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Pleased to Meet Cha

Remember when Daffy Duck would light a candle on his birthday cake? Only it wasn't a candle at all; it was a stick of Acme dynamite, and the whole place would go *kablooey*, up in smithereens, and then all you'd see was a pair of eyeballs blinking in a charred silhouette. Well, that's kinda what happened to me. Only I didn't get a birthday cake. And I didn't have eyeballs to blink. Or a charred silhouette. I just went *kablooey*—up in a fireball. And all of a sudden I was some kind of ghost. All of a sudden, I was dead.

Weird. I had no idea where I was except that I was somewhere in the middle of nowhere. At least when Captain Kirk looked out into the void from the bridge of the starship *Enterprise* he saw stars and galaxies and celestial bodies. He could see Klingon starships and rogue planets, and even an orbiting space junkyard. But when I looked, I didn't see a damn thing. Nada. Zip. It was as if I'd been shanghaied into a black hole, and there wasn't nothin' but nothin' below my event horizon.

That out-of-body stuff—that feeling that I was Lamont Cranston in a closet—was all new to me. Well, almost all new. Years ago, when I was just a young stud, I once had to play possum in I-can't-even-remember-her-name's closet. Holy nooner! What a nightmare that afternoon turned out to be. Her outlaw-biker beau had unexpectedly returned home a little early from his bike club's Toys-for-Tots run, so I had to hole up in her closet, posed like *The Thinker*, naked, in total darkness, uncomfortably perched atop a nest of stiletto heels and biker boots, sweating, praying, "Dear God, if you really exist, get me out of this jam and I promise I'll never borrow money from the poor box for cigarettes again."

Gathering up some courage, I cracked her closet door and peeked out. Through the open bedroom door across the way I could clearly see into the living room where Conan the

Barbarian had plunked himself down on a couch in front of the TV, a six-pack and a bag of Doritos in his lap. *Damn*, I thought, he was blocking my only escape route. He gave me no choice but to sweat it out in the blackness with just my thoughts . . . and a nagging bladder. At least, after the explosion, I didn't have to pee. Of course, that was because I didn't have a bladder anymore. In fact, I didn't have any body parts anymore. I was just a bunch of thoughts floating around in the darkness like a fart in a mineshaft, you know, like, I stink, therefore I am.

So that was it? I thought. That was what was lurking behind cosmic Door Number 1? A big, fat nothing? I couldn't believe I'd been zonked. I couldn't believe that after a whole lifetime of taking the time to "be kind and rewind," of not chewing my food with my mouth open, and of being careful not to scratch my balls in public, that this was my reward.

Something was definitely wrong with this picture. It seemed to me that if I was conscious, there should have been something to be conscious of. But there wasn't. The void was as vacuous as a crackhead's piggy bank.

Well, what did I expect? To tell you the truth, I'd never given much thought to the hereafter. I mean, really, dude, the hereafter? *Whatever!* That'd always been my motto. I'd figured that if there was some giant, invisible Marvel Comic superhero up in the sky who was making a list and checking it twice, I'd just have to suck it up, admit that I'd been wrong, and throw myself at the mercy of the court. And if there *was* to be some kind of after-hours action following the fat lady's final number, I'd play it by ear. And, I reasoned, if consciousness did go belly-up along with the rest of my body, it wouldn't have made any difference, anyway, because I wouldn't have been conscious of it. Right?

So I never wasted any time preparing for the unexpected. Hell, I never wasted any time preparing for the expected! I was never one of those persnickety types who never went anywhere without a helmet or safety glasses or a parachute or a life preserver or a condom. I'd always focused on the spontaneity of the moment. I never saw any point in wasting my time storing up treasures for myself in heaven when there was a good chance

that the whole damn thing might just turn out to be a spiritual Ponzi scheme. I was confident that if my consciousness survived being “gonged,” I’d be able to handle it the way I always handled things: I’d wing it. I was always good at thinking on my feet. Unfortunately, what I hadn’t planned on was—*not having any feet!*

But let me clue you in on something: being dead wasn’t like anything Sunday school, the Science Channel, or even the Sci-Fi Channel had prepared me for. Being dead was *boring*. I mean, who would have thought you could be bored to death when you were already dead?

I figured, the first thing I needed to find out if I entertained any hope of getting out of there was: where the hell was I? Was I “up there”? And what if I wasn’t “up there”? What if I was “down there”? I suppose I should’ve been whoop-de-doing that I wasn’t up to my keister in a mountain of fossil fuel with a shovel in my hand and some dude poking me in the ass with a pitchfork. Or that I wasn’t hot-tubbing in a cauldron of boiling oil. Or, worse yet, that I wasn’t eternally stuck in an elevator with Muzak. So was that what hell was really about? Eternal boredom?

Why me, Lord . . . or dude . . . or whoever? I cried. What had I ever done to deserve such a fate? I hadn’t been such a bad guy. I had never stolen anything, or murdered anyone, or elbowed my way into the ten-items-or-less line with “just a couple of extra things.” All I had ever asked for out of life was my fair share of the pie, just like anybody else. Yeah, yeah, maybe I’d taken a few shortcuts here and there. So what? I had to. After all, I hadn’t been born rich. I hadn’t been born brilliant. I hadn’t been born talented. And I sure as hell hadn’t been born with looks to kill for. I’d just played the cards I’d been dealt as best as I could. Wasn’t that what a person was supposed to do? Wasn’t that what everybody was supposed to do?

So why, then, was I marinating in an ocean of India ink?

I had always heard that you were supposed to see a bright white light after you died. That you were supposed to see your spirit, or your ghost, or your whatever, drift up from your body, and then, after hovering around, pestering friends and

loved ones who were ignoring you because they couldn't see you, you'd finally accept the fact that you'd died, and you'd give up the ghost and drift away into a bright white light.

So where the hell was the bright white light? Why couldn't I see it? Was it because of the way I died?

The way I died? Oh, did I mention that I'd been murdered. That's what I said, murdered! And I was really pissed about it. So it occurred to me that maybe before I went chasing around the astral plane looking for bright white lights, just maybe I'd have to square things up with the son of a bitch who rubbed me out.

I know. I know. A lot of people would say my thoughts were just so black that I couldn't see through them to the bright white light. Well, maybe.

But I'd discovered early in life, way back in the third grade, back in Rootworm, Illinois, that nothing relieved the bitter sting of victimization better than the sweet salve of revenge. The schoolyard at P.S. 17 had been my boot camp.

A sparkling oasis in the barren wasteland of my school day back then had been the daily Milky Way bar I looked forward to violating each morning at recess. *Milky Way* . . . there was magic in that name. The mere sound of those milky syllables made me salivate. The name conjured up visions of rivers of liquid chocolate lazily flowing through the cosmos. Anticipation of my daily shucking of the candy bar's crinkly wrapper made even second-period long division seem bearable. Only those who have experienced catastrophic calamities of epochal proportions—famine, plague, war, jock itch—can imagine how devastated I was when Fat Freddy, a squinty-eyed fourth-grader, began roughing me up and shaking me down for my Milky Way bar as a part of his daily bullying routine.

Now, as a third-grader, I'd become accustomed to being bullied. In fact, I'd grown somewhat stoic about it. Fat Freddy had weight, height, and age on me; it seemed my only option was to grin and bear it. So no one was more surprised than I was when I snapped. One morning, as Fat Freddy held me down behind the teeter-totters, sitting on my back, rifling through my

Davy Crockett lunchbox in search of my Milky Way, I'd decided enough was enough.

But what was a forty-seven-pound weakling supposed to do when he got sand kicked in his face and had neither the patience nor the ambition to work the Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension program? He played dirty, that's what he did.

So I began bringing extra Milky Way bars to school. Milky Way bars laced with Ex-Lax. Candy bars I'd happily surrendered to Fat Freddy at recess each morning without putting up a fight. I soon discovered that I no longer harbored any resentments toward him, and that I was actually disappointed on the days when he didn't make it to school. And he started missing school a lot. I heard, via the grapevine, that he began losing weight and was suffering from a dysentery disorder that mystified his doctors. As Fat Freddy's mysterious malady persisted, Ms. Hubbard had us make get-well cards for him in art class. I pasted a Milky Way wrapper into mine. The lesson learned? Fuck turning the other cheek! Revenge, a dish best served up in a candy wrapper, would set you free.

Now I had never been a mean-spirited dude. Even when Fat Freddy was at the top my personal shit list, literally, I didn't feed him rat poison. I fed him Ex-Lax. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A shit for a shit!

Of course, Fat Freddy hadn't tried to murder me. He'd only shaken me down for a bunch of candy bars. It seemed to me that when I found out who murdered me, I was gonna have to do more than just make him mess his pants to even up the score.

As a ghost, my options were limited. I supposed I could scare away his girlfriends, or mess with the memory board in his Xbox. On the other hand, if it turned out the culprit was a she, maybe I could wreak havoc with her dildo. A haunted dildo! Now there was something I bet they hadn't investigated on *Ghost Hunters* yet.

But that was small-potatoes thinking. I knew that when I finally fingered the muthafugger, I'd have to come up with something a little better than a ghost in a memory board, or a haunted dildo, to make things right.

Meanwhile, I had a whodunit on my hands.

The prime suspect in a murder investigation, so I'd always heard, was usually the person last seen with the victim. I'd learned that from watching endless reruns of *Law and Order*. In my case, that would have been Crazy Daisy. Crazy Daisy: my sometime lover, roommate, and designated pain in the ass. She'd had both the means and the opportunity.

But Daisy? I didn't think so. She didn't have a mean bone in her body. Then again, as the Shadow used to say, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men" . . . or chicks?

According to the gospel of Mickey Spillane, the first thing a good gumshoe was supposed to do was to visit the scene of the crime and interview the suspects. In my case, that was problematic: the crime scene had been blown to smithereens. I'd been killed in an explosion, remember? So the only way I was gonna be able to find any clues as to the identity of my murderer would be to rifle through my memories.

Now I'd heard it said that, when you died, your whole life was supposed to flash before your eyes like a surveillance video in fast-forward. So I figured my first order of business would have to be to check out that "tape" in search of clues.

Hey, I've got an idea! If you're not doing anything special, why not tag along with me on my trip down memory lane? It should be a hoot!

Oh, and by the way, the name's Randy. Randy Ratphink. Pleased ta meet cha.