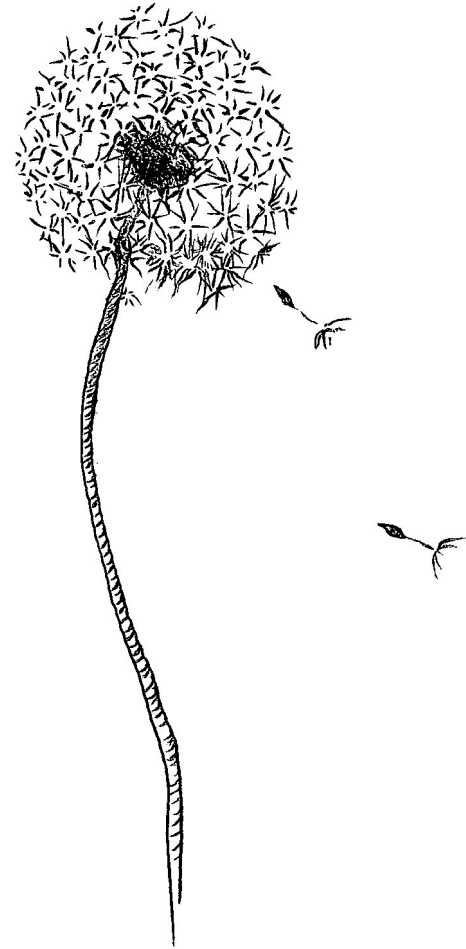


*From Darkness into Light:  
The Courage to Move*



*By Carolyn Fuller*

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This story is dedicated to the  
**Lord Jesus Christ**  
who inspired it by his example.

Special thanks to Jim Fuller for his faithful encouragement.

The important thing is to believe in him.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies. John 11:25

Jesus is well aware of you right now, whether you believe in him or not. When you feel that tug on your heart, that is Him, asking you to come and find the truth. Don't be shut out. Let Him in.

He loved us first, while we were sinners, in open rebellion against Him; before we were even aware of Him and His overwhelming love. (Romans 5:8)

no hope of ever being able to earn our freedom.

But Jesus came to free us from sin (all the sin in the whole world: not just what you do, but what is done to you, and what defiles the earth). He blazed a trail through death into life. He created a way of escape, and we can follow him. All he asks is that we believe in him and obey him, and we will have eternal life.

This world, so sad and so defiled, will be destroyed by fire. It will happen without warning, and when it does, we will have nowhere else to go. We need a Savior. Jesus Christ, the Savior, the Messiah, has created a place for us. It was fashioned with you and me in mind.

Close your eyes and imagine a perfect world: Peace, Joy, Love, and Life await us with Jesus. We don't know what it will be like, but Jesus has given us a chance to get to know him first, so that we can learn to trust him, and let go of this world so we can find our real home.

You can learn about Jesus by reading the Bible. The story of Jesus' life is told in the first four books of the New Testament. They were written by some of the men who followed him: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (The book of John is a good place to start.) The other books are letters from his apostles to the early churches; these letters are for instruction, encouragement, and correction.

You can also learn about Jesus through teaching or preaching.

- If you can find a welcoming church, go there.
- Search YouTube for Billy Graham.
- Read the book, Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis.
- Ask someone who you know is a Christian to talk with you about Jesus.

When you are ready, tell Jesus that you are sorry for your sins, and ask him to forgive you. He promises, no matter what you have done, that he will forgive you, and cleanse you from your sin.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

## *From Darkness Into Light: The Courage To Move*

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## *Afterword*

That God, which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves.

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
from *In Memoriam*

Ernie stood up and flicked his cigarette butt over the guardrail. It sizzled a hole into the snow, gave a brief puff of smoke, and went out. Ernie drew in a deep breath of air, barked out a cough, and then sat back down on the guard rail.

He glanced at Rich, who was facing him, and saw Rich was reading the scrap of newspaper they found tumbling across the highway. Ernie rolled his eyes. Once a salesman, always a salesman. He was probably checking the car prices, even though the paper was over a week old.

Jake was on the other side of Rich, shading his eyes, and peering down the road. As an actor, a mime or stand-up comedian, everything he did was theatrical. He stood tall with his right hand shading his eyes, his weight on his left leg, and his right toe pointing backward.

Still, Ernie took the hint, and looked back the opposite way, watching for cars coming from the other direction. It wasn't illegal for them to sit on the guard rail, but no one liked to see them do it.

The hardest part about being homeless was finding a place to rest. "Public" benches were reserved for well-dressed people. And business owners or managers watched the "public" bathrooms carefully, and some

More than two thousand years ago, in obedience to his Father, Jesus Christ came to live on this earth. He was born as a baby, and experienced everything we do. He gave every moment of his perfect life on earth for us. He owned nothing, and during the last three years of his life, he was homeless.

He spent that time traveling, explaining God's love for us, and making things right.

He comforted those who were despised, and reached out to everyone who would listen, including the prostitutes, the lepers, the insane, and the demon-possessed. He threw the money changers out of the temple, and spoke the truth to power: He compared the religious hypocrites to white-washed graves.

He came to save all of us who are stuck, who are addicted, who can't sleep from trauma, and who are afraid. He even came for the ones who have it pretty good, but often they don't see their need for him.

Despite his position as God's son, he never struck back when someone hit him, even though he could have called a legion of angels to protect him, and even though his torturers had no mercy, and eventually crucified him.

Why did he come, and why did he stay on that cross? A Roman Centurion who watched him die, wondered the same thing. And after Jesus declared "It is finished!" and commended his spirit to God the Father, that same Centurion witnessed what happened afterward.

There was a total solar eclipse, and a terrible earthquake that opened the graves nearby. And then the ones who had been dead walked out of those graves and spoke to people they once knew. He saw all of these miracles and breathed out the truth: "Surely this was the Son of God."

Jesus was sent by his Father on a rescue mission, to save the dying and the lost human race, which God created and loved. Our original parents defied God, and so all of us that came after were changed. No longer perfect, the way Adam and Eve were, all of us are now slaves to sin, and we have

concert to start. "Soon, my darlings," he whispered. "Soon, I'll come and get you." He tucked it back into his pocket, and added, "If you'll have me."

There by the side of the road, in the electric blue moment of twilight, he made his first call to Melissa. It wasn't an easy conversation, but at least she didn't hang up on him, and when it was over, he was more determined than ever to win her back. He longed to see her in person.

He spent a moment watching the evening star grow bright, then crawled inside his tent. He snuggled under his new blanket, and turned on the flashlight from his phone. He took the photo of his family out of his pocket, and kissed it. Then he opened the black book Joshua had given him, placed the photo carefully into the crease between the pages, and began to read.

even banned homeless people from using them.

There was no place to receive mail, of course, and no way for anyone who still cared about you to find you once you slid into homelessness. But that was part of the charm, as well. Being homeless was a great way to escape.

Ernie thought about his last home, the place he had been just a few months before. He wasn't really trying to escape, but he couldn't bear to be found. Shame overwhelmed him as the images swam through his mind: His wife's tear-stained face, the way his drink reflected the light of the fire, his daughter's blanket on the ground, and the key to his truck lying on top of the trash.

Ernie blocked those thoughts by becoming present, and his eyes focused on the ground, on his feet. His feet were moving, always moving. His comfortable leather boots had been replaced by second-hand tennis shoes from the shelter seven weeks ago, and that was what he had now: Green shoes with yellow soles, covered by dirt and worn down at the heel. He had hated to give his boots up, but repeated soaking in the water puddles had changed their shape. The new wrinkles the leather developed had been cutting into his feet.

He reached down to straighten his formerly-bright green laces, and saw a dandelion, probably the last one of the year, standing just under the guard rail. It was covered with white fuzz, so at first he didn't see it against the snow.

"Hey guys," he said. "Check it out--a dandelion!"

He picked it and held it up against the sky. It seemed oddly out of place, like a relic from a lost world. Jake reached over and snatched it from Ernie.

"Behold!" Jake said, "She is covered with snow!"

Addressing himself to the flower he held in his hand, he bowed low and then said. "Fear not, dear lady: I shall protect you!"

Taking a huge breath, he attempted to blow the down from the flower. His cheeks stood out like two small balloons on either side of his face, and though he blew until he completely ran out of air, only a couple of small tufts let go.

"Stupid seeds!" Jake said, disgusted. He threw the dandelion into

the snow where it promptly disappeared. "Why would they hold on to a dead flower like that?"

"Maybe they were too cold to let go," Ernie suggested, irritated. "Maybe they liked it where they were and didn't want to go somewhere else."

"Stupid." The hard word came out softly, as if Jake had forgotten the reason he said it, but Ernie couldn't let it go. The little weed had hit too close to home.

*It's hard to let go when you don't want to leave,"* Ernie thought. *Everything changes, and you lose control. We should all understand that very well.*

Ernie did, anyway, and now here he was, with a clear understanding that being homeless meant always being dirty, and being so bone tired that it seemed like safe sleep was a thing from the past. His eyes scanned the roadway for another discarded cigarette, but he knew they had already smoked everything they could find.

Suddenly, a car came around the bend, and the three men stood up as one. Ernie stretched, and began walking down the hill toward the city dump, and Rich and the other man, Jake, began going in the opposite direction. The car pulled up to where they had just been sitting.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

The man's voice was relaxed and pleasant, so Ernie turned around. The passenger window was down about halfway, and it looked like there was only one man in the car. Ernie approached while Jake and Rich returned.

"I've got some news," the man said. "The city has decided to close the existing dump and install a large incinerator on this property. All of the people living here are going to have to leave."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

"But where will we go?" Ernie finally asked, moving closer. "We have already been banned, shunned, and pushed out of every decent place there is. This dump is home now, only because it's the last place left. Where else **can** we go?" His voice was edged with anger and desperation.

"That's what I came to tell you," said the man in the car. He rolled the passenger window down the rest of the way and leaned toward them.

"How will I do it?" wondered Ernie. "How will I ever convince them to believe in Joshua? Soon it will be too late, and they will have no where else to go!"

His phone lit up with a text from Joshua: "Just love them for me while I am away. When they ask you why you are different, tell them about me. That's it."

Ernie smiled, amazed at Joshua's uncanny ability to anticipate what he needed, and typed, "I will. Thank you."

Ernie considered the move to Joshua's new place, and realized that the "unknown's" made him a little nervous, too. It took courage to move, because it took faith. He couldn't be sure he would like the new place until he was actually there.

What set him apart from all the others who were afraid to move was that he knew Joshua: Belief in Joshua had given him the courage to hope; and hope, in turn, had given him faith. How could he keep this good news to himself?

Something white on the ground caught the light, and he bent down to see what it was. He stood back up, scratching his head, with another dandelion in his hand. He looked at it for a moment, noticing how the little seeds were embedded in the core, and marveling at the perfect round shape it made, with each floret the same exact length.

*Little seeds,* he thought, *are you ready to let go?* He paused.

*Am I ready to let go?*

He noticed the clothes Joshua had given him and knew that he felt better about himself because he looked better. He saw the cell phone in his hand, and knew he could get help anytime he felt a need. He considered the warmth of the blanket Joshua had set aside just for him, and felt cherished.

"Joshua, you have my trust," he whispered out into the darkening sky, and then blew gently on the flower. The seeds floated easily on the warmth of his breath into the night sky, at first seeming to mingle with the stars, and then growing fainter and fainter until the stars were all he could see.

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out the picture of his family: He, Melissa and Annie were cuddled in a blanket, waiting for some



He said he has a job for me, and some new clothes, and soon a new place to stay! I can't wait to meet him in person!"

Ernie nodded. He took his phone back and put it in his pocket. He felt oddly jealous, but knew that sharing the news of their future home was exactly what Joshua had told him to do. Right after that, he thought how nice it was to have someone that believed in Joshua like he did, and with that, he shook the man's hand.

"I'm Ernie," he said.

"John," his new friend replied. "Thanks for letting me borrow your phone."

"You'll soon have your own," Ernie said. John didn't seem surprised, and nodded.

The sun was setting, and the truck had just left, when Ernie dialed Joshua's number for the first time. Joshua answered on the second ring.

"Well done," said Joshua. "Did you find the extra blanket toward the back of the trailer?"

"Yes," said Ernie, amazed. "I was surprised to find it; I thought they were all gone."

"I told you I would take care of you," Joshua said, and Ernie could hear the smile in his voice. "We've got a lot more work to do later, but that's all for today. Sleep warm and safe tonight; I've got you covered. Keep sharing the truth with people that I send to you, and remember, I'll be back soon."

Ernie looked up and noticed that the bright edge of the setting sun was all that was left in the sky. In the deepening twilight, he opened his new blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. He closed his eyes and smiled, so thankful for the warmth, and also for the knowledge that he wasn't alone. For the first time in months, someone cared if he lived or died.

Before he went inside his tent, Ernie looked out over the sprawling dump. Little camping areas were marked by small fires or battery-powered lights. The red-headed child who had been picking through the cans earlier was running through the rubble, and a young woman caught the child, and swung him up into the air. She hugged him tight, then they both ducked back into their shelter under a flap of cardboard.

"Years ago, I lived right here among the homeless. I had nowhere of my own. I realize that anyone can become homeless: performers, executives, and entrepreneurs. I have met many of you, and understand your struggles because I was struggling, too. But my father, who is very powerful, rescued me from this life. Now, I want to offer you a way out."

Ernie had taken another step forward without realizing it. He noticed the car the man was driving. It was beautiful, white, flawless.

"That was years ago," the man continued, "but I have never forgotten what it was like to be isolated, ignored, and erased. I'm an architect now, and I create beautiful spaces. When I remember being cold, I design cozy places; I hate for anyone to be left in the cold. The same is true for the other things I have suffered: Being hungry, needing shelter, living without a community, having nothing of my own. I have devoted my life to fixing what is wrong. I am setting things right."

He opened his door and got out. The men instinctively stepped back. The man shut his door and walked toward them. His white shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, and he had a wonderful tan. He didn't seem to be cold, though he didn't wear a coat. His blue eyes were bright like a diamond, but very kind. Ernie felt drawn by those eyes, as if the man was a brother he had somehow never met.

The man noticed the three men were drawing back and stopped walking toward them. He stood there for a moment, and then addressed Ernie.

"Hi, I'm Joshua. I saw you sitting here, and I felt such compassion for you. I wanted you to know that there is some hope. Your lives have come to a roadblock, and you expressed it very well: There is nowhere else to go. But let me give you some background."

Joshua glanced at the other two men to include them, and continued.

"The plan to install the incinerator is an old one; you can see the problem yourselves." Joshua swept his arm wide to indicate the acres covered by the piles of garbage. "It just keeps piling up. People cart their trash here so they don't have to deal with it, but the problem doesn't go away just because you can't see it. The only way to get rid of all of this sprawling waste once and for all is to burn it. So that's why the plan was

made."

"I guess you're right," Ernie said, slowly. "I just don't think about the garbage being a problem, since what some people call "garbage" is a resource for us. We use and re-use a lot of this stuff, and this place has become our home."

"Home," said Joshua. He closed his eyes, and shook his head "no." When he opened them, there was fire. "No one should have to live this way. This place is for burned-out toasters, rotting carpet, and used-up containers."

He took a step toward Ernie and held out his hands. Ernie was surprised to see the depth of sadness in Joshua's eyes. His voice was soft, but intense.

"You were created to live in a home that is designed with you in mind."

Ernie's heart leaped when he heard the words Joshua spoke. He felt his inner self nodding in agreement.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jake said, laughing. He took a little bow, and then stood with his fingers splayed out against his shoulders. "Who do you think we are? We are obviously not on your level!"

He mimicked Joshua's gesture and swung his arm toward the garbage. "This place is a dump, where they throw things away, right? Well, we are the people that society has thrown away! We do belong here." He shook his head. "If this bothers you, you'd better go back to where you came from, mister."

Joshua paused, then said, "Do you really like it here?"

"I have my moments," said Jake, and then flung his arms wide. "The truth is that you can find happiness wherever you are, and I choose to be happy right here." He pointed dramatically to the ground under his feet, then unconsciously rubbed his hands together to warm them.

Joshua nodded at the way Jake rubbed his hands together. "It's cold, isn't it?"

His gaze went from Jake to Rich, and then Ernie. "So this is the bad news: The incinerator will be installed right over there in a short time." He pointed to the center of the piles of garbage. "The workers will secure this area by fencing the entire thing, and then everyone who is currently here

"I don't think I can do this," Ernie began.

"No, you can't," Joshua agreed. "You can't do it by yourself, but I will never leave you. Come on now, I have a job for you."

"OK," said Ernie, slowly. "I'll try."

"It's easy," said Joshua. "Tonight there is a cold front coming through, and I know that most of the people here don't have warm enough clothes. I've ordered a truckload of fleece-lined blankets which are going to be delivered shortly. Will you please sign for them and then hand them out to whoever wants one?"

While Joshua was speaking, a box van pulled up near Ernie and parked, turning on its flashers.

"Well, sure," said Ernie. "Thanks, Joshua--this is wonderful!"

When the driver stepped down, Ernie signed for the delivery and the driver unlocked the back door. Ernie jumped up into the truck, and broke open the first box. It was full of warm blankets that had waterproof material on one side, and thick fleece on the other. He waved the blanket in the air so everyone could see.

"Hey, guys!" he shouted. "It's going to be really cold tonight, so Joshua ordered a whole truckload of blankets. Who wants one?"

"Oh, sure," said Jake. "They're from Joshua." He winked at the man standing next to him.

"I don't care who they're from," said the frowning man, roughly pushing past Jake and moving toward the truck. "I'd love a warm blanket!" He accepted a blanket from Joshua, and unfolded it, smoothing the soft side with a look of wonder on his face.

"What a gift," he muttered. "I wonder who this Joshua guy is? I'd like to thank him."

Ernie handed him his cell phone and told him to look in the contacts for Joshua. "I have to hand these out, OK? Just give me the phone back when you're done talking to him."

The truck was soon unloaded, and everyone in the crowd was headed back to their makeshift homes, holding a warm blanket. The man came up to return Ernie's phone. His big grin made his teeth gleam in the twilight.

"Joshua told me to come to the restaurant anytime, night or day.

just trying to brag by saying that this "Joshua" guy is the only one who can help us. And, of course, he is the only one who knows this Joshua personally."

"He wants to know all of us," Ernie shouted from the edge of the road, but Jake was closer to the people than he was, and Ernie's voice was lost in the distance.

Jake pulled out the bundle of new clothes he had been hiding, and spread them out over an old rusty refrigerator. He scooped up handfuls of mud and began throwing them at the clothes. At first the people were shocked, and then they laughed.

"Oh, no. They're dirty," Jake said in a high-pitched voice. Then his tone darkened. "Well, if he can give me one set of clothes, he can give me another one. I'm not going to prance around in these clothes trying to keep them clean--what a joke! Come on, let's make them REAL." The crowd joined him in dirtying the clothes. One man put the jacket on upside down, and started dancing. A group of children laughed.

Rich crawled to the edge of the laughing crowd, holding his ribs. He had been badly beaten, and between the blood and the mud, he looked worse than he had before. His new clothes were rags.

When Ernie saw him, his heart was heavy. He ran to try to help Rich up, but Rich glared at him.

"Get lost," he panted. "You are the one who got me into this." Rich deliberately turned away from Ernie to watch Jake, and though he was in pain, he tried to laugh along with the rest of the crowd.

Ernie stood watching for a moment, then walked over to the guardrail where all of this had started, and sat with his head in his hands. His phone rang.

"I never said this was going to be easy," Joshua said. "The people are so full of fear that it's hard for them to begin to hope. But don't give up, Ernie. Love is the most powerful force; it overcomes not only fear, but death itself." An image of Ernie's beloved grandpa flashed into his memory and he knew it was true.

"Yes," said Joshua, as if agreeing with Ernie's thoughts. "Love, like energy, never dies. It just changes form."

Ernie was silent for a moment.

will be forcibly removed. My father has ordered this."

"Your father?" asked Ernie.

Joshua nodded. "Yes. The reason for the delay is that he is giving me time to let people know about the option I'm offering them." He turned his eyes back toward Jake. "Your days of justifying your life here are almost over. Ernie spoke the truth. There is nowhere else to go. . .until now."

Joshua smiled. "Here's the good news: I have spent a long time creating a wonderful new place for all of you to come and live. It's almost ready. I have come to let you know about it, and to prepare you before all this happens."

Rich, who had been silent until now, spoke up.

"What kind of a place?"

Joshua closed his eyes as if imagining what he had built. "A place where you will never be cold, or hungry, or isolated ever again. I told you that I have been working to set things right and make all things new."

"Is that why you are doing all this for us?" asked Jake. "Because you are destroying our homes?"

"This place isn't fit to be anyone's home," said Joshua. "I've lived where you live, and have suffered what you've suffered. I feel for you and for all the others who live here." He rubbed his forehead. "I am helping in a way that no one else can. You don't have to pay for anything. All I ask is that you believe in me, and follow my instructions. Please accept my offer and be rescued."

"There has to be a catch," said Rich. "You know we have no money, but you must want something."

"That's true," Joshua said. "I'm asking for something precious: Your trust. You have all been betrayed and have betrayed others, so trust will be difficult for you. But if you believe me, and do as I ask, you will be rewarded with a whole new life, a place better than you could ever imagine. You will be safe after this place is destroyed."

He paused. "But I will not force you. If you reject my offer, you will be on your own, and I will not be responsible for what happens. I have given myself for you, to prepare a real home, the kind of home you were made to have, and I will even live there with you. But you can only come

of your own free will."

Ernie blinked. "Well, I want to believe you. I don't fully understand all this, but I am aware that I need to be rescued." He shrugged, convincing himself out loud. "What do I have to lose? I will believe you, Joshua, and I am grateful. What do you want me to do?"

Joshua looked at the other men. Jake looked at Rich, who nodded, and said, "Well, I believe."

Jake looked back at Joshua. "If they're both in, I guess I'm in."

"Good!" Joshua said.

He handed each man a cell phone. "I have entered my contact information into these phones," he said. "The place I am preparing for you isn't quite ready, but it will be soon. In the meantime, you can always call me if you need anything." He leaned into the car and pulled out three pure white shopping bags. He handed one to each of the men.

"Your new clothes are in here," Joshua said. "I know how hard it is to live without a regular shower and clean clothes, so I've made sure you don't have to live that way anymore. These suits are the best in the world, and when you wear them, you'll be accepted into places with the highest standards. Please keep them clean, because I want to make sure you look your best when you meet my father."

Ernie looked inside his bag, and found a suit of white clothes, a new pair of shoes and everything he needed for a complete change. When he dug through to the the bottom of the bag, he found a black book. He pulled it out and held it up, questioningly.

"That's my story," said Joshua. "I wrote this book so that everyone will understand."

He gestured to Jake and Rich. "You each have a copy. It includes my plan for the future. Now, because of what I've done, everyone who submits to my care can live a free, joyful life! Help me spread the news, because this offer isn't limited: It's for everyone."

"Everyone?" Rich looked skeptical. "How can you afford to do this for everyone?"

Joshua smiled. "My father is powerful; I told you that. But now I'll tell you his resources are unlimited. You wouldn't even begin to understand how much he controls. Any description I could give you would be an

head with a lot of empty promises. You're acting like a fool."

"They aren't empty promises; every one has come true so far," Ernie said, glancing at the old woman.

Her face wore a smirk. "*You seem a little gullible*, her look seemed to say. *But I'm not going to fall for that!*"

He turned to Rich. "You were there. Tell them what you saw."

Rich was sitting in a broken rocker, brushing at his new clothes to keep them clean. His hands were dirty, and they left grimy streaks on his white pants.

"He is absolutely right!" he said, his voice rising as he spoke. "We are going to be saved, but the rest of you filthy people will be run off. No one wants dirty, poor people in their neighborhood."

"Wait a minute!" said Ernie. "We are supposed to carry his message to everyone so that all of us can go live at the new place."

"These people live like dogs," Rich said. "They don't deserve to be saved. They stink!"

"So did you . . ." Ernie began, but he was drowned by the roar of the angry crowd. Someone threw a rusty can full of dirty water at Rich. Another man tipped his rocker over and threw him on the ground. The old woman near Ernie glared at him.

"You are the same kind of uppity type he is," she said. "You better get out of here if you know what's good for you."

"I'm no better than any of you," Ernie said. "I'm just trying to give you Joshua's message."

The woman pushed him back, angrily. "Get out of here, liar!" The crowd behind her took up a cry and began to move toward him, threateningly.

Ernie walked away until he was at the edge of the dump, and then stared back from a distance. He watched a little boy with red hair try to scrape dried food out of the cans in one of the piles. Ernie thought of the delicious food at The Lily, and wished he could help that little one find warm, nutritious food. A familiar voice drifted toward him across the piles of garbage.

"Lots of rich people drive by here," Jake repeated loudly to a small crowd of people. Their faces were hard and cold. "He's not the only one. Any one of them could drive up and bring money, food, clothes, or a cell phone." He looked across the piles of refuse, and jerked his thumb toward Ernie. "He's

When they arrived, everyone gathered around to find out what had happened. Their bright, white clothes caught the sunlight and made quite a scene. Ernie began telling everyone how they met Joshua, and how he had given them new clothes, a cell phone and access to the restaurant. The first few people who heard were excited and left immediately to go get some food.

Then one old woman spoke up. "This place is my home. I don't want to leave. I have everything I need right here."

Ernie smiled and shook his head. "I have been to the restaurant," he said. "You can't believe how delicious the food is, and how wonderful it is to have a nice hot shower and beautiful clean clothes. Believe me, once you experience it, you won't miss a thing."

She frowned. "I have seen a lot of things, and I know what I know. I am comfortable right here, and I don't want to leave."

"But we won't have a choice," said Ernie. "They are going to make us leave and then turn this place into a huge incinerator."

"Oh yeah? When?" asked Jake, who had stumbled up behind him. "When is all this going to happen?"

"Well, you were there," said Ernie. "You heard the whole thing."

"Yeah," said Jake, sighing. He spoke slowly, slurring his words. "I heard it, but I don't believe it. You think Joshua's dad ordered the city to turn this place into a huge incinerator? Who has that kind of power? Joshua is a nice, rich guy who is trying to soothe his conscience--but it's all right," He smiled. "I got what I needed out of it." He crumpled up the paper bag and threw it on the ground.

Ernie was confused. "Joshua's father owns this land! He decides what happens on it!"

"It was a nice story," Jake said, waving one hand in the air. "But this is real life, and that means being cold, facing the truth and dealing with a broken heart." He put his hand on Ernie's shoulder, and looked him straight in the face: "Man up, dude. Face the truth."

"We just heard the truth," Ernie said. "You saw Joshua for yourself. I don't understand why you don't believe him."

"Look, no one cares if we live or die," said Jake, becoming angry. "There are lots of rich guys who come down here and shower some lucky person with riches for a day. They never come back. Don't let them turn your

understatement; and I and my father are one. So, yes, without hesitation, my offer is for everyone at the dump who believes in me."

He pointed down the street. "But right now, there is a restaurant about a block away called *The Lily*. The staff has been told to expect you. They will help you get ready, so that you'll fit in to the new neighborhood I am working on. Then, after you are comfortable, you can order anything you like to eat and I will cover the bill. They are waiting for you now."

"This is amazing!" Ernie said. "I can hardly believe it!"

Joshua smiled. "I know that's a figure of speech, but you must believe in me and follow my directions as a condition of our agreement. Please tell everyone around you the good news. Bring them to *The Lily*: Feed them and prepare them so that the move to the new place will be easier. Share your phones with them so they can talk with me, too, and I will be back soon."

He stepped into his car and put it in gear, then stopped and looked up.

"It's really important to tell the others about me and the new life I have planned for all of you. Go back to *The Lily* whenever you have a need, and I will meet you there. In fact, I will meet you wherever you are. Just call me. But don't forget to share the news. I will reward you for each person you tell, because I want the whole world to know. Bring them to *The Lily* so they can become equipped until I return. Keep your clothes nice, too. It matters how you look when you meet my father."

Ernie peeked into the bag. "But these are bright, white clothes, Joshua. How in the world can we keep them clean? You know where we live. We don't have any way to wash them, and our living conditions are, well, filthy."

"I paid dearly for your new clothes," Joshua said. "I know that you can't keep them clean the way things are now. Return to *The Lily* if you become soiled, and I will make sure your new clothes are returned to their perfect condition. But do try to keep them clean; and if you slip up and soil them, just return to me. You must be clean when you meet my father."

With that, he shifted into first gear, and took off down the road. The three men stood staring for a moment. Then Ernie looked into his white bag and shook his head.

"I sure hope these clothes fit," he said. "Especially the shoes."

"Well, I am starving," said Jake. "I just want to get to that restaurant!" With that reminder, the men headed down the block to *The Lily*, shopping bags in hand.

When they got close, they realized that *The Lily* was the tallest building on the block, and there was a tower on top that went even higher.

"Hey," said Rich. "I have seen the lights of this building from the dump. At the top it looks like a giant plus sign."

Ernie nodded, feeling a little uneasy. "Joshua said they were expecting us, but how will they know who we are? How did he know we would come?"

Rich slowed down. "Do you think they will accept us? They might just call the cops when we walk up." He grabbed Ernie's arm to stop him. He brushed his shirt off, and finger-combed his hair. "Does this look OK?"

Jake stopped as well, and stood just behind Rich, mimicking his attempts to make himself neater.

Ernie smiled wryly. "I don't think there is anything we can do to look like we belong there, Rich. We just have to believe what Joshua said and see what happens." He looked past Rich at Jake and frowned.

"Stop it."

Ernie led the way toward the door, where a smiling man in an expensive suit met them. He held the door open wide. "Welcome!" he boomed. "We have been waiting for you." He looked behind them, and then frowned. "Is this all of you?"

"Yes," said Ernie. "Joshua told us to come here and get something to eat, and then we will go back and tell the others."

"Very good," said the man. "I am Michael, the Maitre d' at *The Lily*."

He waved his hand toward an arched doorway through which Ernie could see a room filled with tables but only about half-filled with diners. Ernie's stomach growled loudly.

"It's good to eat when you are hungry," Michael said, looking kindly at Ernie, "So let me show you where you can freshen up while we prepare your meal. Will you follow me?"

Ernie nodded, and he, Jake, and Rich followed Michael down a

returned.

"I didn't order that," said Jake. "I'm not eating it."

The server had gone, and neither Ernie nor Rich knew how to reply. Rich snatched his cordial glass and drank the contents down in a gulp. He wiped his mouth, then choked and began coughing. He quickly took a drink of the water and sputtered a little while, clearing out his throat. Ernie ignored Jake, but he was troubled. He finished his little glass of wine, turning his mind back to Joshua.

All too soon, the meal was finished. Ernie stood up and looked for the waiter. A young woman came over to the table and questioned them to make sure the meal was all right. Ernie assured her it was, and then she smiled.

"Since your bill has been paid, the only thing that's left is for you to have a pleasant day."

Ernie thanked her, and they stepped outside in their new clothes and began to walk. Ernie felt himself walking a little taller and trying to see his reflection in the windows they passed. He caught a glimpse of Jake in the window, falling behind. He turned around and saw Jake just disappearing down an alley.

Ernie pointed it out to Rich, who shrugged and kept walking. Ernie kept looking back and soon Jake caught up, carrying his new clothes in a bundle. He was wearing his old clothes.

"What are you doing?" Ernie asked. "Why would you put those stinking clothes back on? Look! You're wadding up your suit--it's going to get wrinkled!"

"I don't want to be seen in these clothes at the dump," Jake said. "People will beat us up and rob us. It's better to keep a low profile." With that, he signaled to a man they knew who was walking past. He showed the man his new cell phone, and the man handed him a small paper bag and took the phone.

Ernie shook his head sadly, while Rich snorted contemptuously. "It figures."

They continued on toward the dump, but Jake fell behind again. Ernie didn't look back this time. He set his mind on what was ahead of them. He wondered how his neighbors at the dump would react.

He glanced around the restaurant at the other patrons, and realized that there was no common denominator of race, education level, or class. They were joined together because they had been called by Joshua, and part of his calling was to prepare them to care for one another.

*I can't wait to share the good news with everyone at the dump,"* Ernie thought to himself. *I am not the first and I will not be the last. I must do my part to share this wonderful news!*

As he continued to look around, he thought, *This is going to be a huge place Joshua is making. I figured it was an apartment building or something, but I bet it's way bigger than that. It must be a whole city!*

The last course was cleared away, and a different server approached the table bearing a carved wooden tray. On it was a curious flatbread, cut into three pieces, on a silver plate. Next to the plate were three cordial glasses filled with red wine.

"We didn't order this," said Jake.

The server nodded. "This has been ordered by Joshua. He asked that you remember him as you eat and drink."

He continued to serve them, placing the silver plate in the center of the table. He put a fresh napkin in front of each man where their last plate had been. Then he placed the cordial glass near the napkin. The three men looked at the server but didn't move. The moment seemed very solemn.

"Take," the server said, indicating the flatbread. "Eat it, and remember what Joshua has done."

Ernie took a bite of the flatbread, and nodded. It was delicious; he remembered the instructions, and turned his mind toward Joshua as he ate. Rich took a bite of his flatbread.

"Mmm. Please thank Joshua for us," he said.

"You must thank him yourself," the server said.

Rich looked down at the pocket that held his cell phone and pointed questioningly. The server nodded and smiled.

Jake watched Ernie and Rich eat with a little smile on his face. Ernie sipped the red wine and remembered what he had been thinking about in the shower. His face flushed red. He suddenly wished for somewhere more private, but the moment passed, and his sense of composure

long, carpeted hallway. He opened one of the doors, and Ernie saw that one side of the room was filled with private showers. On the other end, there was a dressing area with two comfortable sofas and floor-to-ceiling mirrors. A buffet along the back wall held shampoos, razors, shaving cream, lotions, and cologne. Michael opened a closet that held lush towels, hand towels and wash cloths.

"This should supply everything you need, gentlemen. When you are ready, someone will show you to your table."

He paused, and turned back in the act of walking through the door. "May I assume you would like an appetizer at table while you order?"

Ernie nodded, wordlessly. Michael nodded back and went out.

The three men stood holding their bags, staring at each other.

"Wow-wee!" Jake was the first to break the silence. "What did we stumble into?"

He dropped his bag on the floor and started going through the things on the buffet. "What is this stuff?" He sniffed, then closed his eyes in appreciation. "Smells great, but is it soap or lotion?" He squirted some out into his hand and rubbed it in. Ernie picked up the bottle and read the back.

"It's hair gel."

Jake dropped it and colored. He grabbed a bar of soap that was wrapped in paper. "Well, I know what this is, and I'm going to get a shower!"

"I don't know any more about this than you," Ernie called after him. "I just read the back."

"Whatever," Jake's muffled voice drifted from behind one of the curtains, followed by the sound of the water hitting the floor. Ernie shrugged. He and Rich each got what they needed from the buffet and stepped into separate shower rooms.

When Ernie stepped behind the curtain, he found the shower floor was paved with river rocks. The light seemed to be coming through the walls, somehow. Philodendron vines cascaded down on one side, and a row of pegs peeked out through the heart-shaped leaves. On the other side, there was a low bench, with a hand-held shower attached to the wall. Above that was a rain dome.

Ernie disrobed and put his clothes on a couple of the pegs that peeked through the green leaves. The last peg held a brand new white robe.

The water felt so good; it was wonderful to get clean and be warm at the same time. Ernie scrubbed up and rinsed, several times, his mind on the promises Joshua had made. He imagined first that the dump was gone, and in its place was a beautiful new city, with gardens and parks and lots of elbow room. It was the kind of place he imagined when he heard Joshua talking. It was almost as if Joshua had placed a longing deep inside him--a longing for beauty, kindness and peace--and Joshua had put that longing there just so he could fulfill it.

Ernie thought of himself, and his old life. As he scrubbed out the sand that was stuck in his scalp, he suddenly remembered Melissa, and how she used to tease him about styling his hair. What would she think if she could see him now? He felt an urge to talk to her, to tell her how wrong he had been, but what could he offer her? He felt the tears well up, and was glad for the water streaming over his hair and down his face.

He thought of her dark hair, curling under the veil during their wedding ceremony. She was out of reach for a while that day, her beauty hidden under a veil. He remembered the moment when he had lifted it; it was such a small thing to lift. But what separated them now was like an impenetrable wall. Alcohol and what came after had destroyed his vow, and she had said she would never forgive him.

His mind ached when he thought of how much he had thrown away, but then he remembered Joshua, how he now had hope for the future. Would she listen to his apology?

Though he felt the answer would be "no," he wanted to try. He owed her that, at least, and even if she wouldn't listen, he would try to tell her how much he missed her, and how he longed to be a husband and a father once again. Even if she did reject him, she should know the truth about how he felt now.

And if she listened, he could tell her the source of his hope. Ernie felt sure that Joshua would want him to bring his wife and child with him when they went to the new place to live. He stood under the warm water imagining the three of them together once again, in a place without heart-

steak with mushrooms in the gravy, but he couldn't pronounce the name. There were roasted red potatoes, and other dishes came and went. Each seemed like a wonderful surprise, arriving at just the perfect time.

Everyone seemed to know who Joshua was. At a table a little ways away, two women were talking:

"I remember right after my third child was born," the older woman was saying to her friend. The story seemed difficult for her to tell. She took a drink of her water, which had just been filled from the fountain.

"I was exhausted, and my bills were piling up. I was alone. . ." Her eyes filled with tears at the memory. "My boyfriend, whom I had left my husband for, had just left me, and my older children had been removed after I was arrested for using meth. I had lost every good friend I ever had, and I didn't know where to turn. That's when Joshua found me, standing by the river with my newborn in my arms."

"Joshua put his arms around me and told me to just rest. He picked up my newborn and I'll never forget how he put his hand on that little head. My baby was premature, and his head was so small that the entire thing fit inside Joshua's palm."

She paused, and dried her eyes.

"I wish I could have seen him." the younger woman said.

"He was a beautiful baby," the mother said, "but I didn't know how I would care for him. When Joshua told me to rely on him, and promised that he would take care of all of us, I believed him. Sometimes it was hard, because I kept trying to fix things myself, but kept failing. Joshua reminded me to trust him, and he has never let me down. I have believed in him ever since that day, and I'll continue to believe him!"

She smiled, and her determination melted into joy. "I can't wait to see what he has planned! And now, you're coming, too! What do you think it'll be like?"

Ernie looked at the other men, but neither of them seemed to notice the women's conversation. They sure seemed to be enjoying their meal, though. Ernie went back to his dinner, thinking about what he had heard.

It had never occurred to him that the others here had already met Joshua, and were planning to live at the new place Joshua was designing.



was definitely a new man.

He called back over his shoulder. "You guys ready yet?"

Jake stepped out from behind the curtain shaking his head. "Trying to get everything you can, aren't you?"

"What do you mean," asked Ernie, turning toward Jake. "It's a free gift. If they offer me a haircut, why shouldn't I take it?"

Jake shook his head. "Nothing is free, my friend. Haven't you learned that yet?"

Rich stepped out from behind his curtain. "Joshua said unbelief was a deal-breaker, Jake. Are you saying you don't believe him?"

Jake shrugged. "I just don't want to get stuck if we have to somehow pay for all of this."

"None of us could ever pay for any one of these things, Jake," Ernie replied. "Do you know how much this suit probably cost?" He felt the rich fabric he was wearing.

"We can't afford to even breathe the air of this beautiful place. If we don't accept it as a gift, we can't have any of it. It is too far above us. The only way we can receive it is as a gift."

Rich nodded in agreement with Ernie, then nudged Jake. "Come on, aren't you hungry?"

Jake nodded, and they both followed Ernie into the hallway. Soothing music grew louder as they approached the entrance through which they had first come. Michael was there, speaking to a couple who had just entered. He nodded them toward the dining room, where a dimpled woman was waiting to seat them.

Soon, they were enjoying the most delicious food they had ever eaten. Their table was laid with white china, edged in gold, and they drank from carved crystal glasses. The ceiling of the dining room was separated into sections by gilded arches, and above each table was a different colorful painting. The one over their table reminded Ernie of something he had seen once in a museum.

A fountain of the purest water splashed into a large golden basin in the center of the room. Ernie watched a server fill a glass from that fountain and realized that from that fountain, everyone's glass was filled.

He tried to remember the food: The main entree was some kind of

ache, a place where he could be the kind of man he had always wanted to be: A protector, a provider, a man who belonged.

*What has happened to me? Ernie wondered. How did I get so cold, so uncaring? And why do I suddenly realize all this now?*

In his memory, he heard his daughter, Annie, screaming for him in the dark, while Melissa strapped her into her car seat.

"Daddy!" she said, pulling at the straps. "Daddy!"

Ernie remembered how he had felt that night: It was as if his heart had been made of granite. He remembered looking into his glass of whiskey, worried about what the neighbors might be thinking, and angry that Annie was so loud. His real concern was steadying the glass so he could drink instead of splashing it onto himself.

*But that was my daughter,* he protested to his earlier self, remembering her frightened eyes. *Flesh of my flesh. She was crying because she didn't want to leave me.*

In his mind, he turned to look at Melissa. *And that was my beautiful wife, her face streaked with mascara, her nose swollen, her face red. If another man had hurt her like that I would have protected her, and shielded both of them. But it wasn't another man. It was me that did it. It was all my fault.*

And then worst of all, the memory of his grandpa suddenly flashed into his mind. Papa, who loved Melissa, and was so thrilled to be presented with his first great-grandchild. Papa, who put a hand on his shoulder, and congratulated him man-to-man that day he became a father. Papa, who showed him how to shoot a .22, and was there when he learned to cast his first fishing line. Papa, who had slumped in his chair at the news that Melissa had left, taking little Annie. Papa, who was now gone.

His heart, no longer stone, felt the pain of remorse. His mind, no longer befuddled by alcohol, made sense of it all and he finally knew the truth. It wasn't bad luck that had caused all the traumas in his life.

*It was my drinking,* he thought, then corrected himself, because even that excuse was a lie. *No, it was me.*

He scrubbed his scalp one more time and rinsed. The more he thought of and repented of his actions, the muddier the water had become, almost as if he was shedding his sins into the water. He felt his dark

thoughts washing out of his mind the same way the dirt was washing out of his hair. The water ran clearer and clearer, and he felt cleaner and stronger with each rinse. When he soaped up his chest, he imagined his broken heart healing. When he washed his face, he hoped he was washing the years away. Oh, to be a young man again, full of promises that he would actually keep!

It was a blessed thing that the warm water never ran out. Ernie's silent cry continued, as he remembered all he had done. He saw the truth all around him, the same way he saw the light in the shower. He didn't fully understand how he knew what he knew, but then his mind centered on Joshua.

*He has changed me somehow*, Ernie thought. He looked down at his vulnerable body, pale and weak, but clean. *I see my excuses for what they are now that I have the promise of a new life. I have faith that I will really become strong, instead of just pretending to be strong.* He thought of the meal that waited, the new clothes he would step into, and the new friends he would make: Friends who would accept him in his new role, and not judge him by his past sins.

*None of this would be possible without Joshua*, Ernie thought.

Later, wearing the white robe, he searched the drawers of the buffet and found nail clippers. He trimmed his nails, and then peered at himself in the mirror, and felt his chin. He really needed a shave.

He looked around for a second, and sure enough, there was an electric razor on a stand. When he had finished, and soothed his skin with a bracing splash of aftershave, a discrete knock startled him.

"Come in?" he said timidly.

An older man put his head into the room, but he didn't look at Ernie directly.

"Michael sent me to ask if any of the gentlemen would like to have their hair trimmed."

Ernie ran his fingers through his hair and felt the length.

"Yes, I could use a trim," he said.

The man entered with a small bag and went to the closet. He pulled a black stool out and put it in front of the mirror, patting it so Ernie would sit down. When he did, the man shook out a gray cape and fastened

it over Ernie's shoulders. The scissors began and soon Ernie's ragged locks were trimmed neatly. While he watched his hair being shaped, he realized that this was the best haircut he had ever had in his life.

The older man brushed the hair off Ernie's shoulders, and removed the cape.

"Anyone else?" he called. His only answer was silence.

"I guess I'm the only one," said Ernie. "Thank you very much."

The man bowed his head and smiled, then began packing up his bag. Ernie got up to go get dressed.

He reached into the bag and pulled out the beautiful clothes one by one. He fingered the fabric and looked at the linings, and even noticed the seams. The neck of his shirt fit perfectly, and the sleeves were just the right length. The pants were comfortable and stylish, and again, were a perfect fit.

He looked at his shelter shoes on the floor and shuddered. It was amazing how out-of-place and shoddy they looked to his eyes. The bright green that was jaunty at the dump looked gaudy here, and each bit of dirt stood out plainly.

He pulled on the white socks, and then reached for his new shoes. He hoped they would fit as well as everything else had. They were made of white leather, the perfect shade to match his pants. Every part of them was white, even the soles, and he slipped his foot inside.

He expected them to be uncomfortable because they were dress shoes, but these fit as if someone had carefully measured his entire foot and created the shoes based on those measurements. He put the other one on and stood up carefully. He took a few steps across the room. Ernie wondered if it might be his imagination, but it seemed like the word "peace" was pressed into the thick carpet where he had just stepped.

*These are amazing!* he thought.

He slipped his jacket on, then suddenly remembered something and went back to get it from his old shirt pocket. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit, and left his old clothes hanging on the wall.

When he went back into the main room, the stool had been replaced and the older man was gone. Ernie checked his look in the main mirror one more time while he ran his fingers through his dark hair. He