

UNANSWERED

Written By: Clint Hall

Joe rearranged his hair and tried to make it look as presentable as possible. It felt like he was getting ready for a blind date. His posture was rigid, his expression serious, perhaps a bit nervous, prepared speech etched in pen on his hand. He glanced at it again when he forgot the first thing he was to say. Joe rubbed his bushy eyebrows and scratched his high forehead. God, was he still balding? What was that he used? Maybe it hadn't kicked in yet. How long ago was that?

How long ago . . . time was a weird thing. Something important happens, other things matter less and you lose track. God, he was nervous. Maybe a good book would have made this bus ride less nerve-racking.

He stepped off the bus and winced at the brightness of the marvellous day. He looked around, finding his position in the world, and decided he should be heading east.

His reflection strolled alongside him in the tinted windows of a corporate building. Lawyers, Joe guessed; he bit his nail. He noticed a lock of hair out of place and licked it down. He was close now; mere minutes away. His heart raced.

His suit was really nothing special, but it was more than he would usually wear. Maybe he should have worn something more expensive.

The property was enormous, with grass as green as limes, and a scattering of fairly young oak trees were fenced into the community. Joe saw his destination and slowly made his way toward it.

The skies were blue, and the wind blew, and scattered the clouds about the sky. It was peaceful; Joe was glad that his friend lived here.

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Here Lies Malcolm Tilly, Beloved Father and Friend.

Kind of unoriginal, he thought. There were millions of better adjectives he could think of to describe him, but it was set in stone. It was good enough. He would be pleased. He was a simple man, didn't like anything too fancy.

"Well . . . where do I begin," he smiled.

"You know me, I'm not good with words. It would be easier if I could talk to you face-to-face. Don't suppose you want to help me out with that?" He waited for an answer, then continued on, embarrassed that he forgot that it was his mood-lightening joke instead of a real question.

"I . . ." he looked at his hand, "I had something written down, but I was sweating on the way over here . . . you know, 'cause it's hot out.

"I miss you, Malcolm, we all miss you. I bet you're wondering why I didn't show to your funeral. Probably the same reason I didn't make it to my uncle's funeral. You know how bad I am with feelings, and emotions," he took a minute to stare at the sky.

"You were my best friend, it wasn't your time. Do you remember when we first met?" he smiled, "We were in the arcade, what was it called again? – Red Dragon, or white or something? You went to get quarters, I took your game, I kicked your ass . . . okay, all right, you kicked my ass, but that's not how I remember it," he shook a finger at the tombstone.

"Oh, those were good times, those were simple times," he paused, his smile faded.

"What's heaven like? Is there a heaven or are you just a plant now? I've been an atheist ever since I can remember, but when you died, I prayed for you. I cried for you. I

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didn't come to your funeral, but I was with you. I was with you the whole nine yards, every step of the way.

"Can you see me from heaven? Are you looking at me through the clouds? Maybe you're right beside me. Maybe there is no heaven and I'm talking to myself. I'm just talking to an empty grave, and the rock on top of it. Einstein believed in heaven, but most scientists don't, you know. He said energy cannot be created nor destroyed, only converted to different forms. So where does your energy go? Where did you go, Malcolm? Are you there, Malcolm? Please answer me. I really need to hear your voice. Please?"

He stopped and kicked at the grass on the grave. He felt that he was rushing, "What's God like? Do you meet him, or is he just like Bill Gates: you use his stuff, but never meet the guy? I guess comparing that doofus to God is kind of sacrilegious, but it's the best analogy I've got.

"Do you like being here? I mean, it's nice, you've got a gorgeous view, great property . . ." he looked around. "God, there's so many of them. Have you ever thought about how many people in the history of history have died? Is there room for them all in heaven?

"So, so many. Do they miss Earth? Do you? It can be so beautiful, and so ugly. But it's not the planet that's ugly, just the people. People make the world what it is . . . nobody knows that better than me. It must be better up there.

"Ellen phones me every day and cries. I want to cry back to her, but I just can't. I have to be her strength, you know? It's not that I don't want to cry, my voice quivers, and I'm on the verge, but I don't let her know it. You would be proud of me.

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“I was always in awe of your strength; you didn’t shed a tear when your dad died, but I know you loved him even more than Ellen. Well, in a sense you did . . . you know what I mean.

“Do you remember when we went out for pizza every Tuesday? Cheap night, baby! You ordered just cheese – still disgusting, by the way – and I ordered a loaded one,” he paused and his face went pale. “I still phone your house every Tuesday. I wake up in the morning, and forget that that car hit you. I hear Ellen’s soft voice answer the phone and I realize that you won’t be coming out with me. Never again.” At that, Joe couldn’t hold it in anymore; he broke out in tears, sobbing like his friend just died this morning instead of two weeks ago.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I thought I could do this,” he wiped his eyes. “They still haven’t found the driver of that car,” he had to choke out his next words. “I – I’m going to turn myself in tomorrow. I wish I could undo what happened, I wish you were at home that night instead of going to the store. I wish Ellen can forgive me, I wish your boy can forgive me, and I really wish *you* can forgive me.

A tear fell to his friend’s eternal resting place, “I can still hear your voice inside my head. I still see the look in your eyes when I hit you. Fright . . . then recognition, then fright. Jesus, I am so sorry. You must know that it was an accident, because it was! You were my friend, my idol. Hell, you were family!

“You know why I’m here. You know why I’m asking you all these questions. You know that I can’t turn myself in. I’m not as strong as you; I could never survive in prison. So, I hope there’s enough room in heaven for a drunk driver. But I guess we’ll find that out when I get home. See you soon.”

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Joe walked away, and tried to wipe his eyes dry for his final bus ride home.