

The day was warming with the last of the summer sun, under a cloudless blue sky. Joe wasn't interested in the sky he was more interested in the tickling sensation under his left buttock. The feeling had bothered him for the last few corners. Something small pressed against him and he wriggled to shift the cause of his discomfort. He completely lost all concentration when, as he approached a T-junction, the sudden sharp pain caused by the sting of the wasp that had found itself mysteriously stuck in the gap between the back and the base of his car seat, made him thrust his hips forward, straightening his body. His right foot pressed down hard on the accelerator, causing the motor to turn at revolutions that the car had only ever experienced during its journey from the showroom to Joe's house, whilst being driven by the young man charged with delivering it.

Joe was thrust towards the entrance opposite, at the point of the T-junction, of a scrapyard. He never made it to the entrance, he shot onto the path of an articulated lorry, which had managed to maintain its speed as the lights had changed, which then bent and crushed and threw his car across the pavement into the wall of the scrapyard.

Joe knew very little of the accident when he opened his eyes. It was a few moments before he realised what had happened. He was no longer in the car but lying on the pavement. He sat up in a panic, patted himself down checking for injuries. His old jacket was unmarked, no scuffs on his elbow pads, no holes in the knees of his trousers. He felt his head and looked at his hands to see if there was any blood. His hands were clean. Having heard numerous stories of hip injuries in recent years he was relieved not to feel any pains in his bones or joints. It was a one in a million escape, he was completely injury free.

Joe stood up joyfully laughing, and looked around to see what was happening. His car was on its side, with its tail against the scrapyard wall. It did not take a doctorate in physics to realise which side of the car had been struck. Both side doors facing the sky had been smashed in. The body of the car was bent from the impact on the corner of the truck, it was resting on the side of the front half.

The jubilation evaporated when Joe saw a red smear was spread along the pavement and disappeared under the car. Passers-by stopped and held their breaths as they looked into the car, whilst others on the far side of the car were looking down at something else, with equal looks of horror on their faces. Some were holding their hands to their mouths. Others turned away from the accident, freely vomiting into the gutters or bins, or just onto the pavement. Some were not so squeamish and appeared to be absorbing every detail. Others went further.

"What happened?" asked Joe.

Only a few people from the crowd looked up. A roughly dressed man, wearing a floppy black hat, that looked like some leather crudely shaped to fit on his head, with a dark scraggly beard and moustache and wide open eyes, popped his head up quickly. "Isn't it obvious?" he asked, before immediately returning his gaze to the accident, and feverishly drawing on a large white sheet of paper, on top of a pile of papers he was holding. His jacket was sleeveless and made of dark fur, like his tunic. His shoes looked like thick pieces of leather he had stood on, and then wrapped around his feet and roughly tied the sides together. He reminded Joe of a caveman.

"They don't care man," said a voice from behind, in a deep Caribbean accent. It resonated with warmth and reassurance. Joe span around to see a man with long black dreadlocks, cascading over the shoulders of an immaculate suit in green tweed, and neatly trimmed beard, wearing a matching wide brimmed hat, a red striped open collared shirt under his waistcoat, no tie, and brown polished leather shoes. He was holding a large reefer and waving it around as he spoke. Through puffy and stoned eyes, he looked directly into Joe's. Next to him was an Asian who appeared to be from the Indian subcontinent, wearing a sharp dark suit, a white shirt open at the collar and a loosened crimson coloured tie, with black polished shoes.

"Well, some o' them might," said the Rastafarian, laughing gently.

"Who are you?" asked Joe. "What do you mean they don't care?"

"We're the welcoming committee friend, and you're dead," said the Indian. "I'm Dan and this is Dude." He spoke in a deep accent like he was from the southern states of the USA. His smile was wide and sharp at the edges, with clean white teeth.

Joe was taken back by the bluntness of the dark suited man. He turned and looked more closely at the people scrambling around the mangled car. He looked at the mess that was the front of the truck, and the sight of the truck driver staring in shock at the wreckage.

"Welcoming committee?" asked Joe. The world was starting to spin, he reached out to grab something and steady himself. Dude took his arm and supported him with a firm grip.

"Damn it, man! Stop tellin' 'em we're the welcoming committee," said Dude. Dan merely smiled.

"Find Lilly man," said Dude. "I take care o' Joe."

The Indian flicked two fingers from above his eyebrow, in a mock salute, and wandered off. Dude attempted to help Joe to the ground and sit him at the edge of the pavement. Joe pulled his

arm away. "I can get down myself," he said, lowering himself to the pavement. "I'm not decrepit! Who are you, anyway?"

"Like the man said, my name is Dude," was the reply.

"Dude? Really?" Joe was incredulous. "Is this some sort of hippy nonsense?" Then a thought occurred to him, 'Maybe I'm unconscious and this is all some sort of dream?'

Dude shrugged his shoulders. "Hippy nonsense? I look like a hippy?" He sighed. "Dude be my given name. Given t' me long ago, long before the ages o' man," he said. He took a draw on his reefer and slowly let out the smoke.

"Should you really be doing that?" asked Joe, looking at the Joint.

"Why not?" said Dude, "does it bother you?"

"Yes, it bothers me!"

"Chill man, your death is just the beginning. Y' gonna discover a lot o' new things."

Angrily Joe stood up. "This is nonsense!" he said, facing Dude. "This can't be real."

Dude sighed like a man who had seen it all before and slowly stood up.

"I must be fantasizing," said Joe. He scratched the top of his head.

Joe marched over to the people gathered around the car. There were sirens in the distance coming closer. "Hey," he shouted. "I'm right here."

The excited caveman popped up his head. "Oh it's you again," he said. A few others looked in Joe's direction. Some were too distracted to look. A couple were glaring at the carnage and writhing pressed tight against each other, their hands wandering over their excited bodies. Joe was flabbergasted by their amorous behavior, and then noticed more.

"Oh my god," gasped Joe. His eyes widened when he noticed the people who were rolling on the pavement in the blood.

Joe turned to look at Dude. "What the hell is going on? There's a couple making love in the blood," he said, pointing.

Dude took a draw on his joint. "Yes man, there's some that go that way." Dude put his arm around Joe's shoulders and turned him away from the carnage. "Y' know Jonah, y' got t' take it slow, just breath man, and feel the clean air inside," he said.

Dude was about to say more when Joe waved his hands in the air and turned to be face to face with Dude. "What the hell is your game!" demanded Joe. "Is this some kind of con?"

Dude was visibly surprised at the suggestion of a con, but he remained calm and his voice remained smooth like velvet, "No man," he said. "What kind o' con would I be playin', tellin' y' you're dead?"

Confounded by the question, "I don't know?" said Joe.

Dude put both of his hands on Joe's shoulders. They were big hands and yet gentle and soft as they soothingly caressed Joe's tense muscles. Looking directly into Joe's eyes he said softly, "You are dead, man."

"Then why does he see me? And them?" asked Joe, pointing at the stranger and those around him. "And why are those people having sex in public?"

"That's Ghan man. He's got some weird fetish man." Dude waved a hand in Ghan's general direction. "They all dead too."

Frustrated, Joe strutted up to the car to look inside and paused as soon as he could see the body pushed and crushed from the impact with the truck. He could still make out his face. the lifeless eyes still open and staring into space. The jaw absently shoved to the side. Hands, and arms strangely broken and twisted. Then through the windows he could make out parts of a woman's smashed body.

Joe stepped back. "Oh god!" he exclaimed. He swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I love that look on your face," said Ghan, some of those with him nodded and chuckled in agreement. "With your arms crossing like that, looks like you were having a fit."

"Shut up man," said Dude. "Y' know what I got t' do here. You're not makin' it easy."

"Dude, look at the way the car caught the woman, and drove her body across the pavement. You don't get that kind of spread often." He stepped back, laughing. "Look at that, her blood's spreading, and his is starting to flow a little more. Be a while yet before it hardens up." He went back

to his sketching. Ghan's hands moved rapidly, and with precision, capturing the details without having to rub anything out.

Another bystander piped up and said to Joe, "That was a great hit. That truck just smashed into you and threw you off the road and you hit the kerb and twisted and flattened that woman and just slid across the pavement and, wow!"

Joe was appalled. Dude once again put a comforting arm around him and waved away the spectators. "Come back here man," said Dude guiding Joe back to the kerb, and sitting down again. Joe looked at the tarmac under his feet.

"Listen, try something for me man," said Dude. Joe looked at Dude skeptically. "Please man, it's a simple thing," said Dude.

Joe shrugged and said, "Why not?"

Dude smiled. "Now just close your eyes and breath deep."

"That's it?" asked Joe.

"That's it man."

So Joe closed his eyes, and took in a deep breath, slowly. He immediately opened his eyes in surprise. He noticed and separated the range of smells that surrounded him. The cars on the road, mixed with the scents of the Cherry blossom from the trees along the road, to the smell of the tarmac and the blood on the pavement. There was the aroma of an exotic fragrance from Dude. Then there was the smell of sweat and Joe turned to see a man wearing a tracksuit run around a corner straight into a man dressed like Dude's friend Dan, in a sharp dark suit with a red tie, the collar closed and tie pulled up, and shiny black shoes. The smartly dressed man didn't flinch as the running stranger bounced off him onto the ground. A woman in a casual but stylish dress and Cuban heels, appeared a moment later, running up to the fallen man. She stopped and looked over noticing Dude.

"Hey Dude," she said. "How's it going?"

"Different every time," said Dude. "Y' havin' trouble, Bee?"

Bee smiled sarcastically and said, "No," and went over to the fallen man. She helped him to his feet, and put her hands on her hips. "Please don't run again," she said. "I really don't need the exercise."

The stranger looked at the sharply dressed man who had stopped him in his tracks. "He moves fast for a big guy," he said. "How did he get here so quick?"

"Same way I should have," said Bee. "Look, just come with us, and we'll get you processed and settled."

"But I can't be dead," said the runner.

"I know," said Bee, sympathetically. "But it happened. You're died."

"But look at me," said the runner. "I keep fit, I eat right. Don't drink too much. What about my kids, and my wife?"

"I'm sure that insurance policy you took out will soften the blow for her," said Bee's friend. "Your wife was wise to encourage you to take the policy."

"But a stroke," said the runner. "I mean that's just not right. I only just turned fifty." Bee put her hand on his shoulder sympathetically and led him away.

"And she can spend more time with her boyfriend," continued the dark suited man.

Bee glared at her colleague who smiled at her wickedly. The runner looked horrified. "This way," said Bee, leading him away, walking a little faster. She sneakily punched the big man in the ribs. He flinched with the strike from the diminutive Bee, and distanced himself from her as they walked.

Joe, turning back to Dude, asked, "Why is my sense of smell so much stronger?"

"Not stronger man. You're just more aware of it. Your world just got bigger, man. Y' know y'ain't wearin' glasses?"

Joe's hands reached for his face. It was true, his glasses were gone and he could see clearly. The sky was crystal clear, a rich blue. The sun was still half way to its meridian. He could feel its warmth on his face. He put his hand to the ground and felt the rough texture of the paving stones and the smoother finish of the kerbstone.

"So this is it?" asked Joe. "It's all over?"

"Yah man. Your life here be done."

Joe sighed. "This can't be right."

Dude sat down next to Joe, and took another pull on his reefer. "Y' know Joe, y' can't predict what the future's got for y'. Reality's a complicated thing, 'n' it's not for us t' understand it all. Would y' guess that a wasp was the reason for y' crashin'? Mmm mm, Jah man. It's a crazy thing."

"A wasp? Is that what I felt? A wasp sting?"

Dude nodded. "Y' don't shut the window right man. Y' leave a little gap 'n' in it goes, tired. 'n' it was restin' nice till y' come 'n' sit your arse down on it."

"I don't believe it." Joe put his face into his hands, just as he was struck on the shoulder. It was not a hard blow, but rather a sharp slap. Bringing his arms up to protect himself he turned to see a slender woman with long, wavy white hair glaring at him.

"Son of a bitch!" she shouted. "You killed me! Motherfucker!" This time she swung a small handbag at him.

Dan was behind her laughing. "Now now, Lilly," he said. "Be careful."

"Fuck you!" she snapped back confronting Dan, which only made his smile wider.

"You can say what you like, but you can't be doing harm to him, or anyone else. I'll let it go on this occasion, given the circumstances," he smiled amiably, through the obvious threat.

Instinctively Lilly shot back, "Or what!" with just the right amount of derision.

Dan had a look of relish in his eyes. Lilly was suddenly fearful, stepping back unable to keep Dan's gaze. Dude was quickly on his feet speaking in gentle tones. He stood in front of Dan, and said, "Now Dan man, the poor lady just died y' know. Y' see her make up, and the way she's set her hair? So fine, 'n' so elegant." He looked at Lilly. "The lady's wearin' her favourite blouse, with the frilly little sleeves. Y' think she make this effort for work?" Lilly looked Dude in the eye, and her own eyes softened. "No man, she was on the way t' see her grandson. She was going t' be with him all day. Can y' feel man?" Tears came up in Lilly's eyes. Dude continued in a gentle comforting voice, "She was gonna be with him all day, so her baby girl could be with her man. She was gonna give her a break.

Finally, she was doing somethin' meaningful for her girl." Lilly began to cry, and Dude opened his arms and she took his embrace. Softly Dude said, "She got so many plans for the day man. Whatever he wants, she was ready. And life's been cruel t' the lady."

Dude let go of Lilly and turned to Dan, he put his hand on Dan's shoulder and passed him the Joint saying, "Now take a little o' this man." Dan took the Joint and sucked the smoke in deep. "Chill," continued Dude, "'n' find a little generosity in that black heart."

"Alright, alright," said Dan breathing out. "You can let go of my shoulder now. Go on, get back t' your business."

Dude turned back to Lilly. "Y' know it's not his fault," said Dude, pointing at Joe. "Y' can't see an accident coming. Y' think he want t' crash 'n' die?"

Lilly looked away, she had taken out her handkerchief and was wiping her tears. "It was going to be such a special day. I've wanted it for so long."

"Ain't no right or wrong here, dear lady," said Dude.

"So what does this mean?" she asked. "What do we do?"

Dude laughed. "Y' can do a lot o' things." He threw his arms wide. "Whole o' creation out there waitin' t' be found. But we got t' get y' settled." He reached out and gently wiped away a tear.

Joe stood up. The guilt he felt was inescapable, even though a part of him suspected none of this was real. "I'm sorry," he said to Lilly.

Lilly looked at Joe, and Joe saw more sadness than anger in her face. "Fuck you," she said.

Joe winced. Then he told himself, 'It's not real.' With a mental shrug, he half smiled and turned to Dude. "So what now?" he asked.

"Like I said t' the lady, time t' get y' settled, it's time for processing," said Dude.

"Of course," said Joe. "And what's processing."

"Bureaucracy, man," said Dude, chuckling. "The necessary. Come it takes no time at all."

"Ok," shrugged Joe. "Please lead on."



Dan paused and scrutinized Joe. "Now Jonah, is that cynicism I'm sensing from you?"

Joe looked around, and becoming agitated he said, "This does not meet with expectations. I am apparently dead, having accidentally killed this lady, and the Welcome to the Afterlife Committee is a dope smoking Rastafarian and an Asian in a very sharp black suit, with a generous hint of menace about him."

"And your point being?" said Dan. Joe's frustration seemed to enliven him.

Joe replied, "Aliens would have been more convincing. This is obviously a fantasy. I am caught in a dream of my own making. Maybe I did crash, but I'm not really dead, instead I'm in a coma."

"And your mind created us? And all o' this around you?"

"Of course." Joe looked around and for the first time noticed there were people in a variety of dresses, through the ages. There were also people in the sky, floating freely through the air. Then he noticed the people floating outside windows.

"Hey," said Lilly. "I am not a figment of your fucking imagination."

Dan turned to Dude. "Did you do the breathing thing?"

"Yeah man."

"Hmm. What about showing him the mess over there?" Dan pointed at the wreckage of Joe's car.

Joe was annoyed. "This is ridiculous!" he said. "Just take me to processing. Whatever that is."

Dude and Dan shrugged and Dan said, smiling, "Well alright, just follow us."

Looking back at the accident before they left, they saw Ghan was still drawing, and the strange people reveling in the gore and violence. There were others just looking out of curiosity. A policeman had arrived and he had moved people back, except those he could not see. "You know, your car really made one big mess of me," said Lilly. "Good thing I had my purse with my ID in it."

"Ghan was right," said Dan. "Once they move that car, Lilly's gonna take a mighty long time to clean up."

Sirens could be heard as the emergency services arrived. "Come, let's go," said Dude. They started walking down the pavement away from the accident. Many people walked as if Dude's group wasn't there, others moved to make way. Dude turned to Dan, "Y' know that's for sharing man," he said. Dan smiled and returned the reefer to Dude.

As they walked Joe trailed behind, in his own thoughts, when a wasp flew by his head. He waved his hand to flick it away, but the wasp flew on as if oblivious of any attempt to swat it.

The pavement ran out as the streets and buildings disappeared. They were walking into the forest on a dry dirt track. There was a gentle breeze and the sky was still clear and bright. The air was crisp and Joe could make out the scents of the forest, in growing detail. Overhead he heard the birds, and their calls became more varied the deeper they went. High in the distance he saw objects fly above the trees. He could hear movement from the undergrowth. Dan rolled another Joint as they walked.

"So I'm wondering, are we going to heaven or hell?" asked Lilly.

"That's up to you," said Dan, lighting the joint. The smoke billowed from his mouth.

"Then I choose heaven," said Lilly laughing. She looked at the Joint. "Can I have some of that?" she asked.

"Of course," said Dan, holding a draw in as he spoke and passed the joint.

Lilly took a drag. Joe watched her to see her reaction. She stopped walking and her eyes rolled shut, as she held the reefer at shoulder height, and reached out to steady herself. Dan took her hand. There was a glint to his eye.

"Wow!" said Lilly. She opened her eyes, and a wide grin stretched across her face. "That is amazing," she said. "If weed was this good when I was alive, I would never have quit."

"Why'd you quit?" asked Dan, appearing genuinely perplexed. Lilly was surprised by his question, and for a moment didn't know what to say.

"Dan man," laughed Dude. "Why do y' want t' trouble the lady?"

"I'm just curious is all," said Dan.

"Hmm. Y' got a job t' do, so be doin' it right."

"Alright Rasta man. Don't be getting all worked up now."

"Don't be callin' me Rasta Man."

"Dress like that what else am I gonna call you?"

"You know better man."

Lilly was distracted by the exchange, and then her eyes widened with a possibility. "Ooh, I just had a thought," she said. "Will we get to meet our family and friends?"

"Can't be predictin' the future lady," said Dude. "There's lots o' comin's 'n' goin's, and there's plenty dead, y' know." Lilly looked away disappointed with the answer.

Joe turned to Dude curiously and asked, "So how did you know to be there when we died?"

"I know nothing till the moment come. The possibilities are many," said Dude. "Imagine man, y' might've survived."

"So we might not meet the people we knew before? What about my mother and father?" asked Lilly.

Dude turned to look at her. "Your momma 'n' poppa got great love for y' Lilly, there ain't no doubtin' it, and when they die, they move on."

Lilly's thoughts turned inward.

"I'd like to meet my wife," said Joe. "If this is all real, I know she'll be here and she'll be pleased to see me."

"So what are y' sayin'? Seeing your wife's gonna make it real?"

"Call it my litmus test," said Joe. "She would wait for me. Just as I would have waited for her."

"Wow," said Lilly, cynically. "Listen to the romantic."

"I hope your right, man," said Dude, seeing the certainty in Joe's face. He turned and glanced at Dan.

Dan looked at Joe and said, "Maybe you should try a little bit o' that joint."

Joe immediately raised his hands. "Oh no," he said. "I tried it when I was a student, and it really didn't do anything for me. Just made me cough a lot. Never understood what people saw in it after that."

Dude laughed. "That grass y' smoke in Jake's room? The boy that quit in the first year?" he asked.

Joe nodded. "How do you know that?"

"I know that wasn't weed. His dealer took it from his garden, dried and crushed up he sold it. He got burned in a deal y' know, and was desperate for the cash."

"Really?" said Joe. "But Jake seemed to enjoy it so much."

Dude just laughed. "Maybe tomorrow y' try the real thing man, or maybe next week." He took the Joint from Lilly. "But if y' be dreaming, first y' got t' decide what it's gonna do t' y'."

"You have no idea what you're missing," said Lilly. "Sure making this shitty day a little easier to take."

Both Joe and Lilly were startled when a naked young woman ran across in front of them, laughing and giggling, chased by a naked young man, oblivious to the group walking the path. They disappeared into the bushes. When Joe and Lilly turned back, they were surprised again when within the trees a door appeared, floating freely in the air. It was made of wood and had a wooden frame, and both were painted a plain white. The handle glistened in the light and looked like gold. They both walked around it, amazed at what they saw, instantly forgetting the naked couple. Dude and Dan watched them assess what they were looking at.

"Ooh you got the white door," laughed Dan. Joe and Lilly looked at him, nervous about what that might mean.

"Now," smiled Dude. "You go in there, 'n' I see you on the other side. 'n' trust," he glanced at Dan, "the colour don't matter."

Joe and Lilly looked at the door, floating a few inches above the ground. They walked around it again, and came back to the side where Dude and Dan were stood.

"The door is just hanging there," said Joe. "The other side is right here."

"Damn it! Just open the door and go in," said Dan.

Surprised by Dan's outburst, Joe responded, "Keep your hair on son. This is all new to me."

"This is your dream Joe, roll with it," said Dan.

Dude put his hand on Dan's shoulder. "Easy," he said. Dan stepped back.

Joe reached out and turned the handle, and instead of the forest he saw the backs of rows of white seats, on a chromed tubular metal frame. There were people through the door. Amazed, Lilly and Joe looked at Dude and Dan. Dan sighed, "Every time," and Dude, smiling, waved them to go through. They hesitantly stepped into the frame and the other side. The door shut behind them and when they turned it was gone.