

# Oregon

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*Pity the Infidel, oh Warrior, for he does not know what you know, and will not walk the golden streets of Paradise as one day you shall.*

Mir Zie Hussein, ***The Way of the World***, Book Two, Chronicle 9

*Blessed by the blood of martyrs, kissed by the setting sun. Hail, to thee, land of heroes, my Or-e-gon.*

J.A. Buchanan, ***Oregon, My Oregon***

**Christmas 1955**

**SIX-YEAR-OLD SPIKE** Santee sat as usual in the front pew, slightly stage right of the pulpit.

This was his post-Sunday School spot, next to his cousin, Rod. Delmar Krebs, Berean Baptist's young minister, was in the process of laying it on thick. At least Spike assumed he was, given the man's increasing volume, and the higher pitch his voice took on as he grew louder. Spike wasn't really paying attention to Pastor Krebs. He was focused on doodling on the back of the church announcements pamphlet, when suddenly something the minister said jolted him to the surface like a trout heading for airborne glory at the sudden realization there was a hook in his mouth.

"There is only one way to Heaven, only one path to salvation," Pastor Krebs shouted as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief, then dramatically took off his suit coat and threw it behind him where it landed at the feet of Jesus, who, nailed to a cross as he was, looked down on the crumpled Sears suit coat beneath his spiked feet with an expression of obvious distaste.

"Your only chance," Krebs continued, his voice warbling now like a small town air raid siren, "is to accept our Lord, Jesus Christ, as your very own personal saviour. He is the Way. He is the only Way. Only through Him can you hope to reach Heaven, to sit one day in glory at the feet of our Heavenly Father. Without Him, you are lost, doomed to eternal damnation!"

By now the young pastor was in a frothing frenzy, flapping his large hands in the air on either side of the pulpit as he hammered home this grim reminder that the Road to Paradise was indeed a straight and oh-so-narrow one-laner. Rod, to Spike's left, appeared indifferent to this staggering statement, fully engaged as he was in carefully examining the booger he had recently excavated from his freckled nose. On the other

hand, many of the adults to either side and behind the boys were reacting with a fair degree of enthusiasm to Pastor Krebs' sobering news. There was much murmuring, and more than a few shouted 'halleluiahs,' and 'praise the Lords' reverberating around the large room.

Suddenly Spike found himself rising up off the pew, straight up, no messing around. Before he knew it, his feet were well off the ground and he was heading for the ceiling, with its big, slowly spinning fan. This appeared perfectly normal to the boy, and also seemed to completely escape the attention of both Pastor Krebs (Spike noticed the man had the beginnings of a bald patch and a bad case of dandruff as he floated above the pulpit) and the congregation, who behaved as if a kid rising to the roof on a Sunday morning in a church in western Oregon was about as normal as a wet November day in the Willamette Valley.

Looking up, Spike watched with disengaged fascination as he floated freely through the fan, entered the ceiling, and emerged out the other side, into a crisp fall day. Shaking his head and taking his bearings, he looked down on what without thinking he knew to be the fertile valley of the Indus in northern Punjab, spreading out to the west, south, and east. To the north he spied the green and black foothills of the western Himalaya. Always drawn to mountains, he headed that way, effortlessly drifting through the sweetly scented air, noting below him the teeming streets of Rawalpindi, soon giving way to a patchwork of fields and small villages as he gathered steam and moved ever more quickly toward the icy main range of the western end of the greatest peaks on earth.

Laughing out loud with boyish delight, he did aerial summersaults, whooshing through the Asian wind as he scraped the summit of massive Nanga Parbat, its slopes

studded with the frozen corpses of unlucky German mountaineers. Without conscious thought, he knew why he almost whacked into the icy tip of K2. He knew why he was now suddenly heading east, swooshing over the Potala in Lhasa. He sensed rather than knew why he swooped low over the worshipers and tourists at Angkor Wat, why he zoomed over the endless sprawl of Tokyo, soared over the Serengeti, sailed through the skies of Senegal.

He was, Spike knew, right down to the tips his sparkly nerve endings, conducting an inventory.

He was making a checklist. For Pastor Krebs. And Jesus.

He was conducting a Gallup poll for God, counting all the doomed souls in the world. Enumerating all the little babies, the children, the young mothers, the young men sitting on their haunches outside rural Pashtu teahouses, the old men hunched around campfires in Burundi, the worshipers taking off their sandals in mosques from Baghdad to Bahrain, the old women in colourful saris, their white hair framing their dark faces – he was counting them all, every single one of them.

They were all doomed. All guilty of the Unforgivable Sin.

Not one of them had ever heard of Jesus.

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**THE ROOM'S WALLS WERE** green. Sort of avocado actually, bathed in a sickly fluorescent glow that made them buzz. The room smelled of rubbing alcohol and aspirin,

of vomit and diarrhoea. It reeked of hopes shattered, dreams nipped in the bud, of souls sliding into shadow.

Spike lay very still on his back, his legs uncharacteristically straightened, a dangerous position at home, where the end of his bed almost touched the back window that looked out into the yard, a scant 30 feet or so from the Southern Pacific tracks. No need for bent knees here, he was on the 3rd floor of Salem General, a boy-raping dirty no-good Nazi hobo would have to be a world champion pole vaulter to get at him through a window way up here. He stared at the ceiling, trying to count the dots in a single square of ceiling tile. The highest he got to was 97 before his eyes started to cross, forcing him to blink and lose count, still groggy from his last shot of morphine.

He turned his head slightly, watching the bottle dispensing a saline solution and some sort of drug into his left arm, the one with the tube poked into it. He felt fine, in a sort of vibrating, slightly unnatural kind of way. Swallowing, he noted a metallic taste in his mouth, like someone had shoved a wad of tightly rolled Reynold's aluminium wrap under his tongue. Rolling his eyes up slightly, he saw a number of Christmas cards standing on the nightstand beside his bed. The one with the glittery blue angel on the front was from Miss Little and his classmates at Hoover School, proudly named after America's premier crime fighter and Commie-catcher. Or a vacuum cleaner, or perhaps a president, Spike wasn't quite sure which. He closed his eyes and wondered if J. Edgar Hoover had a Hoover.

Just then the door opened, quietly. In walked a couple of men in white lab coats he didn't recognize, together with Spike's parents. They gathered around the bottle-less side of his bed. One of the doctors stuck the business ends of a stethoscope into his ears and placed the listening part on Spike's chest. While he did this, Mrs. Santee, her eyes

glistening, grasped her son's right hand and gave it a gentle, coded squeeze, the sort that only mothers seem capable of delivering – this one was the, *I'm terrified but don't worry, you're going to be alright, oh please God don't let him die* squeeze, which Spike instantly understood in a genetic, unconscious sort of way.

While his mom squeezed like there was no tomorrow (a distinct possibility, apparently), the stethoscope-less doctor cleared his throat and spoke. He was a very big man, with extremely bushy, Russian-style Cold War eyebrows, so Spike was taken aback when out of his cave opening of a mouth came a gentle, high-pitched voice.

“Hello young man, how are you feeling?” the large physician with the tiny voice intoned.

Spike did his best to smile and nod encouragingly.

“OK,” the physician continued, “my name is Doctor Wolf. And this is my colleague, Doctor Fox,” he added, gesturing to his partner, who had pulled the stethoscope plugs from the ears and was now gently probing and pressing Spike's lower abdomen.

Spike let this information sink in for a moment. No doubt about it, here was further evidence of the Ultimate Mystery of the Universe, undeniable proof of the existence of a Cosmic Game of Life in which he was a definite player. *Wolf and Fox*. Not *Smith and Jones*. Or *Burns and Allen*. Or *Proctor and Gamble*. No sir, *his* doctors, naturally, had to be named *Wolf and Fox*. The question was, of course, whether their arrival signified he was a lamb being readied for the inevitable slaughter, or they had been sent to remind him he was a hunter, too, and the pack (or was he thinking of wolves – or coyotes, maybe?) was eagerly anticipating his return to lamb-slaughtering form.

He pondered these intriguing possibilities for a moment, then decided fairly quickly he preferred the latter answer. This triggered one of his more fervent prayers (usually reserved for baseball games when he was on the pitcher's mound, the count 3 and 2, bases loaded, parents and pals in the stands), strongly suggesting that Jesus come down on the side of the predators, this one time only.

Please.

It was at this moment that Spike first let Our Lord know that, if it was all the same to Him, he'd prefer to live to be a hundred. This lying on a hospital bed surrounded by anxious adults was no fun at all. He had a sneaking suspicion life might hold a bit more of this in store. So why not go into all that at least clear in the knowledge that, come what may, he'd pull through to his 100th birthday. Take some of the tension out of it all. Allow a guy to relax a bit, roll with the punches, take whatever life dished out on the chin, get up, brush himself off, and keep on goin'. Made sense to Spike. He fervently hoped it struck a chord with Jesus, too.

As he lay there repeating his mantra-like prayer, (*pleaseGodletmelivetobe100, pleaseGodletmelivetobe100*), doctors Wolf and Fox conferred near the door with Mr. and Mrs. Santee. Their hushed tones made it hard for him to hear what they were saying, what with his young brain being primarily occupied with ensuring he'd survive halfway through the 21st century and all. A bit did filter through, though – words like *appendix, peritonitis, and die*. Phrases like *must operate, never attempted before, and high degree of risk*.

The general gist of this did not strike Spike, doped up as he was, as particularly sensational, or even *seasonal* news. Not even cheerey, actually. The adults' conversation ended with Mr. Santee, his eyes glistening, putting a burly arm around his wife who was

now quietly sobbing. Doctor Fox opened the door and motioned to someone standing out in the corridor. In came a couple of nurses and an orderly, pushing some sort of rolling bed.

They moved to Spike's bedside. The older nurse, with enormous breasts and breath that smelled of Dentyne gum, stroked Spike's forehead, pushing his light brown hair back and up as she did so.

"Merry Christmas young man," she said softly. "We're going to get you ready to go down to the operating theater where the doctors are going to make you all better."

This sounded like a perfectly fine plan to Spike, who smiled back goofily in response.

As the nurses and the orderly fumbled with the line attached to Spike's arm, his parents moved over to the other side of his bed.

His mom reached out and stroked his arm. "Spike, the doctors are going to have to operate on you," she explained. "You have a problem in your tummy, and they're going to fix it. You're going to be fine." Here her motherly voice caught, forcing her to look away and out the window into the damp December Oregon night. She quickly regained some semblance of composure and continued, "but you have to be strong and brave and do your very best to get better. Your dad and I are going to be right outside, so are your uncles and aunts, and everyone's praying for you, all your friends and classmates, your teachers, everyone at church. You're going to be fine..." At this she started to sob, the sort of sob parents always try to stifle, which just makes it sound worse to the person (usually their kid) they're trying to fake out. What Spike fuzzily took from her comments and conduct was, *man, I gotta pray harder and faster, this is not looking too good at the moment.*

By now the nurses and orderly had their work sorted out. Sensing a pause in the family melodrama, the skinny, tall nurse with the hooked nose and the terrible dye job announced it was time to wheel young Santee to the operating room.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Santa Claus came by to greet you when you get back, Spike,” she added, flashing a big, yellow-toothed grin at the boy that reminded him faintly of the slightly scary image on the cover of his otherwise-cherished Bozo the Clown record.

With that the orderly walked up to the head of the bed, unlatched the brake, and started pushing the bed and Spike toward the door and destiny.

As they wheeled their way down the corridor, his parents' faces floating anxiously above him, Spike took note of the occasional additional recognizable form – there was a caricature of his Uncle Burdette’s mug looming momentarily above him, his Kansas-scoured face screwed up in a grimace of encouraging concern. Burdette was replaced by the slightly older, neatly coiffed visage of Uncle Wayne, the eldest of Spike’s mother’s two brothers, a toothpick neatly, deeply tucked in the right-hand corner of his mouth, looking as he always did, as if he was bursting to say something, likely something terribly kind, but whatever it was didn’t manage to barge its way past the obstructing toothpick before the image shimmered and passed out of Spike’s fuzzy, corridor-scanning sight.

After what seemed, oh, approximately eleven seconds, all motion had stopped. He was now in a medium-sized room, with lots of people, their voices muted by the white masks worn over their faces, moving about here and there. They all seemed to Spike to know what they were doing, where they were going, and what they intended to

accomplish. That was just fine with him, he thought, as he closed his eyes for a moment....

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