

UNFERNNO

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This is a lesson story. It doesn't start out that way, and it doesn't read that way. It doesn't strike you until it's over that George Effinger isn't being funny-funny ha-ha in "Unferno." That's because it is funny. Why, it's as downright amusing as Hell can be.

It's not that complicated, really. One of those mistake-in-transportation stories. We've seen them before. Poor schnook ends up in a place where he doesn't belong and has to cope. I've written some myself. Inevitably, he or she ends up coping, and in the coping lies the story.

The central character in "Unferno" copes too. Methodically, bewilderingly, but he copes. Nothing so surprising about that, is there?

That's what's so shocking.

MORTON ROSENTHAL WAS A SMALL, mousy man who, in another story, had murdered his wife and ground her into hamburger. We'd better get a good look at him here while he's still vaguely connected to his earthly form; he'd just died, you see, and he was standing before a battered wooden desk, understandably dazed and bewildered. If they were still producing new episodes of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," Morton Rosenthal would be played by John Fiedler. If you know who John Fiedler is, you have an immediate and rather complete image of Morton Rosenthal; if you don't know, John Fiedler played one of Dr. Hartley's patients on "The Bob Newhart Show," the henpecked Mr. Peterson. But they're not making "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" anymore, or that "Bob Newhart Show," either, and Morton Rosenthal himself was dead, too. He hadn't adjusted to it yet he had never been a brilliant person. For thirty-five years he'd been a butcher, a competent, honest, and hardworking butcher; but he'd been pretty much of a washout as a human being. He would have made a terrific porcupine, and he had the stuff to have been a truly first-rate weasel. But you get the idea.

"You got that?" asked the angel with the deep voice.

Rosenthal just blinked. The angel drummed his fingers on the desk, looking virtuous but as nearly impatient as an angel can look. "No," said Rosenthal at last.

"Fill out the card. We got a whole crowd of people waiting behind you."

"Sorry," muttered Rosenthal. He really hated causing any inconvenience.

" 'S all right," said the angel. "Number thirty-four?" A fat black woman raised her hand timidly and walked slowly and painfully to the desk. Rosenthal looked at the card he held in one hand, the pencil he held in the other. He didn't remember receiving either. He didn't even remember coming here. He didn't remember

dying. His eyes opened wide. He was dead, really dead. "Oh, my God," he said to himself. He knew what being dead meant; it meant that everyone who had ever lived would know every little humiliating thing about him. They were all waiting for him here, especially Rose, his USDA prime-cut wife. He was in for it now. His mouth got very dry and his ears started to ring. He had never felt so guilty in his life, and he knew that this was absolutely the worst place he could be to be guilty. They had their coldly methodical ways of adding up your score, he figured; and he sensed, too, that it was just about half an hour too late to try to get by on charm. He didn't yet have any idea how closely this Afterlife matched the various versions he'd heard about or imagined on Earth, but it didn't make much difference: there weren't many of them that welcomed uxoricides with open arms.

The card. Rosenthal looked down at the card. The first question on it was: How long has it been since your last confession?

Talk about shocked! Rosenthal just stared at it uncomprehendingly. Slowly, like sewage backing up in the pipes of his old Brooklyn apartment, meaning attached itself to the separate letters, then to entire words, and at last to the question as a whole. They wanted to know how long it had been since he'd "been to confession." Rosenthal knew he was really getting off on the wrong foot here, and there didn't seem to be any way to make himself more acceptable. He went up to the desk and waited until the angel finished giving the same set of instructions to a freckled little Boy. The angel glanced up. "You're not number forty-six, are you?"

"No," admitted Rosenthal. "I was number thirty-three. You want to know how long it's been since my last confession, and I'm not even Catholic."

The angel sighed. "Sorry about that, mate," he said. "Give me back that

card, then go over to desk R. Tell the angel your name and she'll punch you up on her terminal. Actually, you've saved yourself some time this way."

"Is that good?" asked Rosenthal.

"Probably not," said the angel.

"Look, I'm really sorry." Rosenthal was now banking heavily on the forgiveness-and-mercy angle.

The angel smiled sadly. "You people always try that one. Well, we'll see how sorry you can be. Go over to desk R."

None of that sounded good to Rosenthal. He was about ready to throw up by the time he found desk R. There was a crowd there, too, and he took a number and waited. His feet and legs were getting tired. He didn't know where he was, exactly it was like God's equivalent of the Atlanta airport, where everybody had to go before they could go where they were supposed to go but they didn't have chairs for the transients, only for the employees. There was no way to tell how long he'd been waiting, either. Nobody wanted to get into a conversation; everybody just stood around and stared at the ground or at the card or form he was holding. Everyone looked guilty. Everyone was guilty. So when his number was called, Rosenthal went quickly to the desk, faced an angel with green eyes, and put on a pleasant expression. His stomach was knotted tighter than when the IRS had called him in for audits. Rosenthal suspected that everyone here was in the same boat with him, so if he looked even a little more co-operative by comparison, it couldn't hurt. He forced himself to smile. "Hello," he said, "they sent me over here because I'm not a Catholic and "

"Name?" asked the angel.

"Rosenthal, Morton M."

"M or N?" she asked.

"M," said Rosenthal. "As in 'Mary.'" He tried to smile winningly again.

"Your middle name is Mary?" she said dubiously.

"No," said Rosenthal, feeling like he was trapped in a Kafka story, "my middle initial is M as in 'Mary.' My middle name is Mendel."

"Social Security Number?"

It took some thought to remember it in this context, but he told her. "Just a moment," said the angel, entering the data.

"The other angel said this would be quicker, but he didn't explain what that meant. I mean, do you have to be Catholic to get into Heaven? That

sounds a little, forgive me, unfair, if you know what I mean. I always thought if you just did your best, you know, lived a good life "

Suddenly, as Rosenthal's luck would have it, there was a great uproar, a raising of voices in song and cheers, a tumult never heard on Earth, a celebration that gladdened the heart and elevated the spirit. Rosenthal turned to stare in wonder and glimpsed, far in the heavenly distance, what appeared to be troops of angels, legions of angels, great armies of angels marching, while all around yet more angels greeted them and welcomed them with an immeasurable outpouring of joy. The angel with the green eyes at desk R rose from her seat and put a hand to her throat. "My goodness," she whispered.

"What is it?" asked Rosenthal. As they drew nearer, the columns of angels seemed ragged and dirty, their wings ruffled, their pennons torn, their lances bent. What place were they returning from, and what great battle had they fought? "What is it?" asked Rosenthal again.

"I'm not sure," said the angel. She looked at him briefly, then back at the astonishing sight, then at her computer terminal. "I really want to join the jubilation, but my duty is to deal with you first."

"I'm really sorry about that," said Rosenthal. "I hope it won't "

"Hey, mister," said the angel in an outraged voice, "you don't have to be Catholic to get into Heaven. You were just given the wrong card; but this says you murdered your wife! So what are you giving me a song-and-dance for?" She raised one angelic hand, slowly closing all the fingers but the index, and jabbed down at a button on her desk. "You go straight to Hell, buster," she said, evidently glad to get rid of him.

Everything went black, and Rosenthal felt as if he were moving in every direction at once. There was a kind of loud, thunderish noise, like at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*. He realized that now he'd probably never find out what was going on in Heaven just before he left; it hadn't yet occurred to him that very soon he'd have more immediate problems to occupy his attention.

Well, not very soon. Travel-time Heaven to Hell, including recovery period, is nine days and nights (according to legend); that's how long it takes for the first coherent thoughts to begin to work their way into the mind, thoughts of lost bliss and eternal pain. After Rosenthal had lain nine days and nights confounded, he began to get his senses back; it was like supernatural jet lag. Hell was hot; but, of course, that came as no surprise. He'd expected fire and brimstone, though he had no clear idea what brimstone was. He thought brimstone was a tool of some kind, maybe

used in the hat business to flatten out brims. He thought brimstone was a kind of inconvenience, as in "she weighted him down like a brimstone around the neck." As it turned out, he was wrong. Brimstone is an old word for sulfur and, when combined with fire, is very unpleasant to have to lie around in. Rosenthal climbed out of the fire and brimstone as soon as he could, and sat down on a hot rock to think and clear his head.

His first realization was that he was now naked. He hadn't felt naked in Heaven; he'd simply been unaware. Now he was aware, and he didn't like being naked. It made him feel very vulnerable. Hell does that to you: it breaks down your confidence, it makes you feel vulnerable. And there certainly are a great number of things to be vulnerable to in Hell, as well. It's a very carefully planned place, like a gigantic anti-amusement park. Rosenthal sat on the rock, feeling it scorching his skin, and looked out across the burning lake of sulfur. Noxious clouds of gas wafted through the gloom; the heat was intolerable; and however Rosenthal shifted position, he found no relief from the torment. He shrugged. That was the idea, he supposed, but he didn't have to like it. He stood up again on one foot until he couldn't bear it any longer, then hopped to the other foot, then sat down, then stood up again this was going to be a hell of a way to spend eternity. At least there were no devils with pitchforks poking at him

no devils at all in sight. There should have been, Rosenthal thought. Devils would have made a nice symmetry with the angels he'd seen in Heaven. As a matter of fact, search as he might, Rosenthal neither saw nor heard another being of any sort, anywhere. No damned souls, no gleeful demons he appeared to be all alone. Maybe that was his punishment, maybe he was supposed to wander around this immense and awful place alone forever. He shrugged again; he thought he could handle that, if that was the worst of it. He decided to take the measure of his prison, because that was the appropriate thing to do at this point in an adventure. You pace your cell, you catalogue whatever objects your jailer permits you to have, you seek weaknesses where you know there are none, you tap on walls and try to communicate.

Rosenthal skipped from one foot to the other, wanting to see what was in the direction opposite of the lake of burning sulfur.

He came to a plain that seemed to bum with solid fire, as the lake had burned with liquid fire. This was the very same plain to which Satan swam, where he and Beelzebub first realized their miserable fate, according to Milton. Of course, Rosenthal didn't know anything about that; he'd never heard of Paradise Lost, and the only Milton he knew was

his dead wife's brother, supposedly a bigshot in the schmatte trade who always had a million reasons why his mother should stay with Rosenthal and his wife because this macher-schmacher Milton had all his money tied up in his spring collection or he was too busy wheeling and dealing to worry about the old lady or something. Rosenthal made a wry face; Milton would learn a thing or two when he died. There was something in there about honoring your father and mother, Rosenthal recalled. He wished he could be there when some angel asked Milton about his last confession.

Rosenthal, just as others before him, began slowly to comprehend the immensity of punishment. It was hot. It was gloomy all the flames cast "no light, but rather darkness visible" (as Milton put it). It stank. It reminded Rosenthal very much of the apartment on Second Avenue he'd lived in as a child, where his own parents had stayed until they'd succumbed to old age. He had never been able to persuade them to move uptown, to Florida, anywhere but Second Avenue. His father had once waved an arm that took in all of that small, cabbage-reeking apartment and said, "There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Rosenthal didn't know what the hell the old man had meant. He just knew his mother and father wouldn't leave that apartment if Eddie Cantor himself came back from the dead to talk to them about it.

Rosenthal hopped from one foot to the other. "Goddamn it," he shouted in agony, "I wish my goddamn feet would stop burning!" And just like that, his feet stopped burning.

"Hey," said Rosenthal. He took a couple of steps around the fiery plain, testing. He was surprised, a little puzzled. The soles of his feet had cooled, or rather they had toughened so that it no longer tortured him quite so much to stand in one place. He looked down at himself and was not pleased by what he saw: his skin had become tough and leathery and the color of old, scuffed shoes. He was as ugly as pardon the expression homemade sin. After a moment's thought, however, he shrugged. "So nu," he said, "if I have to look like the outside of a football, I'll look like the outside of a football. At least I won't die from hopping around." He learned that he could walk anywhere, sit anywhere, even lie down and rest for short periods without too much discomfort. There was always some pain after a while; but, naturally, this was Hell. You couldn't expect miracles.

He pushed his luck what could he lose? "I don't like being naked, either," he said. "What if somebody should come by?" And just like that, he was wearing some kind of scratchy, rough, ill-fitting, foul-smelling robe. "Pen," he said, but at least he had clothes.

He headed across the murky plain, hoping that moving around a little would air out his robe. He chewed his lip and thought. "How about something to drink?" he said. And just like that, he had a mug filled with something that tasted exactly like his Uncle Sammy's homemade wine. Once his Uncle Sammy had tipped over ten gallons of that wine in his basement, and he never had a roach problem down there again. It was the worst stuff in the world. Rosenthal swallowed it, grimacing; hell, what could you ..expect, Manischewitz Concord Grape?

His eyes opened wider as he realized that life in Hell might not be so terrible, if he had some kind of unseen delivery service to take care of his wants. As a matter of fact, as he considered one thing and another, it was almost comfortable. It wasn't so bad as he had imagined; it wasn't much worse than getting stuck on the subway at rush hour, except here he didn't have all those sweaty, obnoxious people jammed in his face. He had privacy and leisure and, if it hadn't been Hell and if he hadn't still suffered every moment, he would have had peace. He heard his mother's voice saying, a million times, "You can't have everything, Moity. You can't have everything."

After he accepted the tolerable nature of his situation, he grew bewildered. After all, he had been cast out of Heaven (or, at least. Heaven's front office). He had been sent to Hell; he shouldn't be in such a good mood. Sure, the darkness and the stench and the scorching still unsettled him. Let's be truthful if he paid any close attention to the panorama of desolation around him, he began to quake with dread and despair. Still, he shouldn't have it so good. He shouldn't have been able to wish up his tough, blackened hide and clothes and his Uncle Sammy's godawful wine. He should have been denied everything. But he wasn't about to bring that to anybody's attention.

Rosenthal shuffled across the incandescent plain until he thought he saw a wall in the distance, looming ominously through the smoky dimness. "Then there's an end to Hell," he said. That notion cheered him a little. He had no way of knowing how much time had passed as he walked; he became neither hungry nor tired, and his surroundings did not change a single detail from eon to eon. He may have walked hours or days or years he could not say. At last, however, he came to the blackfaced cliff that bordered the plain. It rose up straight and formidable like the shaft of a great well. Rosenthal guessed that this barrier surrounded the whole of the plain with the burning lake in the center. Although the cliff slanted slightly away from the true vertical, it was still too steep and sheer for Rosenthal to climb. He stood gazing upward into the hazy heights, lost in

thought, until he was startled by the sound of a voice behind him. The voice was terrified. "Mama!" it screamed.

Rosenthal turned and saw a young, fat, pimply girl with straggly brown hair and broad, coarse features. She was the kind of unhappy girl Rosenthal always used to see in the company of a tall, lithe blond beauty who knew better how to fit into a sweater. Here was the drab companion sundered from her attractive friend, helpless now and alone. She was bent over, trying vainly to hide her flabby nakedness. It was an impossible task; it would have been an impossible task with the aid of an army-surplus canvas tent, and all she had to cover herself with were her hands and forearms. Perhaps out of pity, perhaps out of something less generous, Rosenthal turned his back on her.

"I'm freezing!" she cried.

Rosenthal didn't turn around. "Freezing? This is Hell, stupid. It's hot as hell around here."

"I'm freezing! I've been freezing ever since I fell into that lake of ice."

Lake of ice. Rosenthal had to think about that, now: What lake of ice? A lake like that didn't have a snowball's chance of lasting a minute in this place. "You're cold?" he asked. He still hadn't turned around; remembering what that girl looked like, he was prepared to spend the rest of eternity like that.

"Of course I'm cold! Aren't you'?"

"I haven't been this hot since I was in Phoenix in 1950," said Rosenthal. "And at least in Phoenix a person can sit down inside a little without having to worry about getting heat stroke."

"I don't understand," said the girl, frightened. "I'm so cold and you're complaining of the heat."

"I came out of a lake of fire and you came out of a lake of ice," said Rosenthal, shrugging. "This is Hell. If you wanted things easy to understand, you shouldn't have died."

"Listen " she began.

Rosenthal got tired of carrying on a conversation with his face to the rocky wall. He turned around and the girl dropped to her dimpled knees. "Jesus!" she cried, startled by his appearance.

"You'll forgive me," said Rosenthal, "you've got the wrong boy."

"You . . . you ..." She couldn't get her mouth to form more words.

"What, girl? You're wasting my time."

She tried covering herself again, doing no better on the second attempt. She looked like she was on the verge of fainting. "You must be the devil! You're all ... all leathery and awful and ..." Her voice trailed away and she did faint.

Rosenthal rolled his eyes upward. "She thinks I'm the devil," he muttered. He watched her plop on the ground and lie there for a little while; then she started to wake up.

Her eyelids fluttered, and then she opened them. "Oh, my God," she whispered.

"Wrong again."

"Satan."

Rosenthal had a flash of inspiration. If she thought he was the devil, what the hell? "So what's wrong?" he asked solicitously.

She gave him a horrified look. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"Not a damn thing. I'm busy."

"I fell for nine days and landed in that lake of ice, pulled myself out and walked all the way here, but you're not going to do anything?"

He gave her a trial leer. "Are you disappointed? You have any suggestions?"

She shuddered. "No, Your Majesty," she said weakly.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, sweetheart. Why are you here?"

"You don't know. Your Majesty?"

"And if it's all the same, you can stop with that Your Majesty business, too. No, I don't know. What do you think I am, all-knowing or something?"

It was her turn to be confused. "They said I broke the First Commandment."

"Uh huh. Which one is that? I forget."

"Listen," said the plump girl, "can I have something to wear? I'm still freezing."

"You're still naked," said Rosenthal, leering again. He was getting the hang of it.

"Well, yeah, that too."

"Wish for it. Just wish for some clothes."

The girl looked dubious, but did as she was told. "I wish I had something nice to wear," she said in a quavery voice.

Nothing happened. No nice outfit appeared, not even a cruddy poodle skirt and a blouse with a Peter Pan collar. "How about that," marveled Rosenthal.

"What's the joke?" asked the girl.

"Nothing," he said. "I want a robe for this girl here," he said in a loud voice. And just like that, she had a robe. It was every bit as disgusting as his.

"Thank you, o Satan," she said meekly. She slipped, somewhat disconsolately, into the filthy garment.

"Okay," said Rosenthal, "we still got business. You were telling me about your commandment."

The girl nodded. "It's the one about worshiping false idols. They said I was paying too much attention to this graven image. They said I was the first one to get busted on that rap in a couple of hundred years." She added that with a defiant touch of pride. "They asked me if I wanted to repent my words and deeds. I said no. They hit the button, and I ended up here."

Rosenthal shook his head. "I would have gone along with them. They never gave me a chance to repent. Bing bang, here I am."

"Yes, sir."

"So what kind of graven image were you worshiping?"

"I had this kind of shrine set up in my locker at school I went to Ste. Nitouche's Academy in Arbier, Louisiana pictures of Dick, you know?"

"Dick?" He said it differently; apparently he misunderstood her.

"The lead singer for Tuffy and the Tectonics. Up in Heaven they said I had crossed the fine line between music appreciation and idolatry. I said they could never make me deny my love. They gave me until the count of ten, but I was loyal; then it was look out for that first step."

"You picked Hell over Heaven on account of somebody called Tuffy and the Tectonics? I wouldn't have done that for Martha Tilton with the Andrews Sisters thrown in."

For the first time, she looked a little doubtful about it. "Maybe it was a mistake," she said.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" asked Rosenthal.

"Rosalyn."

He smiled wanly. "Nu, my wife's name was Rose," he said.

"Your wife, O Prince of Darkness?"

"Never mind. Well, you're here for some punishment, right?" She nodded fearfully. "Give me twenty pushups, right now," he said.

"Twenty pushups?" It was doubtful that she could manage even one. Getting down, with the aid of gravity, would probably be simple enough; getting back up was another matter.

"Twenty, shiksa, or I'll think up something even worse."

She got down in pushup position and tried her best, but she failed to do one decent pushup. "The nuns said Hell would be unimaginably terrible. I'd rather have little ugly devils with pitchforks," she said, gasping for breath.

"Very sad, very sad," said Rosenthal, clucking his tongue. "The kids of today."

"Where are the devils and everybody?" Rosalyn asked.

"What, you think you're special or something? You think all of Hell is going to turn out to welcome you? This is a big operation, sweetheart. I can't spare any more demons to shape you up. We have our hands full as it is."

"How do I rate your individual attention?"

Rosenthal laughed. "I haven't heard of anybody breaking Number One in a long time, either," he said. He'd always been a good liar; he'd been a lousy murderer, but he'd always been a terrific liar.

"And the penalty for breaking the First Commandment is twenty pushups?"

"Hey, you and I are just getting started here. We have all the rest of forever to kill. Who knows what I'll think up next?" He looked around at the base of the cliff and kicked together a little pile of black pebbles. "Here, pull up your robe and kneel on these for a while. See how you like that."

"The nuns used to make us do this," said Rosalyn. "It's not so bad."

"Try it for a couple of hundred million years, then we'll talk."

Rosalyn gave him a sideways glance. "Why are you being so easy on me?" she asked.

"I like you. Can I help it? I like you is all."

"I'm not that kind of girl. You know I'm not that kind of girl."

"Listen, Rosalyn, sweetheart, you're in Hell now, grow up. What, you think if you do something wrong, God won't like it? God isn't watching anymore, Rosalyn, you've paid in advance. I'm not saying I'm entertaining ideas like that, I'm just saying you're not in some fancy Catholic girls' school in Louisiana anymore."

"You're the Arch-Enemy, the Great Tempter," she said.

Rosenthal was losing patience with this thick-skulled, fat-faced zhiub. "Tempter-schmempter!" he cried. "What do I have to tempt for, you're already in goddamn Hell!"

"It could be worse," she offered.

"You tell me how."

She shifted uneasily on the sharp pebbles. "I could have bat-winged things with horns pouring molten lead down my throat. I could have scaly fiends flaying the flesh off my bones while spiders crawled all over me and snakes and lizards chewed at my eyeballs. Lots of thing."

"You got some good ideas, bubeleh," said Rosenthal. He genuinely admired her imagination; of course, a lot of the credit had to go to her Catholic school upbringing. Still, he saw that she might be valuable to have around. "There's always a place in the organization for somebody with ideas."

"You mean "

He raised a hand, admonishing her. "I'm not promising anything, you can't hold me to it. I'm just saying that sometimes there's an opening every quintillion years or so, and I like to surround myself with bright people. You could work your way out of the class of torturer and into the torturers. It's still unpleasant; but unless you have a crazy thing for pain, you'll find I'm sure that it's better all the way around to be on the staff."

"What do I have to do?"

Rosenthal shrugged airily. "Well, you have to flatter me a lot and praise me and tell me how wonderful I am and generally carry on as if I was the hottest thing going down here. I like that kind of thing; the nuns probably told you about that. And you have to do everything I tell you."

"We're back to that again." She made a face.

"So what's so terrible? You were saving yourself for this Tuffy or something?"

"For Dick. There wasn't really any Tuffy. It was just the name of the group."

"Why don't you try some situps? I think I'm getting an idea." He watched her puff and wheeze her way through fifteen or twenty situps, he wasn't really paying close attention. She gave him a pleading look; he was feeling satanic, so he said, "Come on, come on, do a few more. I'm being generous, you know. You could end up back in the ice, frozen up to your pupik until, well, until Hell freezes over." He gave a good, demonic laugh and watched her pitiful eyes grow even bigger.

His idea was that he had to learn what she expected from the devil, if he hoped to pull off this impersonation. Eternity is a long time to bluff your way through any role, and Rosenthal suspected that he couldn't keep handing out mere rise-and-shine exercises. For the first time in his life existence, rather he felt his lack of imagination. Plaguing Rosalyn with the gruesome punishments she expected would have the additional benefit of entertaining him. The long haul was going to be pretty dull for him otherwise.

"Isn't that enough?" she whined.

"Huh? Oh, sure, knock it off for now. Listen, Rosalyn, I'll tell you what: because I'm giving you my personal supervision and because I like you, I'm going to do something I shouldn't do: I'm going to take it easy on you. Wait a minute, let me explain. I really shouldn't do this you wouldn't believe it, but they keep an eye on me, too. They don't like that I should take it easy on somebody. After all, you're here for hard labor, not for two weeks in the Catskills. I get a little leeway, so I'm going to make you this offer. I want you to flatter me and treat me nice and tell me I'm wonderful and whatever else crosses your mind. In return, I'll just inflict the kind of tortures you expected with no awful shticklech that you'd be afraid to tell your mother about."

"Just the regular tortures? Like in the paintings?"

Rosenthal didn't have any idea what she had in mind, but he'd find out. "Like in the paintings," he said.

"You promise?"

"If you'll take my word for it."

"You're the devil. You want me to worship you," she said with some distaste.

"Oy, is that so bad? You were ready to worship this hoo-ha of a juvenile delinquent "

"Don't you talk about my Dick that way!" She was furious. "He could sing. He could play the guitar and the tambourine."

"He's not here yet. In the meantime, you could do worse than worship me, lots worse. Believe me."

She started to say something, then decided against it. "I'll give it a try," she said.

"Good girl. I don't expect anything fancy, no slaughtered oxen or anything. Sincerity counts with me."

"Okay, I'll wait then, until I really feel it."

"You do that. In the meantime, I wish I had some molten lead." And just like that, he had molten lead. He also had an awful inspiration for what to do with it. He laughed satanically the whole time he did it; he was growing into the part.

Just before all the molten lead was used up, a thin baritone voice called out to him. The man didn't sound so fearful as Rosalyn had. "Try tilting her upper body back a little more," the man said.

"So fine, that's just what I need now, a kibitzer," said Rosenthal. "You're not here to help. Your puny [aroy-s-gevorfineh] soul's here to get its own share of the hot lead, smartie. Take a number, I'll be right with you."

"Griiss Gott! A Jew!"

Rosenthal gave the man a long, chilly, intimidating stare. "Watch it, bubie, remember who you're dealing with. I can appear a million different ways and I can speak a million different languages. So what are you, some kind of Nazi?"

"Yes," said the man. He was tall and skinny and young, with a sloppily trimmed beard; he looked more like the devil than Rosenthal did. He seemed perfectly unconcerned about being naked.

"Ai-yi-y," Rosenthal wondered if he was torturing these people, or if they'd been sent to torture him. "And stop grossing Gott around here, you're too late for that. And it gives me a pain, too."

"Sorry," said the man.

"Name?"

"Friedman, Lamar S."

"Friedman? Aha."

"My family's Lutheran."

"Of course it is. Offense?"

"Generally good, but I could have used more depth up the middle."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Sorry," Friedman said, "I did some high school football coaching. Want to know why I'm here? I committed an unforgivable sin."

"Mmneh," said Rosenthal noncommittally. "Why? Your team choke in the big game?"

Friedmann laughed dryly. "Hardly. I was jilted by my fiancée."

Rosenthal thought about the twenty-nine years of wedded horror he had escaped from.

"You're a fool, Friedman," he said.

"You're saying she wasn't worth it. You never even met her. She was some dish."

"Dishes get filthy, they crack, they break, or else they sit in the cupboard and cockroaches crawl all over them. They're not worth having your kishkas pumped full of boiling lead."

Friedman blanched. "Maybe you're right," he said, staring at Rosalyn, who was loudly, raucously, and unashamedly writhing, blaspheming, imploring, and hemorrhaging. It was already getting tedious, Rosenthal thought.

"You were telling me about your sin," said Rosenthal.

"To be honest, you never got close to telling me about your sin, but let's pretend that you did."

Friedman couldn't take his eyes off the hideous sight of young Rosalyn in agony. "I broke the Second Commandment," he said, all his cockiness now gone. "That's what they told me in Heaven."

"The Second Commandment," said Rosenthal. "Which one's that?"

Friedman glanced at him briefly, but quickly looked back at Rosalyn. Her shrieks filled the silence of the empty hell. Friedman acted as if he hadn't heard Rosenthal's question.

"So which one is Number Two?" asked Rosenthal again.

Friedman looked very queasy. "That's the one about blasphemy and cursing. I took the name of the Lord in vain."

"That's what they sent you to Hell for? Did they give you a chance to repent?"

"Well, yeah."

"So what happened?"

Friedman's eyes squeezed shut. "I thought they were making a big deal over nothing. I didn't think they'd nail me for something like that. And I guess I was trying to act tough."

"You didn't repent?"

"I told them I didn't have anything to repent for, I never killed nobody, I never stole anything."

Rosenthal shook his head in disbelief. "You let them trip you on Number Two. They are worse than the IRS."

"At least the IRS will take a check, you can halfway dicker with them. Now I'm in Hell." He looked again at Rosalyn; made the connection that the same thing or something similar would soon be happening to him, too; and passed out.

"Some Nazi," muttered Rosenthal, looking down at Friedman. "I wish Rosalyn would stop suffering. I wish she'd be healed, too, and completely forget the whole molten-lead incident." And just like that, she was standing beside him in the same bewildered but untortured shape in which she'd arrived.

"What happened?" she asked. "Who's that?"

"Some Nazi."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"We?" asked Rosenthal. "We?"

Rosalyn scratched her oily scalp for a few seconds. "Weren't you offering me some kind of partnership or something?"

"Bubkes!" said Rosenthal. "Nobody's partners with me. I take on help now and then, but I own this place. I don't need partners, I need servants. Period."

"Whatever. What do you want me to do?"

Rosenthal smiled. "I want you should work on the new arrivals."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Sure you can. You've got great ideas. You've got all those plaid-skirted Ste. Nitouche's Academy horror stories you can use; and when you use all those up, you can make up brand-new ones of your very own. You can have complete freedom to express yourself. You can develop your creativity.

Who knows? You may find a God-given gift you never even knew you had."

"I didn't expect such a nice reception in Hell," she said. She was still dubious.

Rosenthal was glad she didn't remember anything at all about her own recent anguish. "I want you to start on Mr. Friedman here."

"How will I do it?"

Rosenthal klopped his forehead with the heel of one hand. "I'm a fool," he said. "I wish Rosalyn had enough power to wish up torments for Mr. Friedman and whoever else comes along, but not enough power to hinder or harm me in any way." And just like that, Rosalyn became second-in-command in Hell. She woke Friedman up and took him off across the plain. Rosenthal was once again alone.

Some time later, as Rosenthal was wandering along the base of the obsidian cliff looking for an end to his boredom, he saw a growing spark of light high up above his head. It looked like a bright star, but it quickly became a burning moon, then a blazing sun. The light was too intense for Rosenthal to watch directly. He muttered a curse and averted his eyes, wondering what was happening now. Even in Hell you couldn't get any peace and quiet. It was always something.

The light, whatever its source, flared brighter and spread further and further through the gloom. Something was approaching Rosenthal that was going to be awfully impressive when it got there. "I wish I could look at it without feeling like I got jabbed in the eye." And just like that, he had a pair of polarized sunglasses in his hand. He put them on.

He saw a gigantic callused hand. The hand, at least as big as Shea Stadium, was ill-formed and badly manicured. It was attached to an arm so huge that it rose into the shadows out of sight. Rosenthal shuddered, imagining how vast the entire body must be, judging by the size of this grotesque hand. He didn't want to know whose hand it was. It was reaching down into the very pit of Hell like you'd reach down into the garbage disposal to retrieve a spoon; and in the hand was the brilliant passenger.

It was an angel an angel with a flaming sword, yet. "Ai-yi-yi," muttered Rosenthal. He felt an intense fear, although he was sure that there was nothing more Heaven could do him. He was already in Hell, what could be worse? He had the paralyzing suspicion that very soon he was going to find out. God forbid.

The hand set the angel down on the floor of Hell and lifted itself back up into the gloom overhead. The angel looked up and waved. "Thanks, Antaeus," he called. "I'll let you know when I'm finished here."

Rosenthal just stood where he was. The sight of an angel in full glory, evidently on official business, was awesome. It made the clerk-angels he'd seen soon after his death almost drab. The angel of the flaming sword sighted Rosenthal and raised a hand. "Peace be with you," called the angel.

"So nu? That's why you brought a flaming sword?"

The angel smiled. "Never mind that, it just goes with the job. Personally, I think a badge or a nice cap would be better than shlepping this thing around, but it does make some impression."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I am Orahaniel, an angel of the order of Virtues, which is a few orders above Archangel. Virtues are the bestowers of grace, and we're also those angels men refer to as 'guardian angels.'"

"That's nice," said Rosenthal. "Well, I have work to do, so if you need anything "

"Mr. Rosenthal," said Orahaniel sternly, "we must talk."

His own name sounded odd in Rosenthal's ears. He had long since forgotten that he had ever been Morton Rosenthal; he had assumed the role of devil, and he was brought up short by this recollection of his earthly existence. "How do I come to have this little chat with my [op'stair'siker?"]

"There seems to have been a minor mistake made in the handling of your case, Mr. Rosenthal. I've been sent to correct it."

Rosenthal looked down at his tough, blackened skin that even yet did not fully protect him from the incendiary fury of Hell. He gave a humorless laugh. "You people take your time," he said.

Orahaniel pretended to study his flaming sword. "Errors do not often happen in Heaven," he said. "As a matter of fact, your damnation was the very first such error in memory. We're all sorry as h I mean, sorry as we could be about it. I know that hardly makes up for the misery you've suffered here; but I hope you'll listen to the remarkable story I have to tell, and then accept our apology."

Rosenthal was more bitter now than he'd ever been, because it had all been "a mistake." Pain and suffering were inevitable, he supposed; but

nothing in the world is as hard to bear as unnecessary pain. "You must miss being in Heaven," he said. "You must sure be on somebody's list, to get stuck with a lousy job like this, coming down to Hell when everybody else is still up there hymning and everything."

Orahamiel looked surprised. "Why, this is Heaven," he said, "nor am I out of it. I mean, it doesn't make any difference where I am if I have to carry a message to Hotzeplotz and back I'm still in the presence of God."

"You're in Hell now, not Hotzeplotz."

"Look," said the Virtue, spreading wide his wings, "not so much as a singed feather."

"Mmneh," admitted Rosenthal. "So you were saying?"

"Do you mind if I lean this sword against the rocks and we sit down? This is a longish story."

"Sitting hurts," said Rosenthal.

"I can relieve your pain while we sit," said Orahamiel.

"Then we'll sit."

They made themselves comfortable at the foot of the towering rocks; miraculously, Rosenthal didn't feel the slightest discomfort. It was like the sun coming out after a long, grim, and dreary day. The angel began his story. "You see, there was an interruption while your case was being processed "

"I remember some big tummel. The angel who was looking at my records got up and wanted to see what was happening."

Orahamiel nodded. "Well, you'll never guess what it was all about!"

"Probably not!" agreed Rosenthal.

"You just had the unbelievably shlimm mazel to appear in Heaven at the precise moment when Satan and all his fallen angels decided to repent and ask God's forgiveness. That's what all the fuss was about. They were being welcomed back into Heaven."

Rosenthal stared at the angel, then looked around the vast, frightening solitude of Hell. "That's why I was all by myself? I thought maybe being alone was my punishment, but "

"There was always a tradition an unofficial tradition, sometimes labeled heresy, but that was just your human theologians limiting the grace of God in the three Middle Eastern religions that someday the devil would get fed up with Hell. All that kept him here was his pride. If he

asked for mercy. God in His infinite benevolence would grant it. Satan was once a seraph, you know, and he's been given back his old rank and privileges, and nobody in all the choirs sings praises more loudly now than he."

"While Morton Rosenthal, poor shmuck of a butcher, sits on his tuchis and takes his place."

"You were supposed to be asked if you repented your crimes," said Orahaniel. "Even at that last minute, if you repented, you'd have been welcomed into Heaven, too. Your angel was distracted a little by the sudden reappearance of the fallen ones. You weren't given due process."

Rosenthal shrugged. "To err is human," he said.

"But not angelic. Now, Mr. Rosenthal, I ask you: do you repent?"

Rosenthal started to respond, but closed his mouth and thought for a moment. At last he said, "Do I get a little something in the way of reparation?"

The Virtue frowned. "We're not in the reparation game, Mr. Rosenthal."

"You're telling me you don't pay for your mistakes?"

"We're making you quite a generous offer. I've come all the way to Hell to take you back to Heaven with me."

"But you won't give me anything for the physical and mental distress you've caused me. I get a better deal than that from some momzer who sideswipes my car. I'm sorry, but it's true."

"It isn't smart to try to bargain with Heaven, Mr. Rosenthal."

"Ha! I've got you over a barrel and you know it. You just won't admit you're wrong."

Orahaniel looked stern again. "We could see who has whom over a barrel very easily. I'll just leave you here in the darkness and wait for you to come to your senses."

"You just do that. You can't push people around like this. There's such a thing as justice, you know."

"Your choice is between Heaven and Hell. Now you must choose."

When put that baldly, the proposition made Rosenthal hesitate. "If I stay here "

Orahaniel was astonished. "How could anyone even consider staying here, in preference to returning to Heaven?"

"You forget, I was never really in Heaven. I don't know what I'm missing."

The angel thought that over. "Yes, Satan's punishment was the denial of the beatific vision, and his memory of the bliss he'd lost."

"I never had it to lose in the first place. This Hell isn't much worse than what I was used to when I was still alive."

"And I suppose you'd rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, that old business again?"

Rosenthal really didn't want to commit himself, but he'd come too far to back down. "I guess so," he said.

"Your answer was anticipated. Now I must learn if you plan to pursue a course of subversion against the human race, as Satan did before you."

Rosenthal's shoulders slumped. "What do you think I am?" he asked hotly, insulted.

"Well," said Orahaniel, "if this is what you wish, I'll leave you to your new kingdom, such as it is."

"You do that, see if I care," said Rosenthal. He was bluffing, although his mind was telling him to fall to his knees and beg for another chance. He thought about his wife. Rose, whom he'd murdered, waiting to greet him in Heaven. He shuddered and hardened his heart, determined that he would make the best of it in Hell, instead. Especially if he was the new gontsermacher around here.

"That kind of reasoning is just Satan's error of pride, all over again," said the angel, reading Rosenthal's thoughts. He just shook his head, got to his feet, and gathered up his flaming sword. "Last chance," he said.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Orahaniel shrugged. "Go figure," he said sadly. He called to Antaeus. As the gigantic hand cut through the darkness lower and lower, Rosenthal looked away. Across the great plain he saw six more sinners approaching, probably Commandments Three through Eight. They'd all been given the opportunity to repent, and they'd all in their foolishness refused. He turned his back so that he wouldn't have to watch Orahaniel rising up toward Heaven. "Home is where the heart is," said the devil, disgusted by the reeking, foul place he'd chosen, disgusted by the newly arriving lost souls, disgusted by his own stubbornness. The terrified damned inched nearer, accompanied, he now saw, by Rosalyn. "Oy," he murmured.

Administrivia:

Version 1.0 by Monica

*Fixed broken paragraphs from UC text/Removed page numbers,
etc./Corrected scan errors/Added HTML*

Style Sheet by the E-Book Design Group

*Remaining OCR mysteries and guesses at corrections are enclosed in
[brackets]*

From "Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves" edited by Alan Dean Foster

2003.07.05