

Arrangements

The news was difficult to hear. He stared at the floor for a few seconds and then looked up at the physician.

“How long?”

“Usually not longer than five or six months,” the physician said, quietly; “though, some people live a little longer.”

“Not much time.”

“I’m sorry the news isn’t better,” the physician said as he closed the chart. “It’s inoperable, it has spread, and there isn’t anything we can do to stop it.”

“I should have come in earlier. It started almost a year ago and I was too busy.”

“We have a room you can use until you feel like leaving. Is someone with you; someone to drive you home?”

“No.”

“Would you like us to call someone?”

“No. Thanks. I’ll manage.”

“Call us if you need anything or if you just want to talk.”

“OK, yeah, I will.”

“We can make arrangements with people who can help.

I'll make the referral when you tell me you want it."

"Doc?"

"Yes?"

"Will it be painful?"

"Pain can be managed. You'll be comfortable."

"What about my mind? Will I be clear or will the drugs make me sleepy?"

"You control everything. We'll work together to make you comfortable, alert, and pain free."

"All right; well, I need to get back to the office. Six months? Maybe? Could be less?"

"No one knows exactly, but not much time."

"Thanks."

He left the physician's office and drove back to his real estate company. He parked three blocks from the main entrance and sat in his car. He studied his hands as they rested on the steering wheel. They were the same hands that drove him to the doctor's office; yet now, they looked vulnerable, almost fragile. He tried to take a deep breath, but he couldn't. His breathing seemed wrong; his heart was beating wrong; his body felt thick and the car felt too small and too hot. He needed to get out.

He opened the door, stepped out, and started toward his office complex. He didn't want to talk to anyone when he arrived, so he stopped in at a deli, and bought a sandwich and drink. When he walked into the office complex, he told his receptionist, "Traci, I'm going to grab a bite and make some calls: no interruptions."

Traci nodded and turned back to her computer.

He walked into his private office and closed the door. He never closed his door when he was alone. A closed door meant he was meeting with an agent or a client. He worked

with people. He could not accomplish much when he was alone.

He dropped the sandwich bag on his desk. It seemed heavier than it should be. He had already forgotten what kind of sandwich he had ordered. The fluid in his cup was tasteless and he tried to remember if he had asked for water.

“Mr. Petersen?”

The voice on the intercom surprised him.

“Yes, Traci, what is it?” he answered trying to sound irritated, yet thankful for something that seemed normal.

“I know you don’t want to be interrupted, but there’s a man here who says he must speak with you regarding your sandwich. Can you see him?”

“My sandwich?”

“Yes. It’s about your sandwich; he thinks there’s been a mix-up.”

“Send him back.”

He walked to the door and opened it in time to see an older man walking toward his office. The man was walking with a cane and he carried a sandwich sack from the deli next door.

“I believe we swapped,” the man said. “At least I hope we did.”

“Let’s see.”

“This is a turkey club on sourdough and I ordered a Ruben on dark rye; quite different sandwiches.”

The man handed him the sack and continued walking into the office. “Did you order the turkey club?” the old man asked. “I like that sandwich; but today the Reuben sounded too good to pass up.”

“Yes, I ordered the club,” he said, though he was not

certain. "I'll get your sandwich."

"Eating alone?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I need to catch up on some things before two o'clock."

"Excuse my manners," the man said. "My name is Clifford Gannett and I am not related to the Boston or New York Gannett's. They're all rich. Everyone calls me Cliff."

The old man stood with his hand extended for a handshake.

"People don't shake hands anymore?" Cliff asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my name is Jeff Petersen."

The two men shook hands.

"Oh," Cliff said, looking around the office while he continued to shake Jeff's hand slowly. "Are you the Petersen of 'Petersen Real Estate and Property Management'?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then this is your office complex, isn't it? The whole thing?"

"Yes, it is."

"I am impressed, Mr. Petersen," Cliff said as he gently released Jeff's hand.

"Please, call me Jeff. I guess now you have your sandwich you can be off and get on with your day."

"Not quite," Cliff said. "I can get on with my day, but I need to do that here."

"Oh?" Jeff asked. "Who are you seeing?"

"You."

"I'm sorry," Jeff said. "I don't remember an appointment."

"I didn't make it, yet."

“If you see my receptionist, she’ll set up a time for us to meet.”

“It doesn’t concern Traci,” Cliff said.

“Do you want to sell a home?” Jeff asked. “I don’t handle listings; but we have several agents who would be happy to help you.”

“Jeff,” Cliff said as he leaned forward on his cane. “I don’t want to sell or buy anything. You are the person I need to talk with about this matter.”

“What are you selling?” Jeff asked, as he began to suspect Cliff had swapped the sandwiches to get into his office to make a sales pitch for advertising on some park bench.

“Arrangements,” Cliff said. “I make arrangements: final arrangements.”

“Get out of my office,” Jeff said as he began to feel angry. “You’ve got the wrong person. Get out!”

“Are you angry?” Cliff asked, softly.

“Leave,” Jeff said. “Leave now. I’m busy.”

“Shall I wait for you in the lobby?” Cliff asked.

“No!” Jeff said, tersely.

“Where should I wait?”

“I don’t want to see you again.”

“You will,” Cliff said. “In a few hours you will be curious. You will wonder who I am, how I know what I know, and what I am offering you.”

This must be a swindle, Jeff thought. How could this man know anything about my situation? That’s right! Anyone could walk up to anyone else and say ‘final arrangements’ and trigger all kinds of associations: final arrangements for a wedding, final arrangements for a vacation, or final arrangements for a parent’s care. The words were a blank slate and he had jumped to the conclusion that gave

them meaning.

He took a deep breath, studied the old man for a few seconds, and said, "OK, I'll bite, what are these arrangements? Be specific."

"I am part of a group that works to make people happy."

"All right," Jeff said. "How do you do that?"

"We help them have the *perfect day*," Cliff said. "We make the arrangements for a day that will delight in every way; from the smallest detail to your greatest dreams."

"Who are your clients?" Jeff asked. "Celebrities? Millionaires?"

"Anyone," Cliff said. "However, our clients must meet certain criteria."

"Rich?"

"Not necessarily."

"Why did you choose me?"

"You are going to die."

"Get out," Jeff said, trying to control his growing anger. "Don't come back!"

"I'll leave," Cliff said. "But I may not stay away; I'll return when you want me to return."

"That will never happen."

"You can't be too sure of that," Cliff said. "Sometimes it's the little things that change lives. Do you remember when you fell down the stairs during your sophomore year in high school? You said someone pushed you; but that wasn't true, was it? A screw was sticking up from the second step. It caught your shoe. You took a nasty fall and broke your wrist. It never healed right, did it? That little screw ended your football ambitions and you started working after school shredding documents at a real-estate office. That little screw made a real-estate tycoon. That screw was exactly

where it needed to be to give you this beautiful office. Isn't that amazing? I think it is."

"Who are you?"

"I make arrangements."

"Where did you get the information about me? How do you know these things?"

"That's not important; not right now. The big question is do you want help arranging your perfect day?"

"Do you have a business card?"

"Yes," Cliff said. "It's in your sandwich bag. Call me tomorrow."

Cliff left the room only slightly faster than he had entered it. As he walked out the doorway, he turned and asked, "Did I mention we guarantee your satisfaction? A 100% guarantee!"

"What if my 'perfect day' ends with not paying for it?" Jeff asked, smugly. "How's that fit into your plans?"

"They're not my plans," Cliff said. "They are your plans and if that's what you want, why not?"

Cliff ambled toward the front of the office complex. Jeff sat at his desk, grabbed the sandwich bag, and pulled out the business card. It was a plain white card, on flimsy cardstock with the name 'Clifford Gannett.' Beneath the name were the words 'for arrangements call' and it listed a toll free number. On the back of the card were the hand-written words, "If you don't want to pay, that's fine, too."

Jeff dropped the card on his desk.

The next morning Jeff was at his office at 7:30. He sat at his desk tightly pinching the business card. He closed his eyes and tried to dismiss the coincidences. How did this man know about his medical situation? How did he know about what happened in his sophomore year? Jeff felt irri-

tated that the old man was right. He was going to call him. He needed to find out who he is and what he is selling. He knew those questions would gnaw at him until he had the answers.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number. The phone rang twice.

“Hello Jeff,” Cliff said.

“You were right,” Jeff admitted. “I need to know more. Who are you and what are you selling?”

“I’m Cliff Gannett. I help with arrangements. I help people have the perfect day. Don’t you think everyone is entitled to at least one perfect day?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Jeff said.

He tried to word his next question to force Cliff into revealing more about these arrangements. “How can you guarantee I’ll have a perfect day? Can you control the weather? What can you do?”

“Whatever we need to do,” Cliff said. “I don’t have any power over the planet; however, the perfect day might happen regardless of the weather. It’s up to you. Are you still interested?”

“If I was interested, what would be next?”

“We need answers to questions, then there’s an interview, and if all goes well, we will have papers for you to sign; you know, all that legal stuff.”

“How much?”

“Oh, not too many, I think there are four.”

“No, not the paperwork, the price: how much does this cost?”

“You decide,” Cliff said. “Some people want to be generous at the end of their perfect day. They’re grateful. Some have been extremely generous; others find happiness being

stingy.”

“Give me a number,” Jeff said. “I don’t want this ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ talk; what do people usually pay?”

“I have no idea what people pay,” Cliff said. “I don’t handle the money. I’ll find out and let you know. No one has pressed that question before.”

“All right,” Jeff said. “When you know, call me.”

“Fine, I’ll do that,” Cliff said, “or maybe I’ll drop you a note. Would you like to start the process while I get that information?”

“What would I need to do?”

“Fill out the questionnaire,” Cliff said. “I’ll send it over. I’m sure I’ll have an answer about the typical payment soon.”

“How many questions?”

“I don’t know,” Cliff said. “I haven’t seen your questionnaire; but I’m sure it is long enough.”

“All right, I’ll look at it and get it back to you.”

“No hurry,” Cliff said. “We can do the interview when you have completed the questionnaire. Bye.”

Jeff hung-up the phone and leaned back in his chair. The questionnaire should be interesting. What do you ask someone if you are going to plan his perfect day?

He looked up and saw an envelope on the windowsill. He walked over to it, picked it up, opened it, and pulled out a booklet and a cover letter. The letter was from Cliff; it restated the conversation they had just minutes earlier, including Cliff’s promise to find out about the typical payment for services. The booklet was a questionnaire. On the cover was a warning, in bold print and all capital letters: **START AT THE BEGINNING AND ANSWER EACH ITEM UNTIL THE END. DO NOT READ AHEAD!**

Jeff fanned through the questionnaire. Neither the pages nor the questions were numbered. It had to be at least one hundred pages long. There must be thousands of questions.

He flipped the booklet open to the middle and glanced at an item. It asked him to list three people who had been mean to him. The item below it asked him to list three people to whom he had been cruel.

He flipped to the last page. The last item was, "Did you complete the items in order or did you flip to the end of the booklet?"

He closed the questionnaire and put it on his desk. He did not know if he would complete it. It would probably take too much time and he might not even want anything to do with this perfect day scam.

No rational person believes in the perfect day. Regardless of the planning and control, something always happens to break the spell of delight that any good day brings. Vacations, birthdays, holidays, graduations, springtime weekends when the flowers are just peaking up from the earth, offer only moments or perhaps an hour or two of happiness. The perfect day is a myth. It is a delusion that everything could ever be as he wanted it to be: no worries, no problems, no burnt toast, no bills, no crime, no world crises, and no disappointments.

Jeff noticed a small piece of paper protruding from the envelope. He slid it out slowly and saw a hand-written note.

Hi Jeff,

By now, you must be slipping into despair, and the prospect of a joyful day seems impossible. You are not alone; many people are discouraged. They believe the world is a bad place and that they alone can never be happy. They also believe that things can never change; however, consider this: have you had one-minute of perfection in your life?

Have you awoke one morning when you knew you were going to do something that was so important that the entire day felt special; better than all the others?

If you can experience it for a moment, then you can experience it for a day, a week or even longer.

Now, fill out that questionnaire and do it in order.

Kindest regards,
Cliff

PS: No one knows what the typical payment is for our service. No one cares enough about that side of the business to keep records.

Jeff worked diligently on the questionnaire for two weeks. The early questions were casual acquaintance stuff: what is your favorite movie; what foods do you like; what is your favorite song. Then the items moved on to more personal topics: how many hours do you sleep; what is your most common nightmare; how often do you pray. Jeff worked on the questionnaire during every spare minute of his day and into the evenings. On a few occasions, he wondered if he should be spending so much time answering questions about his life; was this really how he wanted to be spending his last days on earth?

At 2:45 in the morning, Jeff came to the last item in the questionnaire: "Did you complete the items in order or did you flip to the end of the booklet?"

He wrote, "At first, I skimmed through the booklet and flipped to the end; then, I completed the items in order." He laid the questionnaire down.

The doorbell rang.

I don't believe this, Jeff thought as he stood and walked toward his front door. *It isn't possible...*

As he opened the door, he heard Cliff's voice, "Are you ready for the interview?"

“Do you know what time it is?” Jeff asked.

“I had a hunch you might have finished the questionnaire and you might be eager to move on to the interview.”

“How long is the interview?” Jeff asked, yawning.

“As long as you want it to be,” Cliff said, as he stepped in.

“Do you want a drink?” Jeff asked as they walked toward the kitchen.

“No, I’m fine,” Cliff said. “Fix something for yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Jeff said.

They sat down at the kitchen table.

“Ready?” Cliff asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Are you a ‘good’ person or a ‘bad’ person?”

“What?”

“Are you a ‘good’ person or—”

“I try to be a good person,” Jeff offered, interrupting Cliff.

“So ‘good’ is something you must work at,” Cliff said. “It isn’t natural to who you are?”

“Will this whole interview be like this?” Jeff asked, yawning again. “Are you going to interpret each of my answers to every question?”

“We’re finished,” Cliff said as he rose from his chair.

“No, wait, don’t get mad,” Jeff pleaded. “I’m tired.”

“The interview is just that one question,” Cliff said. “You answered that ‘you try’ to be a good person. That’s all I need to know.”

“That’s all you need to know?”

“Is there something else?”

“Well, no, I guess not. I’ve made mistakes. There have been times I’ve been thoughtless and mean; but there have also been times I’ve been kind and generous. On balance I’ve tried to be a good person.”

“Fine,” Cliff said. “I’ll add that ‘on balance’ you try to be a good person.”

“Wait,” Jeff said. “Who get’s this report? Who wants to know if I am good or bad?”

“The committee.”

“What?”

“The group that is planning your perfect day.”

“Who are they?”

“You’ll meet them later; that is, if you continue with us.”

“How did you get my name? Who told you about me?”

“I get a name and address,” Cliff said; “sometimes a picture, sometimes information about the family. Each case is unique. The information comes down through the system.”

“Did my physician contact you?”

“No, we never get referrals from the medical profession. They are secretive about patients. They fret over privacy, law-suits, and that sort of stuff.”

“I need to know,” Jeff insisted. “How did you get my name?”

“When you meet with the committee, ask them,” Cliff said. “I’m sure they will tell you. Just tell them that would be the best ending to your perfect day: you want to know everything. They will tell you, there is nothing we would ever hide from you.”

“I’ll ask them,” Jeff said.

“One more thing,” Cliff said. “What is your favorite day

of the week?”

“Tuesday.”

“Thank you,” Cliff said. “I need to start thinking about how soon we can arrange your day. Would you like your perfect day to be on a Tuesday?”

“Yes, that would be fine.”

“We’ll start planning for a Tuesday,” Cliff said. “I know we’re at least a week away with all that needs to be arranged. I’ll get this back to the committee. If they decide we can do your perfect day, you will just need to sign some papers and pick the date.”

The rain plummeted down and the windshield wipers could not keep up. Jeff drove into the parking lot and tried to find a space close to his office. It was useless; he parked a block down and rummaged in his back seat for an umbrella.

He sat in the car as the rain continued without any sign of letting up. Resigning himself to his fate, he opened the door, sloshed through the puddles and hurried to get under the awning. He was quick; however, the blowing rain drenched his clothes and he could feel water seeping into his shoes. As he walked into his office, he found a note from Traci that Mr. Gannett was on his way with papers for his signature. Cliff arrived a few minutes later.

Jeff read each document carefully. Cliff kept suggesting that he take the papers to his lawyer for additional advice. The contracts were simple enough. The Perfect Day Company would provide services designed to bring happiness and joy to Mr. Petersen in exchange for a sum of money to be determined by Mr. Petersen. The contract’s longest parts described restrictions and refusals. The Perfect Day Company would not do anything illegal, immoral, unethical, or of questionable social behavior and they required the same of Mr. Petersen. The Company or Mr. Petersen could end the agreement at any time, without explanation, and nei-

ther party would complain about the other.

It was all above board and friendly. He signed the papers, made copies, and put them in his file. As Cliff left his office, he asked, "How's next Tuesday; around eight-thirty in the morning?"

Jeff answered, "Yes, let's do it."

The following Monday evening, Jeff's phone rang. Cliff was on the line and he said he had some things to drop off. Could he come by for a few minutes?

When he arrived, Jeff answered the door and Cliff walked into the house carrying a briefcase and a dark leather portfolio.

"Are you alone?" Cliff asked.

"Yes."

"Sometimes people have company over the night before their perfect day," Cliff said. "Not everyone, some people prefer solitude, a little time for reflection."

"I guess I just wanted to get a good night's rest; I don't know what to expect tomorrow."

"About 8:30 in the morning a handsome young man will knock at your door and you will leave in a limo for breakfast," Cliff said. "It's all right here in this itinerary."

Cliff handed him the portfolio that contained a few pages of parchment-like sheets of paper.

"You understand," Cliff continued, "that you may stop your perfect day at any time and we'll get you home as soon as possible?"

"Yes, that was clear in the contracts. I understand."

"Or if you prefer, we'll take you somewhere else and do something different."

"Yes, I know that, too."

“Any questions? Any concerns?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll leave you with this,” Cliff said as he handed the briefcase to Jeff.

“What?”

“That’s yours,” Cliff said. “It is a gift. See? Your name is on that brass nameplate. It has a few items we thought you might enjoy.”

Jeff opened the briefcase. It contained a bottle of a very exclusive cognac and a small brandy snifter. It also had two small boxes of cookies, three of his favorite candy bars, and a stack of fifty-dollar bills.

“What’s the money for?” Jeff asked.

“I don’t know,” Cliff said. “It must be important for some reason. That’s usually how they pick things to include. You might need it tomorrow.”

“Am I supposed to take this with me?”

“If you want to,” Cliff said; “but I know the cognac is for tonight. Have one or two glasses but don’t over do it: it’s smooth and it’s very potent. You’ll want to be as alert as possible tomorrow. Everything is planned for you and you should enjoy it.”

“Will you be there?”

“Would you like me to be there?” Cliff asked. “I could be, though I fear I would slow you down. Perhaps I could catch up with you when you meet with the committee at the end of the day?”

“That would be fine.”

“Great! I’ll say good-night for now and I’ll see you tomorrow,” Cliff said as he left the house.

Jeff prepared for bed and poured a small glass of the co-

gnac. He savored the remarkably subtle tastes of cinnamon and ginger, and the dark brown color of the liquid that so gently spread across his tongue. The aroma filled his head. Cliff was right. It would be easy to drink too much of this stuff; however, he would have just one more and save the rest for tomorrow night. If this cognac is the preview, tomorrow will be fascinating.

The alarm clock was abrupt. The radio blared and Jeff concluded he would not get away with having had four glasses of the cognac. He must pay the price. He pulled himself from bed, showered in a stupor, and dressed slowly from the pile of clothes he had stacked on a chair after the second glass of cognac. As he tied his shoes, the doorbell rang. He glanced at his watch: 8:30, exactly.

“Coming!” he called out as he stuffed his keys into his pocket and started toward the door.

The doorbell rang again.

“Coming!” Jeff called out as he reached for the doorknob and swung open the door.

“Good morning, sir,” the young man said. “I’m Dirk; I’ll be driving you to breakfast. Can I help you with anything?”

“No,” Jeff said, “I’m not taking anything.”

“Perhaps the briefcase, sir?”

“I think I’ll leave it.”

“It has your spending money.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Jeff grabbed the briefcase and his itinerary.

“Ready,” he said as he returned and they left the house.

The limousine was a stretch model, midnight blue, with a white leather interior. It had a sunroof, a bar, a television, and a stereo that was playing classical music: Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, Spring.

“Ready, sir?” Dirk asked.

“Yes,” Jeff said. “How long until breakfast?”

“About fifteen minutes,” Dirk said. “We’re going to a new place just off the expressway.”

The limo glided away from the curb and sped along the road as if suspended above a high-speed rail. Jeff stared out of the darkly tinted windows. They arrived at the restaurant and Jeff was walking through the main entrance in only minutes.

Cliff was right, Jeff thought, I should have stopped at two glasses of cognac, I’m not very alert, and that didn’t seem like fifteen minutes.

“This way, sir,” the *maître d’* said as she led him to a private dining area. “We have selected items we believe you will enjoy; if you want anything else, we will have it for you promptly.”

“Thank you,” Jeff said as he sat down at this private dining table and three wait staff poured juice and coffee, and lifted silver serving covers that revealed croissants, scrambled eggs, jellies, and assorted meats.

He reached for the coffee first. He knew he needed that; he wanted to be more alert. The coffee was dark, full-bodied, and the flavors gently washed through his mouth. He could taste citrus, then apricot, and then hints of chocolate. The coffee tasted so good he did not want to swallow it; he did not want to lose the experience of its magnificent taste. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the aroma of the coffee in the cup and the sensation of the brew swirling through his mouth. It was as if he was tasting coffee for the first time and he had the good fortune of having the perfect cup.

Everything on the table, every morsel of food, every breadcrumb, and each spoonful of strawberry preserves was perfection. The tastes and textures showered his senses and he struggled between the utter self-absorption

of eating, and the opulence of his private dining room. He was ready for the day to end, right now. He leaned back in his chair and realized for the first time that Dirk was standing by the door.

“Ready, sir?”

“Yes,” Jeff said. “Let me settle my bill and we’ll be on our way.”

“Would you like to take anything with you?” the waiter asked.

“Yes,” Jeff said. “I’d like a cup of coffee.”

The waiter handed him a travel mug of coffee and announced, “Breakfast is on us. We thought that would make a great start to your day.”

“Thank you,” Jeff said, as he started to leave the room, then he paused and pressed a fifty-dollar bill into the waiter’s hand.

“What’s next?” Jeff asked Dirk as they returned to the limo.

“We’re going to the park,” Dirk said. “Unless you’d rather do something else.”

“No,” Jeff said. “The park’s fine: why the park?”

“It must be important,” Dirk said. “The committee always makes great itineraries.”

The limo was back on the expressway within a minute of leaving the restaurant. They sped up and once again, the limo felt like it was gliding, suspended above a high-speed rail, then it slowed quickly and came to a stop as they pulled off onto the expressway’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Jeff asked.

“Everyone’s stopped,” Dirk said. “I think there’s an accident or something ahead. Yes, an accident: I can see the cars about fifty yards up there.”

“I don’t see ‘accident’ on the itinerary,” Jeff said, amusing himself. “Does the TV work?”

“Yes, any channel on satellite or local,” Dirk said. “I don’t see any ambulances. May I leave you and see if I can help?”

“Sure.”

As Dirk started to get out of the limo, Jeff asked, “Do you think someone needs help?”

“I don’t know; but, I’ll do what I can.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Even if it’s not on the itinerary?”

They walked quickly toward the scene of the accident. One car was on its top, another was smashed at both ends. As they approached that car, they could hear a child calling out. A man ran up to them and told them he had called for help. He kept muttering to himself, “This is bad, this is bad, where are they?”

“The engines are turned off and I don’t smell gasoline,” Dirk said as he walked from one car to the next. “I don’t like it; but, we shouldn’t move anyone.”

“Move who?” Jeff asked as he started to feel disoriented.

“The people in the cars.”

“Right,” Jeff said. “So what do we do?”

“I can help the people in that car,” Dirk said as he motioned toward the car that was upside-down.

“You can talk to the girl in that car,” Dirk continued, motioning toward the car that had been crushed at both ends. “Her mom is not going anywhere for a while and the little girl needs someone to assure her everything is all right.”

“OK,” Jeff said. “I’ll talk to her.”

Jeff walked to the car and looked in through the wind-

shield. The girl was about five or six years old. She was in the middle of the back seat, secured in a car seat. The driver—a woman in her mid to late twenties—stared expressionlessly at the steering wheel. Jeff walked around the car, pulling on each door, trying to get in. The window on the front passenger door had been shattered. He pushed a few pieces of glass aside and leaned in to face the little girl.

“Hi,” Jeff said, feeling at a loss for words.

“Are you an angel?” the girl asked.

“No,” Jeff said, feeling self-conscious, “my name is Jeff.”

“My name is Alicia.”

“Glad to meet you, Alicia.”

“Is he an angel?” Alicia asked, motioning toward Dirk.

“He’s with me,” Jeff said. “We’re here to help.”

“My mom is hurt,” Alicia said. “The bag hit her. Is she all right?”

“Yeah,” Jeff said. “We’ll take care of her, I’m sure she’ll be fine once we get her out of this car.”

“Who are you?”

The woman’s question startled Jeff, and he could not conceal his surprise at her recovery.

“My name is Jeff,” he stammered, quickly. “You’ve been in an accident and your daughter’s here and she looks OK, and help is on the way.”

“Alicia?” the woman asked. “Where is she? Is she all right?”

“She’s here,” Jeff said. “In the back seat; look in the rearview mirror. Don’t turn around: just look in the mirror.”

“I can’t see her.”

“She’s all right. Don’t worry. Her car seat protected her. She looks fine.”

“Mommy!” Alicia cried, “I want you.”

“Your mom is all right,” Jeff said, leaning over the front seat and taking Alicia’s hand. “Do you hear that? Do you hear the siren? They’re coming and we will get your mom out of here and she will be fine.”

“Alicia?” the woman said, as her voice quieted to a faint whisper. “I love you, you are my treasure. Tell daddy he should get the convertible: the green one.”

“Did you hear that?” Jeff asked. “Your mom loves you; she said you are her treasure. Your mom also said to tell your dad to get the green convertible. You need to remember that because I’m sure your dad will want to know he can get a convertible.”

“Mr. Petersen?” Dirk said. “Fire and rescue needs you to get out of the way so they can get these doors off. Let’s go.”

Jeff and Dirk walked back to the limo.

“Not on my list,” Jeff said, “but, I’m glad we could help those people.”

“You have no idea how much you helped,” Dirk said.

“Well, I’m glad we could do something,” Jeff said. “Off to the park!”

The traffic cleared and the limo was back on the road, gliding swiftly and silently along the blacktop. For a moment, and only a moment, Jeff wondered if the accident was part of his perfect day. For some reason, deep in the recesses of his consciousness, talking with that woman and assuring her that her daughter was fine, seemed like it could be part of a perfect day. He decided he would consider it an unintentional bonus.

The limo stopped in the parking lot of a small park. Five or six people lined the sidewalk and gestured toward a picnic table. Jeff recognized them: they were the same people who had waited table for him at breakfast. Dirk opened the limo

door; Jeff exited and started down the path.

As he approached the picnic table, Jeff saw trays of food, a coffee urn, and ice chests beneath the table.

“I’m not hungry,” he said to the waiter standing closest to him.

“Very well, sir,” the man said. “What would you prefer?”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Jeff said. “The itinerary shows we go to the park, though, I don’t know why.”

“What would you like to do?”

“Swing,” Jeff said. “I’d like to swing for a while.”

Jeff turned away from the man and walked to a large swing set. He sat down on a swing and began the rhythmic flexing of his legs as he leaned backward and then leaned forward. He thought about his best friend Alex. He and Alex had spent every moment of every recess swinging as high as they could go. They were in the 3rd grade and they were going to be jet fighter pilots. They would streak across the sky and do loops and barrel rolls in the clouds.

He began moving faster and soon he was swinging in a high arc. Sweeping backward until he stared down at the ground, then after a moment’s hesitation, descending faster and faster toward earth as gravity propelled him downward through the bottom of the arc and then upward toward the cloudless sky.

He felt young again. He felt excited. Nothing was more important than swinging just a bit higher, rushing toward the earth just a bit faster, and the thrill of feeling launched into the sky. He had never felt more alive.

“Sir!” the man called out to him. “Are you hungry now?”

“No!” Jeff called back. Then he realized the sun was setting. Hours had passed, perhaps seven or eight hours. How could that have happened? How could he still feel so full of energy?

“Sir, would you like to bail out? You can if you want to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jump! You’ll enjoy it.”

As the swing began its descent toward earth, Jeff felt his body pressing against the seat as he watched the ground rush toward him. He knew the right moment, that exact second when the upward momentum of the swing would hurl him into the air. He released the chains and leaned into the sky. He felt his body rise, then float down to the ground.

“How did you do that?” Jeff asked incredulously. “How did you make me float?”

“It wasn’t me,” the man said. “I was wondering how you did it.”

“You did see it, right?” Jeff asked. “It wasn’t my imagination. I was floating or something. That was very strange.”

“Do you still want to meet with the committee?”

“Yes,” Jeff said. “I’d like to meet with them; is the day over?”

“Not really,” the man said. “We have freshly-baked cookies that are still warm from the oven, and we have some French-vanilla ice cream made with whole cream if you would like that with your cookies. The committee is here to answer any questions you may have; however, there is no hurry. The day does not end until you want it to end.”

“I’ll have some cookies,” Jeff said. “Do you more of that coffee I had this morning? That would go well with cookies.”

“Yes, sir,” the waiter said. “I’ll get that for you.”

“I think I’d like to talk with the committee, now,” Jeff said. “Is Cliff here?”

“Do you want your perfect day to end?” Cliff said as he walked up the path toward Jeff.

“No, but I guess it will end, anyway.”

“Not necessarily,” Cliff said, as he approached the picnic table and sat down. “It is your day. It will last for as long as you want it to last. Take your time; savor the experience: eat, drink, and be merry! Did they bake chocolate chip cookies? I like chocolate chips.”

“I have an early appointment at my office in the morning,” Jeff said. “I need to get home soon; but, before I go, I’d like to ask the committee some questions.”

The staff had gathered and they began sitting down at the picnic table.

“The committee is here,” Cliff said. “Meeting with the committee is the last item on your itinerary, isn’t it? We will answer any questions you have.”

“Why do you do this?” Jeff asked as he looked from person to person around the table.

“We enjoy helping people,” Dirk said. “I like driving the limo. I also like working with this group.”

“No, that’s not what I meant to ask,” Jeff said. “I want to know: What are you trying to accomplish?”

“We want you to have a perfect day,” Cliff said. “We designed this day for you. We want you to be happy.”

“Why did you pick me? How did you get my name?”

“The boss passes out the assignments,” a woman said. “I get a name and a few details and pass them on to Cliff. He’s our contact person.”

“Who is the boss?”

“The boss is nameless; someone who works behind the scenes to help people,” Cliff said.

“What did the boss tell you about me?”

“Your name and address, and a date that would be good for you—the day to introduce our services,” the woman

said. "I also had information about your health and when you fell down the stairs and broke your wrist in school."

"What about the accident on the expressway?" Jeff asked. "Was that part of my day?"

"It wasn't on the itinerary, was it?" Cliff asked. "Sometimes the boss gets involved and adds a personal touch. It's up to you to decide if the girl and her mother were part of your day."

"You could flip a coin to decide," Dirk said, then stifled a chuckle.

"Just a bit of humor," Cliff said. "We don't believe in chance events: 'flipping a coin' is an inside joke. We believe everything is part of a plan."

"Everything is part of a plan?" Jeff asked. "Everything?"

"Why not?" Cliff asked. "For some people, the perfect day gives them a peek at the plan. They allow themselves to see things from a different point of view, everything is fine, and everyone they meet is wonderful. It's an elegant plan."

"So the car accident was intentional?" Jeff asked. "It was part of this elegant plan?"

"Why not?" Cliff asked. "Can you think of any reason why it couldn't be part of a plan?"

"No, I can't," Jeff said.

"Then there is a possibility the wreck was part of a plan," Cliff said; "part of a perfect world."

"You think this world is perfect?" Jeff asked. "Most people I know would vigorously disagree with that. Why are you so convinced this is a 'perfect world?'"

"It's how the boss created it," Cliff said.

"All right, fine," Jeff said. "It's been a great day and thanks for everything. And no, I will not be joining your church and don't leave any literature at my office."

“Jeff,” Cliff said, “we are telling you what we believe because you asked for this meeting and we are answering your questions. You heard me say you are perfect; why would I want you to change?”

Cliff paused and brushed cookie crumbs from the table. Then he smiled and said, “When you were a child, you saw perfection and beauty in every living thing. Butterflies were colorful delights that fluttered around flowers. Mud was a warm, gushy mass that became anything you wanted it to be. Rainbows arched across an azure sky that reached to infinity. A few minutes ago, when you were swinging, you thought about your friend Alex, back when you and he were in jet fighter training together. The world really is a wonderful place, and that is not an accident.”

“How do you know about Alex?” Jeff asked. “Is that something the boss told you? How could he know?”

“Yes, the boss told me,” Cliff said. “The boss knows a lot; the boss pays attention to us all the time.”

“Who are you?” Jeff asked. “I want to know the truth.”

“I work for the boss,” Cliff said. “I’ve never had any other kind of work.”

“I work for the boss, too,” Dirk said. “We all work for the boss. It’s the best job anywhere.”

“And this boss doesn’t have a name?” Jeff asked.

“A name isn’t necessary,” Cliff said. “Would you like more coffee or cookies?”

“No thanks,” Jeff said, “I need to get home; however, I will not sleep tonight if I don’t get an answer to this final question: How did the sandwiches get mixed up? How did you do that?”

“I didn’t,” Cliff said. “You did. That was when I knew it was time for us to talk.”

“Oh,” Jeff said. “I guess I was pre-occupied.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s what it was,” Cliff said.

“Thank you, everyone,” Jeff said. “This has been a most amazing day. I’m ready to go home.”

“Good-night,” Cliff said.

Jeff was kicking at the bed covers when he woke. He looked around the room. *That booze must have had something in it*, he thought. *That was all a dream or something.*

As he sat up on the side of the bed, his clothes were in the spot he had left them last night. He did not see a brandy snifter or briefcase anywhere and there was no money or cookies. He must have been dreaming about that stuff.

He showered, dressed, and drove to the office desperately trying to decide if everything had been a dream. Was Cliff real? Did he complete a questionnaire? Were his medications making him nutty?

As Jeff entered the lobby, he saw Traci at her desk. He would ask her if she remembered Cliff Gannett. How long ago had that happened? He was not sure of anything, anymore.

“Good morning, Traci,” Jeff said as he approached her desk.

“Good morning Mr. Petersen,” Traci said. “Mr. Clarkson called a few minutes ago. He rescheduled his appointment with you: tomorrow at 9:00 AM.”

“OK,” Jeff said, absentmindedly. “That’s fine.”

Jeff stood by Traci’s desk struggling to find a good way to ask his question. How could he ask about an old man with a cane, carrying a sandwich bag, who may have dropped by the office during the past few days or weeks? He decided not to ask the question.

“Did you hear about the accident on the expressway

yesterday?” Traci asked.

“An accident?” Jeff asked, starting to feel strange. “Was it in the morning?”

“I don’t know,” Traci said. “You know my mom works at the ER at Cedar Crest Hospital. Last night she was talking with the paramedics who were on the scene. They said a little girl told them she had seen two angels.”

“And you don’t know if it was in the morning?”

“No,” Traci said. “This girl was in the backseat of the car. She said an angel leaned into her car, touched her hand, and talked to her. The angel told her that her mother was going to be all right and they would take care of her.”

“That’s quite a story,” Jeff said, continuing to feel strange.

“The amazing part is that the angel told her to tell her dad to buy a green convertible. When she told her dad about the car, he just broke down. He said he was at a car lot when the accident happened, test-driving a green convertible. The dad said all this must be real; his daughter could not be making it up.”

“That does sound strange. Did the paramedics say anything about the other people who were helping?”

“No,” Traci said. “The paramedics told my mom that when they arrived at the car, this girl was talking and there wasn’t anyone there.”

“No one else was there?”

“No, no one was there. Do you believe angels exist?”

“Sometimes I do,” Jeff said. “Do you believe in angels?”

“I think angels could only exist in a perfect world,” Traci said. “And this isn’t a perfect world.”

“Oh, there’s a briefcase on your desk,” Traci continued. “That man who came by yesterday with the sandwich mix-

up came back this morning with a briefcase. He said you left it at the park and he was returning it. There, that is what I mean. In a perfect world, we wouldn't forget briefcases and sandwiches wouldn't get mixed up, would they?"