, but none of them deserved it. They would rush off just as he was warming up to explain again what they were doing wrong. They reminded him of those rats in his yard scurrying from one neglected debris pile to another.

In the evening Thomas set his thoughts on the alleged news until he could stand it no longer and let his wagging tongue off its leash. At such breaking points he would rise, pace the floor, open his mouth and without a clear understanding of what his hardened heart was leading him to say curse the stale air of his living room.

Demons loved to party there.

REDEMPTION

TIMOTHY WAS DRIVING to a closing angry at the “idiot” going only 85 miles per hour in the fast lane. To pass the time he was wasting he went through a list of people he felt needed a piece of his mind giving the windshield a spirited round of abuse he wished those on the list could have heard.

In particular he scolded his sister who kept bugging him about repentance and “redemption”. When she’d say the Second Coming would be here any day now he’d remind her that she told him that very same thing forty years ago and so far nothing. Nothing’s happened.

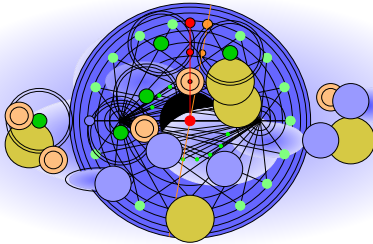
Enraged at the driver in front of him Timothy jerked his car from the fast lane to the middle lane just as another driver from the opposite side of the expressway accelerated without looking into the middle lane aiming for rapid deliverance in the fast lane. Neither knew what hit them as the traffic that was unfortunate enough to be following collided or braked to a stop.

TEST OF FORGIVENESS

GEORGE LOVED to stir-fry Steve's faults. Every now and then he force-fed Steve a taste. Steve himself had a kettle of righteousness in which he boiled every embarrassing detail he could recall, or invent, from George's past.

Although this provided some satisfaction for these two friends, it never satisfied them long enough to stop.

Since so far nothing happened neither expected anything to wear down as a result of their mischief. When it did both knew the other side needed to apologize though neither knew how he could bring himself to forgive the other one should the unlikely event of an apology happen.

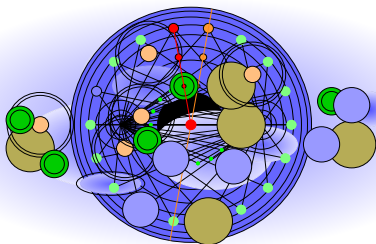


KNOT TYING

SCROOGE, the knot tier, saw threads come apart and got busy. Unfortunately the threads didn't like the way he thought best to tie them together so they slipped through even the toughest knot Scrooge knew how to tie.

Meanwhile a prophet passed by who told Scrooge he wasn't anointed to tie knots. Annoyed with the threads this further bit of abuse pushed Scrooge over the edge triggering him to ask the prophet what exactly does the word 'anointed' mean and what exactly does this prophet think Scrooge was supposed to be doing anyway instead of his own job tying knots?

Considering how the world was unraveling prophets were very busy. He had no time to waste giving Scrooge any further word than "Merry Christmas!"



EXPRESS SPECIAL

IN THE DINING CAR of the express train to hell Ryan motioned for the waiter. When the waiter arrived he complained about the quality of the food saying, “Any decent chef would know how to prepare steak and don’t forget I’m riding your train first class.”

Sitting across the aisle from Ryan was a woman who initiated an exuberant protest of his butchery of sentient life forms as soon as she heard him order the steak special. Pointing to her with his thumb Ryan asked the waiter, “And would you, please, do something about that?”

The waiter apologized. He said that he would personally scold the chef. However, he regretted that he could do nothing about Ryan’s fellow passenger since she also held a first class ticket. Not wanting to further alarm the woman the waiter bent down and whispered an assurance in Ryan’s ear that shortly after reaching their destination he would never see her again.

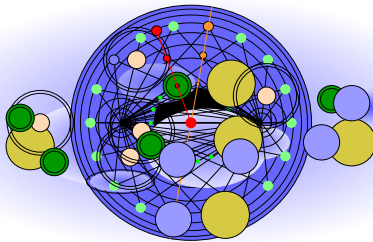
FAIR ENOUGH

JOHNNY DID not trust anyone. He knew they were a lot like himself. Knowing himself he knew better. He didn't think there was anything wrong with his own behavior because when dogs ate dogs the rats better watch out.

After all, wasn't it the point of the game, the purpose of life, to get more stuff than the other guy before one died? He just didn't like it when someone pulled a fast one on him and wasn't fair.

Surveying his wealth Johnny was proud of all he had been able to accumulate and hang onto before he died.

However, on the final day of his life, too weak to chase them off, he watched dogs fight over his treasure and rats clean up the crumbs.



DEAL

JEROME THOUGHT of all the good he could do if he made the deal.

“You really could do a lot of good with that money,” the lawyer reaffirmed offering him the contract.

With those trillions Jerome would be able to implement his plans for climate control by reflecting solar radiation back into space, stop genetic entropy by cloning engineered species and medically manipulate the population into an addicted state of happiness. As a side benefit he’d get to eliminate any needlessly unhappy terrorists who’d try to stop him.

“Just to make sure you understand,” the lawyer continued, “after fifty years my company will acquire your soul which you admit does not materially concern you. In exchange you will have enough resources and influence to save your planet in any way your heart desires.”

Years later after monkeying with the planet, Jerome’s top scientists explained to him how they might be able to remove the sun-reflecting micro mirrors released in Phase 1, but it would cost him more than he expected.

He then asked them, “Suppose I were fool enough to have sold my soul to the devil to hire guys like you, is there any way out of the contract other than the one you are now proposing and how much would that cost me?”

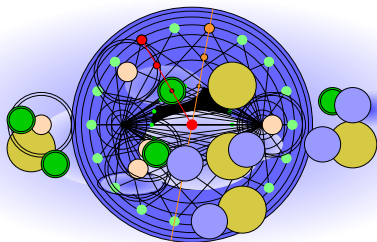
SPOTTING THE HERETIC

CLYDE knew enough theology to spot a heretic. He cursed them in capital letters. He oiled his words till they slipped through the nets of truth. He ridiculed without mercy. He wanted every heretic to feel just how hot hell would get.

During his massive heart attack Clyde heard a voice say, “What do you think you’ve been doing?”

“I’ve been serving You, Lord,” he responded, but he realized, much too late, that he had been serving only himself.

No one expected Clyde to recover anymore than they anticipated the joy his revived words would bring when he did.



CHICKEN STORY

BARRY had a handful of chickens on his tiny home in the woods which were a handful too many for his dog, Fred.

Things might have turned out differently for the birds had they not taunted Fred while he was chained to his dog house. They knew just how far his chain would reach and teased him until he lunged at them only to be snapped back by the chain.

Things also might have turned out differently, or at least gone on precariously, were it not for Barry taking Fred on walks far down the forest trail and then letting him off his chain to freely romp about in the trees.

Early before the sparkling dewdrops vanished Fred led Barry further down the forest trail than usual. Barry's hypnotic dreaming of what he would do if only he had a homestead as big as this beautiful woodland area popped like a forest fairy fantasy when he watched Fred run back to take care of those chickens.

UNEXPECTED CALL

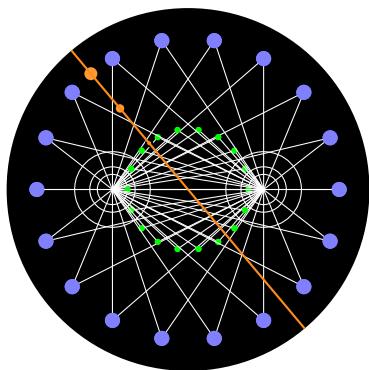
AFTER a decade Bill called. He reached a level of intoxication where lunacy required an audience. He also had a list of unforgivable people and wanted to go over it with me. Admittedly I've messed things up, plenty, but I was surprised to find my name on *his* list.

After an hour I told Bill I could hook him up with a good shrink or an exorcist, if he preferred. That worked. He hung up.

A week later I called him back. Bill was sober and I was tactful. We joked some before I brought up the exorcist.

CHAPTER 4

CURSE



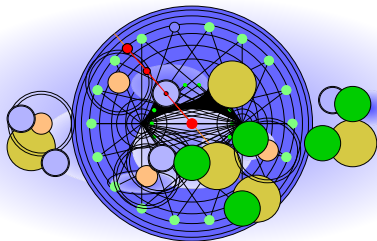
REAL ABILITIES

THE PSYCHIC SMILED. A wealthy couple was waiting and she intuited from her familiar spirits that their future looked promising. Perhaps she could use them to restore her own fortunes in the competitive occult arena where mediums and fortune tellers were readily available. She knew she could do this if she played her cards right.

When the tarot deck confirmed her intuition she predicted that the husband's public influence would increase and his wife would overcome infertility. However, after paying the minimal fee they declined further services. They doubted her abilities were real.

After the couple left the psychic realized that they must have thought that what they had just participated in was some innocent tourist adventure and so she cursed them. She'd show them just how real her abilities were.

A year later, unable to secure paying targets, she collapsed under her own misadventures. Bankruptcy was the least of her worries.



PROOF

JACK tried method after method to prove the Collatz conjecture, but every proof he came up with was flawed. He even studied defective proofs others came up with to see if there might be something he could salvage from them, but once he understood the methods he realized their authors weren't much smarter than he was.

When someone suggested that he try proving that the conjecture could not be proven he felt defeated knowing he had no idea how to even begin proving something like that.

The problem with the conjecture was that it was so easy to state, and so obviously true, that the path leading to a solution seemed right around the corner, but no one could turn that corner. Jack imagined if he ever could then fame would compensate for his diminished sense of self-worth.

The real problem was even if he did prove the conjecture true, or proved it false, or proved it could neither be proven true nor false, he would still need some other method, some transcendental rationale to grasp that hand he wasn't sure was even there reaching out to him to help him overcome his ever present sense of existential futility.

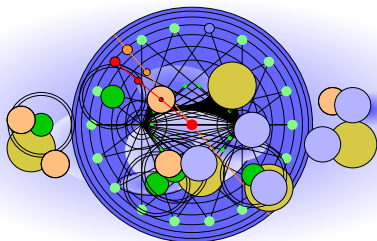
NEBULOUS

CONSIDERING HOW NEBULOUS his mind was only a few years ago Joel knew he was being led by someone beyond what he thought the word “beyond” meant.

Shamefully he admitted he didn’t deserve any of this insight, or help as he sometimes called it, having filled his life with vanity and trouble. Now all he was interested in were questions like *How can you feel at home in this world?*

When they heard that Joel disappeared most feared the hunters got him. The hunters got a lot of them.

Sometimes they found body parts, but so far nothing turned up that could be linked to Joel. This gave them hope that whoever or whatever he thought was on his side led him beyond the hell they were living in. They wished they could have gone along even if it meant dying to get there.



TRAIN

SIX people wearing their required masks for passenger safety boarded the train heading downtown while Sam watched. He remembered the days when the station was full of people, of which he would have been one, going to work. Today he was waiting for the stopped train to move on so he could cross the tracks and proceed on his walk through the park.

Without realizing it Sam was near the center of a pentagram formed by two points in the station, two on the train and one across the tracks.

The media reports, carefully written days before the explosions occurred, said that a terrorist group had assumed responsibility but luckily an unusually high number of regular commuters had taken that specific day off. Sam would have described the event as his ticket home if he had known although if he had known he would not have taken his walk there that morning.

TEARS WIPED AWAY

JAMES devised a dark tale where the deep state released bioweapons which led to genetic degradation which led to starvation which led to random violence from terrorist groups such as the Retaliators which led to dead bodies piled upon dead bodies.

That was when something snapped inside him making him explore other plots.

He came up with a new character, Tommy, a quite likeable bunny. He wrote that Tommy's rabbit hole was near Farmer John's vegetable patch. He described Farmer John smiling at Tommy while they lunched together on carrots.

Being pleased with that new plot, James wrote his final words before the Retaliators arrived, "Their tears were wiped away and all the earth lived happily ever after."

"3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." Revelation 21:3-4

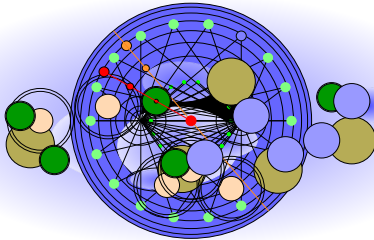
AUTHENTICATION

ONCE AGAIN Colin realized he messed things up. He got a grip on reality to make his way back through deceitful waves to the sanity of shore.

Then he saw an arm extend toward him with a voice saying, “Take my hand!”

That can't be real, Colin thought. The one reaching out to him roughed up the waves a bit more figuring Colin wasn't desperate enough.

Colin valued assistance, but he was under orders not to bend his knee to just anyone and that hand hadn't properly authenticated itself.

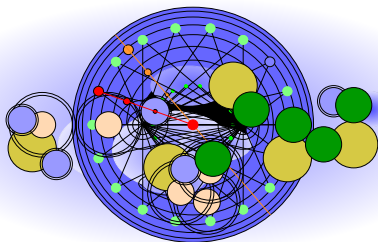


TERRIFYING DREAMS

ANTHONY'S PRIDE returned as he began drinking the last can of his last six-pack. He was ready to point out every nit that needed picking from the members of a social networking community he frequented.

In righteous rivalry he led his own charge condemning the "morons" to fiery hells that he himself didn't believe in. They knew he was drunk.

When he was tired his demons, unforgiving accusers themselves, led Anthony to bed one last time. As a reward for his long service they prepared particularly terrifying dreams.



TAKEN QUEEN

WITH less than a quarter of his pieces remaining John was trapped. He moved his queen next to Tom's king tempting Tom to capture her.

"I could win this game right now," Tom announced as he took the bait removing John's queen from the board and giving the plastic piece a messy kiss, "but I'll first take your queen just like I took your Rachel long ago."

John moved a pawn to Tom's edge of the board with a diagonally unobstructed view aimed right at Tom's newly exposed king with the right to exchange that pawn for any piece he wanted. John replaced the pawn with a bishop as nursing home aides entered to wheel them back to their respective rooms.

"Why didn't you get another queen, idiot?"

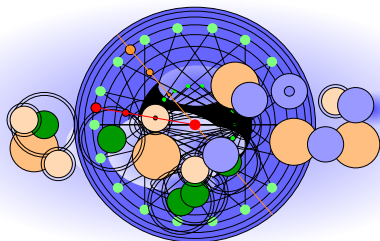
"I had one until you took her away, but I only needed a bishop to checkmate you."

FRESH BRAINS

WE DIDN'T care that Jim was short on brains. We all liked him.

However, he must have taken the wrong turn in some alley. He stopped fooling around with us when we chased stuff that didn't want to be chased. He even refused to help us tip dumpsters.

We couldn't figure out what was wrong with him, but we all knew he was a certified idiot when he finally told us he had smartened up.



RANDOM GUILT

CONNER KNEW that random stuff wasn't all his fault. Some of it was bad luck. And as for the rest, he intended to get even with Mark and his girlfriend, Florence, for dodging their involvement by witnessing against him.

The judge sentenced him to thirty years saying that at Conner's age that would give him a good chunk, if not the whole chunk, of the rest of his life to think it over. It would also give the community respite from his stony heart.

Two decades later Conner heard that first Mark and later Florence died from natural causes.

In his own last years he forgot about luck. He wished he could have seen either of them again to tell them how sorry he was for wasting their lives.

EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

PEOPLE faulted Blake. He couldn't stop starting and stopping stuff. He popped in here and then suddenly there. He jabbered about this and then that longer than most listeners, they in particular, could tolerate.

All this running around focused his waking hours on optimizing the quantity of funds he could turn over to questionable, but good enough, causes with little time left over to deal with his own problems. As his future turned into his past and the measurable score of his good deeds exploded he anticipated that there would be an endless supply of more of the same in spite of knowing that entropy makes a mess of most things.

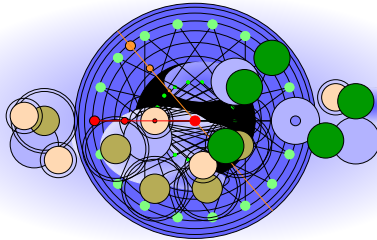
Reality intervened one day like a waiter bringing a tab he didn't know he started. Trying to find something of value with which to pay the bill he was surprised to learn that the busyness of his effective altruism provided little, if any, positive value in his present situation to keep the demonic darkness from coming in and taking him out.

GUIDE

As a popular guide Steve told his clientele what they wanted to hear about the history of the island, its famous sandy beaches, its monarchy (that is, dictatorship), and the concentration camps. Things went well for him until he himself stopped believing the narratives he told others.

His doubts began when construction workers discovered mass graves followed by the leaked results of forensic analyses. His suspicions were confirmed when the graves suddenly disappeared. Every major news outlet reported over and over again that the graves never existed nor had any “forensic analysis” ever been conducted implicating the royal house.

Since he was merely a tourist guide Steve felt safe including his suspicions, albeit in a hushed tone, during the narrations he gave of the island figuring he ought to slip the truth through the cracks if he could. When he lost clientele he suspected he crossed someone’s line in the shifty island sand, but that no longer bothered him.



PESKY CRITTERS

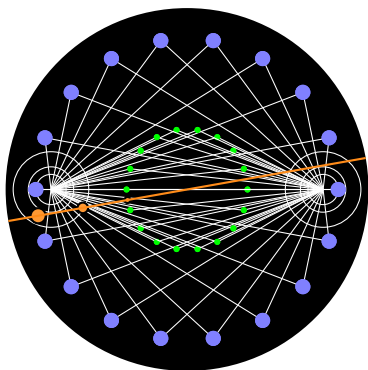
DANIEL had no problem believing in demons especially since members of his family, including himself, were messed up like lines of broken meter trashing a melodious poem. What didn't sink in was the thought that the salvation which the street preacher taught included deliverance from those pesky critters.

Anyway Daniel's life bounced like a yoyo, like an echo, like his day-trading portfolio from one curse to the next. Often he would confuse a curse for a blessing only to find out that he had fallen back into the rabbit hole of his addictions.

Things stayed pretty much the same until a miracle occurred. Like receiving a nourishing sandwich rather than spare change he might trade for stimulations he did not need all Daniel had to do was reach out, take and eat which he finally did.

CHAPTER 5

RETOLD



BETHLEHEM

FEAR BE IT from Joseph to doubt the angel even when he felt overwhelmed. Every step he took leading the way carried them along with a peaceful joy.

Mary went into labor as expected, but there was no room in the inn. So, they stayed in their tent which they built for the holy feast. She gave birth under the stars wrapping her child in cloths much as her ancestors had done while wandering in the desert.

Shortly after the birth shepherds found the child and told everyone about the angel who told them where to look and how the horizon filled with heavenly praise.

“10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

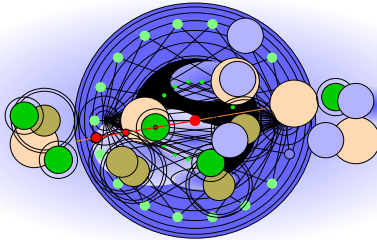
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Luke 2:10-14

REMNANT

THE DOOR of the boat was shut from the outside. The fountains of the deep opened and the rains began. The earth quaked sending tsunamis over the land in wave after devastating wave burying living creatures successively in higher and higher mucky graves. Shortly there was no place to hide as the entire surface of the earth became a sea.

Then the mountains rose. The valleys fell. The waters retreated exposing higher ground while eroding canyons into it as they formed the oceans. Those waters remain there to this day.

The remnant left the boat.



“6 Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains.

7 At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away.

8 They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them.

9 Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.” Psalm 104:6-9

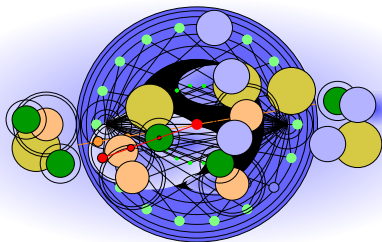
THE SPIRIT OF GOD

SAUL CONSENTED to the stoning of Stephen outside of Jerusalem. Little did he realize that years later he himself would be stoned in Lystra, stoned to death so his enemies thought. And perhaps it was to death, but after being dragged out of town and left for dead by men who supposedly knew what they were doing he stood up.

But all that would come later.

Now, on his way to Damascus, Saul once again was up to no good. This time he was stopped. He fell like one overwhelmed by the Spirit of God.

When he rose he could not see. When his blindness left so too did his powerful delusion.



*“3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Acts 9:3-4*

OBEDY AND DISOBEY

REBEKAH told Isaac of the prophecy she received that Jacob, the second-born of her twins, her favorite, was to receive the blessing. However, as the boys matured Esau, the first-born and Isaac's favorite, seemed to Isaac better able to carry any burdens his blessing might require.

With failing eyesight Isaac decided to give the blessing to Esau rather than Jacob without telling Rebekah. She overheard his plan and improvised one of her own. She prepared the meal Isaac requested from Esau, covered Jacob's arms with fur to imitate Esau's hairy skin and dressed him in Esau's clothing to deceive her husband. Not even Jacob thought her plan would work, but it did.

Afterwards Isaac remembered the prophecy and reaffirmed the blessing he gave to Jacob.

Esau, on the other hand, wanted revenge. Rebekah convinced Isaac to send Jacob off on the pretext of finding a suitable wife, not one like Esau found, knowing she might never see Jacob again.

"43 Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran;

44 And tarry with him a few days, until thy brother's fury turn away;

45 Until thy brother's anger turn away from thee, and he forget that which thou hast done to him: then I will send, and fetch thee from thence: why should I be deprived also of you both in one day?" **Genesis 27:43-45**

GENERATIONAL

SEEMINGLY FARAWAY in time and space Athaliah was the daughter of Jezebel and King Ahab and the wife of Jehoram son of King Jehoshaphat of the southern hill country.

She observed how her mother handled the problem of Naboth when he refused to trade his vineyard to please her father. In her husband's name Jezebel directed two false witnesses to accuse Naboth of cursing God and king resulting in him being stoned to death. As her father took possession of the vineyard like windfall from the forbidden tree in the middle of the garden a prophet gave Ahab a piece of God's mind.

That her mother got away with it bewitched Athaliah into thinking she could as well. Besides, she had the opportunity to take what she wanted.

She was ready to usurp the reign of the southern hill country.

"10 But when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the seed royal of the house of Judah." 2 Chronicles 22:10

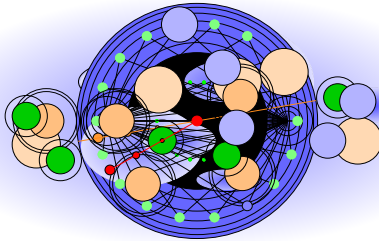
PATH

ONE PATH looked rough and narrow. The other one was wide.

He told me, "Take the narrow way."

I told Him, "Look, the other's fine!"

My mind persisted: *Don't obey.* But what do minds know anyway?



"13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." **Matthew 7:13-14**

HERETIC HUNTERS

THE HERETIC HUNTERS saw the man lowered from the roof to the Master's feet. The simmering fluid of righteousness popped its cork when they heard the Master say, "Your sins are forgiven."

"Just who does this demon possessed guy think he is?"

The Master waited for them to catch their breaths. The man waited also since he couldn't do much of anything. He needed to hear the words, spoken with the proper authority, "*Arise, pick up your bed and walk*".

"18 And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him.

19 And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus.

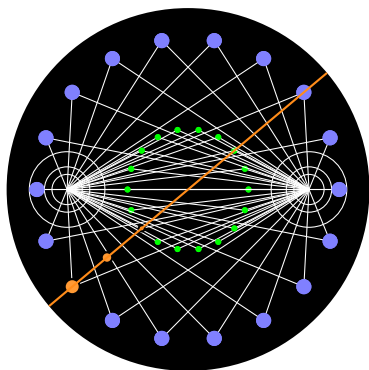
20 And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee.

21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?

22 But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?

23 Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk?" **Luke 5:18-23**

CHAPTER 6
HELEN



PLow

BACK IN FREEZING Chicago as snow plows uncovered a buried street, Timothy learned at Headquarters that the raid in Miami killed his partner Bill. He delivered the zip file and reported the compromised safe house.

Timothy hoped Bill's raid was successful. He knew that any intel he'd receive would be psyops. Still, scraps of it might be true. From his back door to their communication system he identified and then disabled the assassin they hoped would take him out once he left the building.

Walking down the street with fresh snow falling Timothy smiled to think that those whiz kids at Headquarters wouldn't believe how few bits he had to flip in that zip file to plow away their covers and expose them.

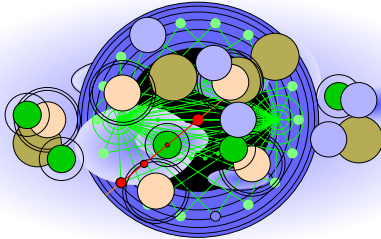
RUNNING RATS

HEADQUARTERS claimed Bill was killed in the raid.

“They don’t even know who Bill is,” Helen said. “The agents we arrested in that kaleidoscope of tunnels made plea bargains before Headquarters heard anything of it.”

“I wonder when the rats will start running.” Timothy added, “I hope they think it’s safe to implement the spider protocol.”

An hour later Helen smiled, “We’ve got them.”



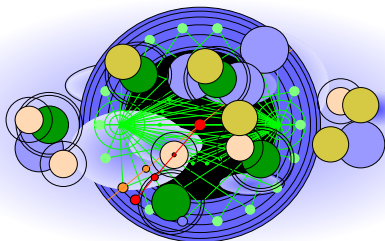
STRONGER ARMS

THE CORRUPTION went deeper than Timothy imagined. The interrogations after the fall of Headquarters led to the whereabouts of additional missing people, mostly children, more than he had anticipated.

“Do you think we’ve found all of them?” Helen asked.

Helen first met Timothy when she was investigating the kidnapping of his own daughter a decade earlier. During their month-long search his prayers left him convinced that his daughter had always been in stronger arms than his own even before they found the body.

As to whether they located all of the victims, Timothy said, “I hope there will never be any more.”



THE ARREST

WHEN HEADQUARTERS COLLAPSED the agencies covered their tracks. They assigned men to take out Bill and Timothy in a bar. Upon entering the bar the men noted the location of the barmaid and a quarrelling couple along with their targets.

In more civilized times opponents, in theory, would face each other on dusty streets with cemeteries in full view where one or both would be forced to rest in peace while the decent folk got out of the way.

Today when the two assassins with bitcoins dancing in their heads drew their weapons the quarrelling couple stopped quarrelling and, in spite of shots being fired, arrested these valuable sources of information on this side of eternity.

After the couple escorted the hit men out of the bar Timothy permitted the owner with his clientele back in. Although Bill tried to convince them, scoffers all, that they were filming an action movie, it was only when the barmaid handed the owner and each of his customers envelopes generously stuffed with cold, hard, fiat cash that everyone was happy.

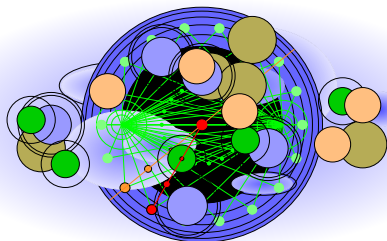
THE RELEASE

AS EXPECTED the judge released the assassins back onto the streets. Complaints were filed against the officers who made the arrests, but no one at the station knew who those officers were. Not even the medics in the ambulance who received the assassins with all the paperwork neatly printed out could identify them.

The surgeon who removed the bullets from their arms didn't notice the tracking devices that the shots were intended to deliver. Once the assassins were released Helen began logging their journey.

Watching her monitor, Helen remarked, "Which pill did these guys take?"

"They're dumb enough to have taken both."



FILTER

THE email filter kept Rafael's messages, rare though they be from this bouncer and saint, at the top of Bill's inbox until read. Today Rafael sent the code words: "traffic second tunnel east". That was all Helen needed to dispatch agents.

Helen never met Rafael. Bill often did when passing the revival tent where Rafael worked the streets explaining once to Rafael that he was suffering from the lingering side-effects of a flu. Hearing this as a call for help rather than a lame excuse not to go into the tent, Rafael gripped Bill's shoulder with a hand that could have dropped a terrorist praying that, through Jesus, "this illness leave my brother".

That was twenty years ago. Bill had since relocated, but Rafael kept in contact through messages uncanny in their accuracy. That flu didn't dare return.

SERVICE

AS RAFAEL finished texting Bill the message, “traffic second tunnel east”, his daughter, Celia, arrived. She sat down at the outdoor cafe table and, as he expected she would, began berating him.

Listening to her reminded him of the disrespectful way he treated his own father decades ago. Given that experience he knew there would be no service he could perform to make things right with her. Suddenly Celia rose to leave and hissed, “Who do you think you are anyway?”

Sensing this as his last opportunity Rafael quickly said when she rushed off, “Don’t trust that guy you’re with.”

When Celia reached her apartment she remained outside pacing the sidewalk trying to imagine which deceiving friend betrayed her by telling her dad about Derek, how it was done and how she would get even.

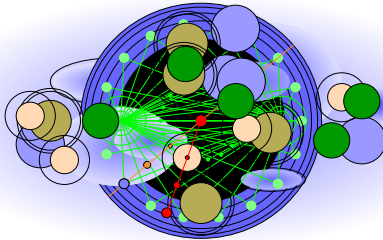
Rafael slowly sipped his coffee hoping she might return, wondering if it would be a good idea to try to meet her again and then stood up, put his empty cup in the dirty dish container and left.

GEAR

SOME AGENTS went with Timothy to the east parking area near the second tunnel after getting Helen's dispatch. There they found a suspicious van and arrested the driver upon hearing screams from the back. Other fully armed agents stood ready anticipating a hostile response.

When the shootout started Timothy dropped behind a car with the girl he was moving from the van shielding her with his body and the protective gear he wore.

A few days later Timothy saw her reunited with her parents. She pointed him out to her family. In broken English they thanked him. The girl's mother sealed it with an uncontrolled flow of tears, holy water: God be praised.



HOME

SOON after the murder of his daughter, Timothy's wife died in an accident brought on by the distraction of sorrow. Timothy sold their house and moved to a basement apartment of a building owned by the church to house members of their fellowship needing a place to live. Much of the money Timothy earned he donated to this church and they shielded him in the basement.

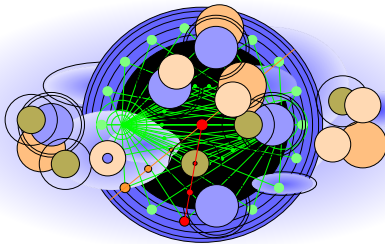
Although he didn't feel at home anywhere without his wife and daughter, this was where he returned after Helen's dispatch to the tunnel and the successful extraction of the trafficked children from the van.

He would be in that apartment for the next five years until the church, knowing his skills, asked if he could train prospective chaplains in defensive operations in a violent land. After being there a couple of years, one autumn day the group they were defending was attacked, and though they repelled the attackers, Timothy was hit and he found his way home.

WALK

CELIA's boyfriend, Derek, with two of his friends removed his things from her apartment while she met with her father, Rafael, at the cafe. How did her father know Derek could not be trusted? Since the arguments with her mother she had not spoken to either of them. How did her father even know there was a Derek?

Rafael walked by the ocean after Celia ran off. He was wondering what the next move should be and how he would tell his wife that his meeting with their daughter failed when he heard footsteps running from behind and Celia shouting, "Dad, wait!"

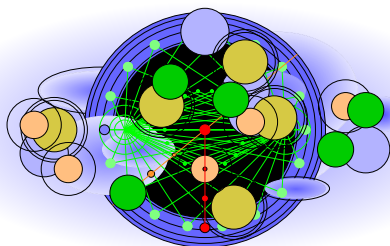


CONNECTION

RAFAEL walked home with his daughter. Celia told him about Derek. She wondered how he knew so much about him? Rafael didn't think he knew much at all.

They climbed the stairs to the second story apartment wondering what Celia's mother would say or do when she saw her daughter again after two years.

The silence of their searching eyes overcame the hardened words and deeds from their memories. Then tears restored their lost connection.



ROSE

EVENTUALLY BILL stopped giving Rafael excuses. He entered the revival tent. He hoped his doubts would not spoil the joy of others should someone claim a miracle occurred.

He stood at the back where he met a missionary who had scars across her cheeks, lips, ears and nose. She explained that the militia overpowering her town a decade ago carried off the pretty girls for prostitution and mutilated the ugly ones or killed them, like her sister, to demoralize the surrounding communities.

Bill went back often and at one point disclosed to her as a warning that his work was dangerous. In turn she reminded him that she was one of the ugly ones.

She loved it when he called her Rose and they were married under the revival tent.

THE RESCUE

HELEN heard an infant crying. Near the river she found a newborn abandoned to be washed away by the drain outlet. She wrapped the baby in her coat and almost fell when the ground shook from the explosion.

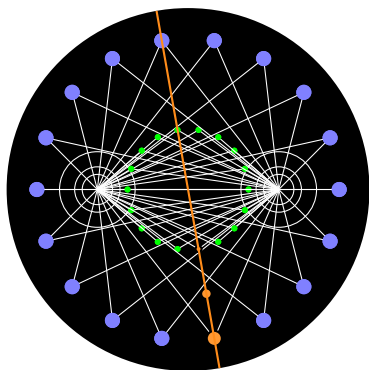
From above Bill yelled, "Helen, get out of there!" The water from the burst dam crushed her against vegetation on the bank as she protected the infant until her team reached them.

Bill and Rose adopted the child Helen rescued and invited Helen to stay with them indefinitely since she lived alone and could no longer take care of herself given her injuries. This gave Helen days, months and then years to read to and guide Little Helen from her wheelchair.

When Little Helen was three years old a man gave her a permanent marker to write a message while Rose held her so she could reach the top of the casket. As she carefully made her marks she suddenly looked up with astonishment and proclaimed loud enough for all to hear, "Mommy, Auntie Helen is dancing with Jesus!"

CHAPTER 7

ENLIGHTENMENT



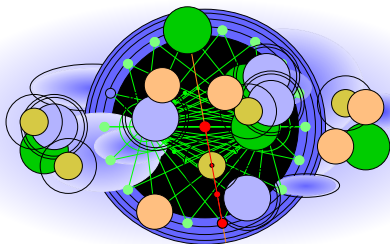
BOWL

LUKE rented in an artist community. As an artist he was not commercially viable so he served tables.

In one of the New Age stores that littered the area he listened while the shop attendant tapped a Tibetan prayer bowl available for purchase in his price range. It sounded nice and he almost bought it, but then he couldn't see himself doing his kundalini meditations to that noise and fifty bucks was fifty bucks.

He also wondered where his girlfriend, Martha, was. Tourist-trap spirituality with its bowls, crystals and satanic supernaturalism couldn't keep his mind off her.

He told his neighbor, Jeremy, the part-time pastor of a tiny, nondenominational chapel, about his concerns, but since Martha and Jeremy didn't get along all Jeremy offered was confirmation that buying that bowl would have been a waste of money.



AVALANCHE

LUKE WAS self-reliant. Like most people around him he did whatever was good in his own eyes. He did not anticipate that he would have to repent of much of this goodness. The fantasy mountain he trusted would hold the weight of his imagination began sliding due to an avalanche of truth.

Down he went clutching onto one esoteric branch of conjectures after the other discovering that every alternative he grabbed onto failed to stop his fall. He could see the smiling mouth of nihilism lick its lips and open its jaws below him.

He looked into this dread one beautiful day when the bus hit him. Rushed to an emergency room he was pronounced dead on arrival. Perhaps the expert opinion was wrong but when Luke's heart began beating he had no desire to climb fantasy mountain again.

"In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." **Judges 21:25**

DELIVERANCE

IN his apartment Luke kept books on gnosticism, astrology, occult philosophy and guides to the underworld of fairies, muses, demons, gods and goddesses. He was charmed by the writing. After being hit by the bus none of it made sense.

When he left the hospital he saw that Martha was with someone else. As consolation Jeremy gave Luke a Bible. To Jeremy's surprise Luke began reading it and asking questions. His initial excuse for doing so was he wanted to know what he was trashing. After a few weeks he stopped making excuses.

Replacing his kundalini meditations with a desire for deliverance Luke threw out any occult object he could find. All the stuff he collected over the years to help him see into what he thought were innocuous spirit realms went into the dumpster.

Who knew where the devil loved to hide?

DRAGON EYES

ALTHOUGH it shocked Martha to hear that Luke died after being hit by a bus his death saved her from having to explain to him her involvement with Sebastian should he ever find out which he wouldn't now. She had warned him many times that he had better get his act together if he wanted to keep her.

Besides, she reasoned, Sebastian was a serious artist with highly acclaimed paintings of mystically wise dragons and seductive fairies grossing over five figures. Luke by comparison was what exactly?

Martha forgot about Luke. Months later she and Sebastian passed a side-street of the art district and there he was—*Luke!*—bringing pizza to guests at a patio table, alive and well, working where he always did. Luke saw her, too, and went back inside.

Walking by Sebastian's side through the gallery that displayed his art a chill came over Martha as she stared into the enflamed eyes on painting after painting. She wondered how she could have been so wrong about those dragons.

QUEEN OF DRAGONS

“**A**UTHENTICITY is what matters,” Sebastian informed a customer who just bought ten of his paintings and commissioned five more where she would serve as model for the queen of the dragons. They would begin work immediately. Sebastian told Martha to go back to her own apartment to give them space, but he would call her when he got a chance.

Martha saw how the woman selected her dress to distract men with fantasies of her body while blamelessly covering enough of it. She saw rebelliousness in the woman’s eyes that would debilitate any opposition Sebastian might later make against her manipulations.

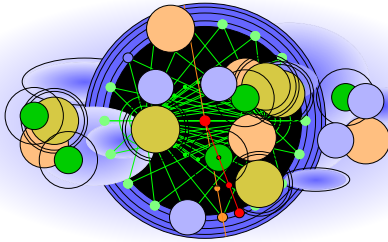
Habituated as he was to his own authentic selfishness Martha knew he would never call her. Their parting could have been an opportunity for her to change her ways, and perhaps it would in time, but now she only reinforced her humiliation by blaming him for every demon he let in as she walked home.

PROPOSAL

SIX MONTHS after Luke was hit by the bus he looked for and found Martha in the Art District Park. He told her that he tossed his pendulum and tarot cards in the trash and stopped doing those mindless kundalini meditations. Although this was the first time he spoke to her since his accident but having heard that Sebastian left her for the queen of the dragons Luke took the opportunity to ask Martha if she would marry him in a real church.

Martha wondered if by “real church” Luke was thinking of Brother Jeremy’s chapel recalling how they mocked that pastor. She also wondered if Luke expected her to give up her yogic devotions to Shakti.

Martha hoped so and knowing Luke she knew so and so she answered, “Yes!”



AFTERWARDS

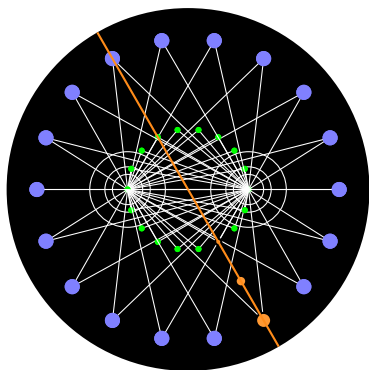
LUKE and Martha in the years that followed opened a gallery of their own. They displayed their own art along with that of artists who had a belly full of the demonic and wanted nothing more to do with it. Brother Jeremy was their advisor.

The envious claimed that the main reason for their success were their children who played in the gallery with the cats. Initially other gallery owners brought in their own children or rented some to compete. That worked until the rented children and the animals made a mess of things when tantrums erupted.

Sebastian and his queen of the dragons went to Blislnis, a little Babylon built on caverns, where they remained demonically influential, but unhappily ever after.

CHAPTER 8

BLESSING



HANDWRITING

JEREMY'S Bible had a red ribbon glued to the spine which served as a bookmark. Being a gift from his mother he kept it in great shape by not reading it.

Motivated by some controversy that stormed from social media onto his imagination he opened the book expecting to get to the bottom of the mystery in no time.

However, the parts he thought he knew he realized he barely knew at all and the parts he did not know—oh, those awesome parts he now knew he did not know—humbled him.

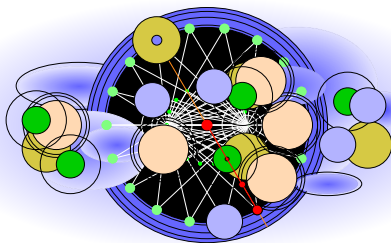
Years later when the cover fell open because the spine of the book had crumbled he saw his mother's handwriting. She wrote in small letters, shyly so as not to offend and yet boldly so as not to encourage unbelief, "May your life be blessed, my dear Jeremy."

LABYRINTH

“**T**HE EASIEST WAY to get out of a labyrinth is not to go in. They’re all dead ends anyway with monsters seeking someone to devour. Guard your heart and train your imagination to stay focused on better things.”

Every time Jeremy got lost in a labyrinth he realized his father was right. He’d promise, should he be given the insight to find his way out, that he’d focus on better things, but times would get easy and he’d get lost again.

The final time Jeremy got lost the monsters found what they were looking for before he found his way out, but at the moment when those beasts gloated in triumph he cried out and saw his father run toward him with open arms.



“And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.” **Luke 15:20**

CONTROL

WHO CONTROLS the whirlwind? All one can hope is when the debris settles one can find something left of value.

When Benjamin saw the twister head straight for the farmhouse he yelled to his wife to get the children. While they were driving away she noticed that the tornado had changed direction. With the sound of the wind ripping trees apart Benjamin braked, turned into the entrance of a field, backed out to face the opposite direction, shifted into first, accelerated, shifted into second, accelerated and shifted into third to accelerate out of the reach of the advancing wind.

If that twister really did want to get them it miscalculated since it left chickens, cows, sheds, tractor, cellar and the farmhouse, all of it, intact and untouched, but glowing with Benjamin's and his family's praise rising heavenwards sweetened with gratitude.

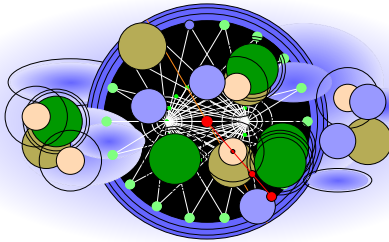
"As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation." **Proverbs 10:25**

OIL ANOINTING

NIKO HAD NOT ONE but six godmothers selected by his father and mother. He had just as many godfathers, too, because those godmothers were all joyfully married even though their marriages might have suffered through times when the husband, the wife, or usually both, were a bit rambunctious.

Being an infant he did not recall the oil anointing at his dedication, but now with the battles raging about them he gave thanks for all of his extended family who faithfully showed him by their own lives the narrow path. As the men and women around him fell he remained fearless. He prayed that all would find the way home.

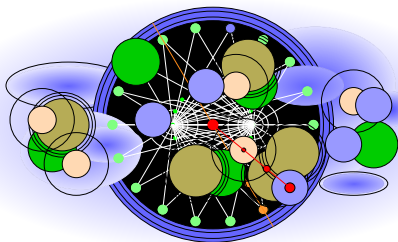
Niko himself found his way home. His mother and all those godmothers along with his father and all those godfathers rushed to welcome him laughing and singing like joyful, rambunctious children eagerly showing him the dance of praise before the Lord.



GRATITUDE REGARDLESS

GEORGE CUT THE LEMON into halves. He pressed the juice from each half into his water container. Then he cut the squeezed halves into quarters, removed the seeds and ate them, rind and all.

Distracted by the morning's sunrise he almost forgot. He thanked God for lemons even the most bitter ones. He thanked God for the one he received today.



JUNK

JEFF looked at the cracked mug he found among his father's possessions after the funeral. He recalled how its glaze brought to his mind calm waters under a blue sky when he saw his father drinking from it.

Wondering why his father had not thrown it away as useless junk long ago Jeff took the mug home and set it on his desk to hold pens. Decades later that was more or less where it still sat charged with the duty of caring for odds and ends.

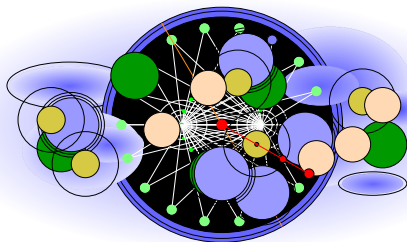
As Jeff reached his own last days he explicitly put the mug on a list of items that his son would inherit with an explanation that although the mug no longer served its original purpose it was the cup his grandfather drank from. Besides, it still made a great place to put pens and it had a beautiful glaze like calm waters under a blue sky.

WAX

THE WAX from a single candle dripped onto the cupcake. Jim let the candle flatten burning itself out in silence. After removing the wax he stood in front of his wife Lisa's grave and ate the cake.

Jim did not expect to be here given his own health, but he promised Lisa he would come back yearly as long as he could with a cake and candles marking her "birthday into Heaven".

Jim's final cake had seven candles on it. It was made by friends from their small church who pushed Jim in his wheelchair to the grave site and then celebrated Lisa's birthday with him.



KEEPSAKE

JOE TOSSED THE LETTER into the box not as a keepsake but as one of those things he did not have time to sort through at the moment. More than two decades later while cleaning the basement he noticed the box and went through its contents. He found his father's letter. Reading it for the first time he realized his father was not scolding him in spite of their disagreements but rather offering him assistance should he need anything during that tense period when he decided to move from the family home.

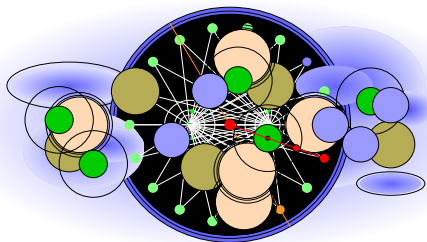
Having a rebellious son now of his own Joe understood what must have been going through his father's mind. Although he and his family reconciled shortly after his move, it wasn't until he read his father's letter that he began wondering just how much of his past was lived under misconceptions of what was actually going on.

TREATMENT

TOM COULD NOT SEE how to get from where he was to where he wanted to be. Nor did anyone have a suggestion outside of praying that he get well soon.

He resigned himself to whatever would happen hoping he could get his house in order before it did.

While sitting outside in the summer air Tom's appetite returned and his death influenced fantasies left him. Without any evident treatment to credit with the change he suddenly found himself where he didn't think it was any longer possible for him to be. He got better.



ISLAND

B EING NEW THERE Tim sat at an empty table like a survivor washed onto an island in a sea of festivities asking himself why he bothered going to this church picnic in the first place. He watched children play on inflated structures, but he was far too old for that. He saw groups conversing, but he was far too shy to introduce himself.

Two elderly women, both widows, along with a husband and wife sat down at his table. The widows spoke of their husbands who were now with the Lord and they all spoke of their activities and the work of their children and children's children. They listened to Tim struggle to pick the right words that avoided topics like where his wife and son were or revealed for scrutiny the questionable paths he followed with his career and choices of entertainment. The husband, who met his wife in high school and had been with her now for over sixty years, invited Tim to a men's group on Thursday which Tim, although unsure of what he was getting himself into, agreed to attend.

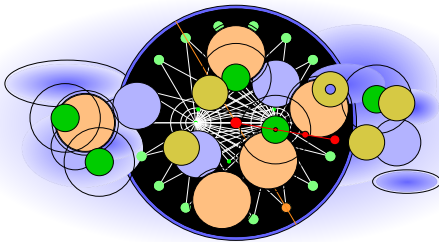
By the time the picnic was over Tim was breathing calmly and wondering why he had not realized before that people like this still existed who overflowed with power in their humility of being salt for the world. He hoped it was not too late for him someday to somehow do the same.

DETOUR ON THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

THE DETOUR Brian didn't have to take took decades. His troubles knocked some sense into him, but he lacked the sense to ride those blessings home. Sliding on curses he went where no one needed to go.

When Brian found his way home he told us, "If I knew how easy it would be to jump off that merry-go-round I'd have done it long ago." Regretting the waste of life he added, "Why didn't you tell me?"

We were so glad to see him none of us saw any need to remind him just how often we had told him.



"He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding." Proverbs 15:32

A VERY SHORT LOOP

STEPHANIE told her father to visit the Nature Center at a part of the Forest Preserve that was further away than his normal trails. Every year when she was in middle school they took a field trip to that center and listened to the guides describe the wild birds and animals that lived there.

At the Nature Center her father chose a loop trail realizing that he had been there before with Stephanie when she was at a tender age, barely able to walk. He counted the decades and felt time disappear.

An elderly couple approached and asked him how short the loop was concerned that it might go on for over a mile. He answered as one well-acquainted with this very short loop that even a child could walk saying, "It's not long at all."

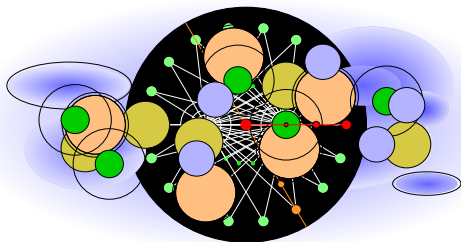
MOON SONG

THEY sat outside our dorm singing the Moon Song. It was his favorite. Even she knew it. He sang, “Yadda yadda goo goo.” She responded, “Doo-doo doodoo wah wah.” This would go on and on.

I imagined them singing the Moon Song for decades even after a long day of fighting and making up. When they grew old I imagined them singing it to each other in their hearts.

Indeed I hope so.

But we didn't have air conditioning. My window was open. This was exam week. And that's my lame excuse for shouting, “Shut up!”



WORSHIP SONGS

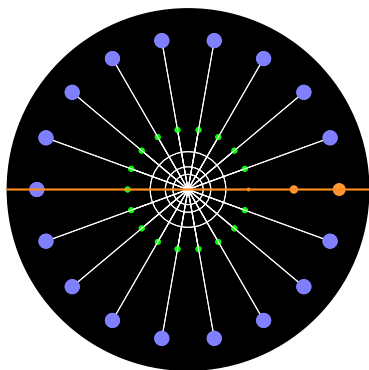
BELOW THE VAULT of the small chapel's roof Brad saw a singer in the band step back from the microphone because her daughter approached. They stood calmly embracing each other through two songs of thanksgiving to the Lord and a prophetic word. It was getting late, but the service was nearly finished.

That night the chapel held about twenty people including those leading the worship. There is not much to this tale because all that happened, as if that were not enough, was mother and daughter about the same height but decades different in age resting their hearts in support of each other.

Brad wanted the same love in his own family that those two shared.

APPENDIX A

STARS AND GALAXIES



I CONSTRUCTED THE ILLUSTRATIONS in this book using tikZ¹ code. Each chapter has its own distinct ‘star’. The ‘galaxies’ are at the bottom of the stories, at most one galaxy per page spread with the specific star that was used on the chapter page. Global variables stored what I set on the previous page. Parameters to the procedures set specific options.

The first listing provides the details for a star.

```

1 \newcommand{\makestar}[1] {
2   \begin{scope}[on background layer]
3     \path[fill=black](0,0)circle[radius=6cm];
4   \end{scope}
5   \foreach\i in {0.5,0.75,1.25} {
6     \draw[\starcolor](0-#1,0)circle[radius=\i];
7     \draw[\starcolor](#1,0)circle[radius=\i];
8   }
9   \foreach\i in {0,20,...,340} {
10    \draw[\starcolor](#1,0)--(\i: 2);
11    \fill[\innerstars](\i:2)circle[radius=0.1cm];
12    \draw[\starcolor](#1,0)--(\i: 5);
13    \fill[\outerstars](\i:5)circle[radius=0.25cm];
14    \draw[\starcolor](0-#1,0)--(\i: 2);
15    \fill[\innerstars](\i:2)circle[radius=0.1cm];
16    \draw[\starcolor](0-#1,0)--(\i: 5);
17    \fill[\outerstars](\i:5)circle[radius=0.25cm];
18  }
19  \filldraw[color=black,fill=orange!80,thick]
20    (\storycount:5)circle[radius=0.25cm];
21  \filldraw[color=black,fill=orange!80,thick]
22    (\storycount:3.5)circle[radius=0.175cm];
23  \filldraw[color=black,fill=orange!80,thick]
24    (\storycount:2)circle[radius=0.1cm];
25  \draw[orange!90,thick](0,0)--(\storycount:6);
26  \draw[orange!90,thick](0,0)--(180+\storycount:6);
27 }

```

Listing A.1: makestar Code

The second listing provides the details for a galaxy.

```

1 \newcommand{\makegalaxy}[5] {
2   \vfill

```

¹CTAN: *Package pgf*, <https://www.ctan.org/pkg/pgf>

STARS AND GALAXIES

```

3 \addtocounter{cA}{10}\addtocounter{cB}{1}\addtocounter{cC
  }{20}
4 \begin{center}
5 \resizebox{7.49cm}{3.37cm}{ %7.78 and 3.5
6 \begin{tikzpicture}
7 \makestar{\startype}
8 \begin{scope}[on background layer]
9 \fill[outer color=white,inner color=blue!50]
10 (-14,-6.5)rectangle(14,6.5);
11 \fill[outer color=blue!10,inner color=blue!70,
12 draw=blue!10]
13 (-6.5+0.3*\theCB,-1)ellipse(5cm and 2.3cm);
14 \fill[outer color=blue!12,inner color=blue!60,
15 draw=blue!12]
16 (5.6-0.4*\theCB,2)ellipse(3cm and 1cm);
17 \path[draw=black]
18 (5.6-0.4*\theCB,2)ellipse(3.1cm and 1.2cm);
19 \fill[outer color=blue!12,inner color=blue!70,
20 draw=blue!12]
21 (-4.5+0.3*\theCB,2)ellipse(4cm and 3cm);
22 \path[fill=blue!60,draw=black,thick]
23 (0,0)circle[radius=6cm];
24 \path[fill=black,draw=black]
25 (0,0)circle[radius=0.166*\theCB cm];
26 \foreach\i in {5.8,5.5,5.1,4.6,4,3.3}{
27 \draw[color=black,thick]
28 (0,0)circle[radius=\i cm];
29 }
30 \fill[outer color=blue!13,inner color=blue!50,
31 draw=blue!13]
32 (4.6-0.35*\theCB,-1.3) ellipse (3cm and 2cm);
33 \fill[outer color=blue!38,inner color=blue!60,
34 draw=blue!38]
35 (-5+0.3*\theCB,2) ellipse (1.9cm and 1cm);
36 \fill[outer color=blue!17,inner color=blue!60,
37 draw=blue!17]
38 (7.5-0.4*\theCB,-1) ellipse (1.8cm and 0.9cm);
39 \fill[outer color=blue!30,inner color=blue!60,
40 draw=blue!30]
41 (-9+0.5*\theCB,-3) ellipse (1.5cm and 0.5cm);
42 \path[draw=black]
43 (-9+0.5*\theCB,-3)ellipse(1.7cm and 0.6cm);
44 \fill[outer color=blue!17,inner color=blue!70,
45 draw=blue!17]
46 (8.8,0.8)ellipse(1.3cm and 0.9cm);
47 \end{scope}
48 \foreach\i in {{-8,-1.2},{180+\theCA:5},
49 {200-\theCC:2.5},{2,2},{8,-1}} {
50 \filldraw[color=black,fill=#2,thin]
51 (\i)circle[radius=1.2];
52 }
53 \foreach\i in {{-7.5,0},{240-\theCC:4},{100+\theCA
:3.5},
54 {-30+\theCC:2.5},{20+\theCA:4.2}} {

```

```

55     \filldraw[color=black, fill=#3, thin]
56         (\i)circle[radius=0.04166*\theCB];
57     \draw[color=black](\i)circle[radius=1.5];
58     \draw[color=black](\i)circle[radius=1.65];
59 }
60 \foreach\i in {{-8.5,0.25},{-6.8,-2},{\theCA:2},
61     {100+\theCA:2.3},{7,1.2}} {
62     \filldraw[color=black,fill=#4,thin]
63         (\i)circle[radius=0.7];
64     \draw[color=black](\i)circle[radius=0.05*\theCB];
65 }
66 \foreach\i in {{-145+\theCA:3},{-220+\theCA:2},
67     {40+\theC:5},{6.5,-1},{8,1}} {
68     \filldraw[color=black,fill=#5,thin]
69         (\i)circle[radius=0.9];
70 }
71 \filldraw[color=black,fill=blue!50!white]
72     (-1*\theC:5)circle[radius=0.25cm];
73 \filldraw[color=black,fill=red]
74     (\theCA:5)circle[radius=0.25cm];
75 \filldraw[color=black,fill=red]
76     (\theCA:3.5)circle[radius=0.175cm];
77 \filldraw[color=black,fill=red]
78     (\theCA:2)circle[radius=0.1cm];
79 \filldraw[color=red,fill=red]
80     (0,0)circle[radius=0.25];
81 \draw[red,thick](0,0)--(\theCA:5);
82 \end{tikzpicture}
83 }
84 \end{center}
85 }

```

Listing A.2: makegalaxy Code

I offer gratitude and praise to the Lord for the idea and means of including these illustrations. May they be a blessing to you.

THE AUTHOR

FRANK HUBENY was born in Indiana. He has lived in Maine, Illinois and South Carolina.

He posts stories, poems, essays and photographs to *Poetry, Short Prose and Walking* at <https://frankhubeny.blog>.

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