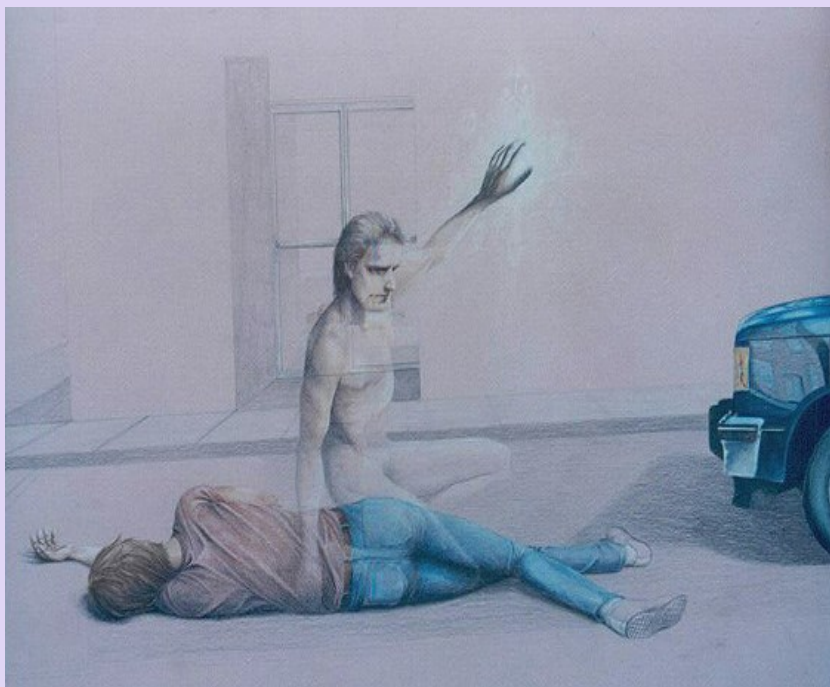


# The Wheel



A ghost story told from  
the ghost's perspective

Dorothy G. Sims



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**Dorothy G. Sims**



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# **The Wheel**

By Dorothy G. Sims

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***I'm dying. I'm too young to die.***

I felt so tired, so confused. But I had proved something. I had shot that son of a bitch. But then I felt that terrible force against my own chest that knocked me down, and now I felt so tired...

But I had proved something—I'd remember it later. I was so tired I could barely move my hand.

Was someone talking to me?

I felt some kind of odd twisting movement.

"Go away and leave me alone," I snarled. But by then air was no longer passing over my vocal cords.

I had thought at first that I was dying—that Rob had returned his shot, and we had killed each other. But now I realized I felt all right. It must have just been a hard jolt.

But there was that irritating voice nudging at my attention, and a very bright light a little over to the side.

"Turn off the damn headlights!" I roared.

I heard running feet, and a woman's scream. Jumping to my feet I looked around. A man lay sprawled on the asphalt, his shirt a bloody mess. A sobbing woman was crouching there so I couldn't see the face, but damn, that was my sister Nancy. What did she think she was doing?

"Shut up and let me think," I yelled at Nancy.

The man on the asphalt was wearing clothes like I had worn today. I moved to see the face. Damn if the bastard wasn't a dead ringer for me! Had Nancy thought it was me lying there?

"No, kiddo," I told Nancy. "I'm here. I'm fine."

The stupid kid paid no attention. I put my hand behind her shoulder to lift her up to face me. It looked like my hand went right through her arm.

*Too much has been happening today,* I thought.

Luckily there was a distraction. A kid started screaming down the block. "Daddy! Daddy!"

I turned to look, and suddenly I was there standing beside another man on the ground, his clothes torn and bloody. The little kid was beside him, yelling to wake the

dead. Wait, he *looked* dead. Maybe he *was* dead.

Hah! It was Rob.

*Rob, you bastard, that will show you. Think you can mess with my woman? Think you can disrespect me? Now look at you.*

If only that brat would shut up.

Now there was something else. The sound of sirens blasted the air, drawing attention from everything else.

Sirens! The police! The police would think I had killed Rob.

I looked around for a place to run. The street was filling with people.

An ambulance screeched to a halt, followed by a police car.

But Rob's kid was saying something. "That man shot my daddy!" He was pointing down the block, pointing to where the man wearing my clothes lay sprawled on the ground. Nancy was still sobbing, talking now to the people gathered around.

Nobody was paying any attention to me.

Gradually it began to sink in. I had been too dazed at first to notice, but all this time nobody had paid any attention to me. Even the policeman was talking to someone else, ignoring me.

This was perfect! Not only had I got rid of Rob, but nobody was making any connection with me. I could hang around and watch in safety. I tried to say something to Nancy, but she ignored me again. That's a kid sister for you.

I went over and watched Rob. Somebody had taken the kid into the house. A lot of people were messing around, mostly police. Declaring the bastard dead, I suppose. I could have told them that.

There was a lot of fuss around the other body, too, but somehow I didn't want to think about that.

I became more and more confident that nobody knew I was there. *Well, I thought, I really out-smarted everybody.*

Then I noticed something peculiar. Someone was

standing where Rob's body had been, someone who looked a lot like Rob.

I stared at him. There was something about him that was different from the other people hanging around, but I couldn't put my finger on it at first.

Oh, yes. He was standing inside the police tape.

"You're not allowed to stand there," I told him.

He moved quickly toward me. I could feel the anger sort of pouring out of him. I know I was still confused, but it looked as if he went right through the yellow tape. I hate to admit it, but I felt a little scared.

"You're not supposed to be here anyway," I told him. "They took you away."

"Who do you think you are to be giving me orders? You're nothing but a God-damned ghost."

Suddenly panic hit me. There had been so many things that didn't add up. I had been pushing the unexplainable things out of my mind. Nothing was acting right.

A ghost maybe went through things, but a ghost... *No, no! I'm too young to die!*

I looked wildly around for something else to think about.

A beautiful woman was standing beside me. She was dressed in white robes that sort of shimmered and her face almost seemed to glow. I stared at her.

"Perhaps I can help you," she said.

*What now?* I thought. "Sure, Babe," I blurted. "You can put your shoes under my bed any time."

She smiled softly. "Of course you're confused. But you can find a more peaceful place to think about what has happened."

"How?"

"Turn to the light. No matter where you are, you can always turn to the light."

I had heard too many sermons about turn. Turn to Jesus, turn to the light, turn away from your sins.

"You sound like my God damned mother," I snarled. "You can't tell me what to do." But I did notice an actual

light glowing softly to my right.

“What do you want?” the woman asked.

“I want to be left alone.”

Everything disappeared.

**I** was alone in a gray void.

Frightened, I reached around with my feet to find something to stand on. Nothing.

Frantically I reached around me with my hands. I could touch nothing. I wasn't supported by anything!

I was overwhelmed by absolute terror. *I must be falling.* I felt a cold weight in the pit of my stomach. I thought I would faint.

It was a while before I realized that nothing had happened. I was simply floating in that gray, impossible void. As I realized this, my stomach stopped hurting. I no longer felt faint. I was really all right. Except that what was happening couldn't possibly happen.

Time passed. At least it seemed to me that time passed. But whether it was seconds, months, or years, I had no idea. Nothing happened in this impossible nowhere. I saw nothing. I felt nothing. Perhaps nothing would ever happen.

My terror was gradually replaced with boredom. The boredom grew into anger, and I flailed around with my fists.

Nothing happened.

I cursed and shouted. I called God every vile name I had ever heard, and tried to make up new ones.

Nothing happened. I wasn't even struck by lightning.

Suddenly I realized I was in Hell.

All my life people had been predicting that I was headed straight for Hell, but I had never dreamed it would happen so soon. I had told myself that when I was an old man, about forty or fifty, there would be plenty of time to think about going to church and making my peace with God. This was so unfair! I deserved a second chance. I shouted some more curses at God, but even as I shouted I had an unpleasant feeling that this wouldn't



change anything.

I was too young to die.

I thought about this for a while. Gradually I realized that, young or not, unfair or not, this was really happening. I thought about the shooting, back there so long ago. Somehow I had not thought about anybody dying, but only about proving that I was a man, that nobody could disrespect me.

Rob had called me a ghost.

A ghost floated in thin air. A ghost's hand passed right through things. A ghost went around shouting "boo!" to scare people. But I hadn't been trying to scare people; I was trying to figure out what had happened. Fact is, I had been scared myself. There was so much noise, so many people around, and a lot of them seemed to be police. That was when I said I wanted to be alone.

And suddenly I was alone—alone in the most frightening place I had ever dreamed of.

Was that a sort of answer? Unfair; it was so unfair. God sent me to Hell just because I had asked to be alone.

I mulled over this for a while. Finally I admitted to myself that that might not be the only reason. I had not lived a very good life. I had been bad to my mother. And, and... I did take another man's life! No wonder I was in Hell.

Was I going to be in Hell forever? I tried to think about eternity. Just this, forever and ever? God, no, I would rather be dead.

I *was* dead.

Why wouldn't God give me a second chance?

Slowly a thought formed in my mind. I didn't give Rob a second chance. I knew I deserved this. But I didn't deserve to be the only person in the whole world.

Somehow a thought came to mind. Ask.

*Please God, I said, if there really is a God, at least let me talk to one other person.*

At once I realized there was something happening in the nothingness around me. A small light was glowing, and gradually grew brighter. A figure of a man appeared.

It was Rob.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't know this was going to happen," I said.

"I suppose you thought that gun was shooting rose petals."

"I wanted to make it clear you couldn't take my girl."

"Yeah," he snarled. "Well let me tell you what you did. You not only killed me, you left my wife and little son without anybody to support them. My wife is pregnant, too. That little fellow will grow up without ever seeing his daddy. You're responsible for three people having a terrible life."

I couldn't help feeling that he was right. But it wasn't all one sided.

"If you cared so much about your wife, what were you doing sneaking off with my girl friend? How do you think she'll feel when she finds out that's why you were killed?"

There was a very long silence. Then Rob said, "I guess I might have been in the wrong, too."

"Darn right you were in the wrong."

"But that doesn't mean you can go around killing people."

"I didn't go around killing people," I said self-righteously. "I was only protecting my rights."

"That was murder."

"Well, you murdered me."

"You bastard," he said. He started to go away, but then stopped where I could still see the little light that moved around with him. I guess he didn't like being alone in this terrible place any better than I did.

"You didn't think you could just walk away and nothing would happen? It's just lucky I had my gun with me."

"You call this lucky?"

There was a long silence. Finally Rob said, "You know, once we used to be friends."

"Yeah, we lived on the same block when we were little kids."

"I remember your kid sister hanging around, following us, wanting to play in our games."

“Remember the time we tried to steal a watermelon, and the man chased us?”

“Yeah. The watermelon got busted all over the sidewalk.”

“Remember when we went on a picnic in the country and got chased by a bull?”

We went on talking like this for a while. Finally I said, “We used to be best friends in the second grade. How did all this happen?”

“I don’t know. Your mom moved away, and we made different friends. Went in different ways.”

“And ended up killing each other. Boy, I was sure confused. I couldn’t figure out what had happened.”

“Me too. Say, there’s something I was wondering about. Was that an angel you were talking to just before you disappeared?”

“An angel? Oh my gosh. I told her she could put her shoes under my bed. No wonder I ended up in Hell.”

“But she said something to you. What did she say to you?”

“I said I wanted to be left alone, and suddenly I was here in Hell.”

“But I’m sure she said something to you.”

“She said I could turn to the light, no matter where I was, I could always turn to the light. I don’t know what she meant.”

“I don’t know either, but there’s a light over there.”

Sure enough, there was a light over to my left, a faintly glowing light, but somehow it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I turned toward it....

**I** was standing in the midst of that beautiful radiance. Someone was with me, the figure of a tall, kindly man. But I wasn’t sure it was a man because somehow he seemed to be part of the light, or possibly the source of the light. I felt surrounded by love—a deeper, more accepting love than I had ever dreamed possible.

*“I’m delighted to see you here, my child,”* the Being said.

I didn't know how to answer. Resting in that love was like lying down on the softest of pillows after a very hard day's work.

Except that it wasn't like that. It was like getting "A" in algebra class when you knew you didn't deserve it.

But it wasn't like that either. It was on a whole different level, that nothing in my life had prepared me for. It was as if nothing in the entire universe could ever separate me from the depth of that love.

*"It is time for your life review,"* said the Being.

I had heard of your life flashing before you, but I thought it was one of the wise cracks people make.

It was like watching a movie, except more personal. It seemed to happen all in an instant, but in another way it seemed to take days. Unlike a movie, I felt everything was happening to me, but there was a general awareness that this had been my life. There was so much detail, it took months before I could really think about all of it.

I couldn't figure out what was happening at first, but then I realized I was a baby being born. I was cold and frightened, my body hurting all over. I was covered with blood and mucus. What a way to come into the world. Disrespected from the start!

But before I had time to think about it, there were other scenes from babyhood—nursing at my mother's breast, lying on my back watching for the faces that occasionally passed over my crib, slowly learning to control this strange little body I was born with.

At first I knew nothing about the world. I was aware of myself in a vague way, but I had no words to express my feelings, even to myself. If I felt uncomfortable it seemed natural to cry. After a while my mother would come to feed me or change my clothes. Sometimes it seemed a long, long time, and I got really angry. Other times, it seemed she was a special part of myself, and I had a relationship with her that no one could interfere with.

It was exciting when I began to understand words. I quickly realized that this was a means to power, and I

resented it that people were so slow in understanding my efforts to speak. I learned to walk, and eventually to run. I got very good at getting my mother to do what I wanted.

There was another person around a lot of the time—a person with a deep, loud voice. It was fun when he would pick me up and play with me, but he never held me for long, and sometimes I didn't like him because he took so much of my mother's time. Sometimes he would come home late and start yelling at my mother as soon as he came in. Sometimes he would hit her and then she would cry. I really hated him when that happened.

I grew bigger and made friends with other kids in the neighborhood.

I learned I had to share my toys and listen to what my friends wanted, much as I wanted to decide everything we did. I was gradually beginning to think I had figured out what life was all about.

Then disaster struck. Mother went away for a few days, and when she came home she had a loud, messy new baby with her. I could hardly believe how much of my mother's time she took up. Then when she got old enough to play by herself, mother was always yelling at me to go check on Nancy.

I got older and went to school. I had always felt jealous of the kids who got to go to school, but now I found that someone was telling you what to do all the time. You had to sit at your desk and not move around. You had to learn some crap the teacher decided you should learn. And if you got bad grades, your father gave you a couple of whacks with his belt. It seems that you dishonor your family in some way by getting poor report cards.

Second grade was a little better because that was the year I made friends with Rob. We seemed to understand each other, and we got into all kinds of scrapes together. Also I began to read a little better, although I didn't see much use in it.

Then there started to be a lot more fighting between my mother and father, and after a while mother and Nancy and I moved to a smaller house in a different part

of town. Mother had to get a job and Nancy had to help a lot in the house. Nobody paid much attention to me, and I started running around with some bigger boys.

Soon it began to seem to me that being accepted by the boys a little older than me was the most important thing in life. I managed to get a small revolver and carried it to school to show secretly to my friends. It was unpleasant at home. Both Mom and Nancy were always complaining about how hard they worked, and they kept fussing at me to do bothersome things like taking out the garbage and cleaning up my room. I spent as little time at home as I could manage.

Then I discovered sex. I couldn't believe how great the feeling was, and it certainly gave me a new perspective on life. Up to now I had figured that girls were a necessary evil, just a few steps above flies and mosquitoes. But now I began to see that they served a real purpose. Of course you had to do a little persuading to get them to go with you to a secluded doorway or under some bush. It was a sort of game. Even if they said "no," or pretended to cry, you knew it was really what they wanted. I gradually got very good at letting them see it was the right thing to do.

Then one of the little split-tails named Betsy got herself pregnant. What a mess! I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw her. I linked arms with her and brushed a kiss across her lips.

She pulled away from me a little. "I need to talk with you," she said.

"Sure, honey. I want to talk too. Let's walk out to the park."

"Do you love me?" she said as we walked.

"You know I do. We'll have a nice evening together, and you'll feel a lot better. Let's sit on this bench."

It was a lovely evening, not too hot. A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the shrubbery behind us. To my horror, she burst into tears. It took me a while to make out what she was saying.

"My father will kill me."

I knew I had to be patient. I gathered her into my arms and gently stroked her shoulders. As she calmed I gave her gentle little kisses. After a while she let me move her under a low hanging bush.

I thought the problem was solved. I happily told her I had saved enough money so we could split a soda down at the corner drug store. She just started crying again.

Finally she told me. "I found out today that I'm pregnant."

Such a thing had never occurred to me. "How did you go and let yourself get pregnant?"

"I didn't mean to. It just happened."

"Gosh, that's too bad. What are you going to do?"

"I thought we might get married."

"Get married! Are you crazy? We can't get married. We're only kids."

"But you said that you loved me."

I didn't date her after that. She would only cry and nag and say I didn't love her. Besides it wasn't long before her parents came over to talk with my mother, and after that it was much harder to get away after school. I got bawled out a lot. But there wasn't much anybody could do. After all we were only kids.

Soon after that Betsy left school, and I didn't see her again. In fact it made me uncomfortable to think about her.

Shortly I got in with an older group of boys. We tried to be pretty tough. I thought about it as establishing my position in the community, and managed to persuade mother that I was turning over a new leaf. Most of my new friends had dropped out of school, and as soon as I turned sixteen I dropped out too. Alcohol had been made illegal, so obviously part of establishing a respected position was being sophisticated about where to get a drink.

Mother was pretty nasty about me coming home with liquor on my breath. "I never thought my son would be a drunkard," she said, and "If you start hanging around in speakeasies it will ruin your whole life." All the other kids that counted did the same things, but that didn't matter

to her. She cried and cried.

Seeing I was in trouble, Nancy started complaining. "He ought to do more to help around here," she said. "I have to do a lot of work when I get home from school."

"That's right, too," Mother said. "He really ought to get a job if he won't go to school, and pay for some of his stuff. Goodness knows I have hard enough a time."

**W**hen I did get a job it turned out to be really disgusting. I didn't get paid enough to buy the clothes I wanted, especially after turning some of it over to mother.

The boss was totally unreasonable. He said I didn't work fast enough, and if I as much as paused for a cigarette he got very sarcastic. When I finally messed something up he said there were a lot better boys than me looking for work, and he fired me on the spot.

I didn't want to tell mother I had been fired, so I made up a story. I was beginning to get worried, but then I got my big chance. All I had to do was drive a carload of bootleg whiskey for a few hundred miles a few times a week. I told mother that I had a big raise, and I got my own apartment so I could keep the hours required by the job.

About this time I met Rob again. Rob had finished high school and had a job, but he wasn't making as much money as I was with the moonshine. He had managed to get a girl pregnant, and was really tied down, what with a wife and kid. I felt sorry for the poor chump, but I dropped in to see him once in a while.

Everything changed when I met Clara. At first she was just a pretty girl, but somehow she got under my skin. I kept thinking about her, even when I was dating other women. She was sure something special. I got thinking about maybe we should shack up together.

I brought up the subject one evening. "I'd sure love for us to be together all the time."

"Why? So I could cook and wash dishes for you?"

"Honey! I know you're a good cook, but I love you. I



want you around so I can look at you.”

Finally we got down to serious discussion. To my surprise she didn’t jump at the idea.

“Perhaps, after we’ve know each other longer and you settle down a little more.”

“Me settle down? I thought you loved me!”

It turned out she had a list of demands as long as your arm. She wanted me to get a different job so I’d be home more, and stop seeing other women. By her ideas it wouldn’t be much different from getting married. I told her she didn’t love me. She said that if I loved her I wouldn’t ask her to live with me without getting married.

So it kept on. Everything she said made me angrier, and everything I said got her even more upset.

I tried to reason with her. “This is just the first step to something we both want. Later on we’ll get married and think about a family.”

“Yeah, later on. But the minute I move in with you half my friends are going to start calling me a whore. I want to see some commitment on your part. Like staying home at night.”

“I’ve got to be away for this job.”

“Quit the job.”

“I need the job for us to live decently.”

“If you’re a real man you’ll get another job.”

“Have you noticed there’s a depression going on? Do you think jobs grow on trees? I expect you to appreciate the effort I’m making for you. There is some danger to this job, you know.”

“That’s another reason for you to quit. I don’t want to be messed up in that sort of thing.”

“If you loved me you’d stand by me no matter what happened.”

“I guess you’ll never be anything but a damned criminal!”

That’s when I slapped her, hard. She sort of stumbled and fell down on the sidewalk.

I looked back over my shoulder as I walked away, and saw her get up, crying and holding her hand to her face.

*She'll be all right*, I thought, *and in a couple of days she'll be ready to talk sense*. But when I called her up, to my surprise she was still angry.

"I don't go out with men who hit me," she said.

"Aw, I'm sorry honey. I just got so frustrated, I didn't realize what I was doing. I'd been dreaming about having you stay with me, and somehow things got off on the wrong foot."

"I'm not about to be hit every time you get frustrated."

It took a lot of talking and eating humble pie, and swearing I had learned my lesson, but finally she agreed to spend the evening with me. I wasn't too happy about all that saying I was wrong, but really I did love her. It just wasn't quite the same with other girls. So we dated that night and the next, but the night after that the boss wanted me to make another trip. Clara asked when I was going to quit the job, and we ended up in another big argument.

The next time I asked her out, Clara said she had another date.

I was furious. When she kept refusing to go out with me, I made up my mind to find out what she was doing, and started to follow her around. It took me awhile to figure it out, but I knew she was doing something. Then one Sunday morning I saw a man coming out of Clara's apartment. It was Rob! That son of a bitch! So that's what he was doing while his wife was at church.

I gave him one warning. I told him to keep away from my girl. He told me to mind my own business. I said that if I saw him with Clara again he was a dead duck.

The next time I saw him with Clara I'd been drinking. I'd had a hard night's run and come awful close to being stopped by a sheriff. When I got home expecting to be congratulated on my escape, my boss said I was taking too many chances and I'd have to tighten up or lose my job. On the way home I saw Rob kissing Clara good night. I stared at him, and he looked up and saw me. I said, "I'll see you in a little while."

By the time I got to Rob's house he must have picked

up his own gun. He came out on the sidewalk and told me to stay out of his affairs. I told him Clara was my property. He said Clara wasn't my anything and she didn't want to see me again. I called him a son of a bitch. He ordered me to stay away from my own girlfriend.

It was too much. I pulled my gun and shot him in the chest. But then I felt that blow against my own body that knocked me to the sidewalk. *I must have been shot!* With the thought I started to feel pain, and I thought, *I'm dying. I'm too young to die.* But then I didn't feel anything.

**T**he scenes from my life stopped. The Being looked at me, and I thought He wanted my reaction. But, oh, what would this Being of light think of all this? He'd think I had been a very bad boy and should have helped my mother. He'd think I shouldn't have talked the little girls into sex and even that Betsy couldn't have possibly gotten herself pregnant, and that I was only thinking of myself.

Oh, it was hard standing beside this Being who seemed the very essence of goodness and watching all that rottenness unroll, knowing that he knew I had done these things, knowing there was no way to hide. No doubt he thought that Clara was nobody's property except her own, and I found that deep down I thought so too. How painful!

Could it be that it was partly my fault that I lost Clara? The Being probably thought so, and that I had murdered Rob, once my friend, in cold blood.

To my astonishment, I realized that the Being was watching me with gentleness and kindness. Here I was, undergoing the tortures of the damned, knowing that every detail of my life was open to him, and the Being was still radiating the same unbelievable love with which he had first received me.

It almost seemed that I was judging myself, and that while he knew I had done these things, he also saw something entirely different when he looked at me.

I said, "Are you going to send me back to Hell?"

*“Not unless you really want to go.”*

I said, “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

As if in answer, he showed me pictures, like a short film, of a professional baseball player taking a lot of trouble to show a small boy how to use a baseball and bat.

I still didn’t understand, but the Being said, *“Think about these things. Questions will be answered over there.”*

I looked around and saw a small, attractive building. Over the door was a sign, “Questions Answered Here.”

Would I be able to walk there?

I wasn’t sure how to do anything. Did I still have normal feet? Was there ground under my feet?

I began to feel frightened, but as I turned to the Being for help, I saw he was gone. Yet there was a feeling of love and gentle encouragement that remained, like the breath of perfume that lingers after the wearer has left the room.

I wanted to be in that building.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I was in the building. There was a pleasantly furnished lobby with comfortable looking chairs and sofas. What appeared to be an information desk was in the back of the room, and as I looked at it I found myself there. A beautiful woman—was it an angel? —asked if she could help.

“What is this place?” I asked. “Is it Heaven?”

“Well, not exactly heaven. Heaven is something you will have to find for yourself.”

“I think I heard something about pearly gates and streets paved with gold.”

The angel laughed. “I don’t think it would help you much, but someone made a place like that, and left it as a kind of joke, I guess.”

I was getting more and more confused.

“How could I get to a place like that?”

“Just think about being there.”

“That simple?”

“That’s right. You see, things don’t work by the same

rules as on the Earth-level. You can go almost any place you want just by thinking about it. You can do almost anything you want to. But you can't interfere with anybody else."

"What happens if I do?"

"You are removed from that place."

"You mean I get punished?"

"Well, not exactly punished, just you aren't there any longer."

"Can I talk to other people?"

"Of course. But if you want to stay around other people, you have to be very polite."

"How do I get something to eat?"

"Well, you don't really need anything to eat, but if you want to, you can experiment with making yourself some food."

"How do I do that?"

"There's an invisible substance all around us. It's really energy, but you might want to think of it at first as something like air. You can learn to mold this into any shape you want. It's just a matter of concentrating."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Concentrate on the details of what you're doing," said the angel. "You'll learn. Everyone needs a little while to understand this place."

"Can I make anything I want to?"

"I don't see why not."

"I'd like to make some whisky—good, legal, mellow whisky."

"I suppose you could, but I should warn you that it might not give you the kick you're expecting."

"Fake whisky?"

"Well, it's synthetic, of course. The problem is, you don't have the same kind of body. It just wouldn't react the same."

I felt depressed. Too many things were happening, and I didn't like any of them. I didn't understand any of them. I was willing to accept that I deserved to be in Hell, but this place was just crazy. I certainly didn't deserve

this!

The angel smiled sadly. "Would you like someone to sort of show you around?"

Seeing that I would, she called out to someone named Jimmy.

I suppose Jimmy was a ghost too. He wasn't transparent, though, just an ordinary looking goof, wearing clean work clothes. Until I saw him I hadn't given any thought to what I was wearing. Now I realized I had on the clothes in which I had been shot, my shirt still all bloody. How embarrassing! I should have changed before talking with the Being of Light. But how?

"Er... where can I change clothes?" I asked Jimmy.

"Right here. Just think about what you want to be wearing."

"Here? In front of the angel?"

Jimmy gave a rather odd smile. "There's no problem. Just think of what you would like to be wearing, and there it will be. Try it."

I tried to picture a fine gray business suit with a white shirt. Suddenly there it was. I looked down at myself and added a striped tie. Hey, this wasn't so bad! I wished I had a mirror, and suddenly, there it was, just like the mirror in a men's clothing store. The mirror showed that I was still wearing dirty old work shoes. I changed them for highly polished dress shoes. I had to make another change to be wearing expensive wool socks. I was still preening myself in front of the mirror, thinking how I could impress the chicks, when Jimmy said, "Of course anyone can do this at any time."

"I just don't understand this. I didn't think ghosts wore clothes anyway."

"We don't need to wear clothes. But when folks first get here from the Earth plane, they usually feel more comfortable with clothes."

I gave another look in the mirror and sighed. What was the use of special clothes if anybody could do the same?

"What do people do for entertainment around

here?" I asked.

"I know where there's a party going on."

**A** long table was set in the midst of a garden. About twenty people were sitting there, being served from huge trays of delicious-smelling food. Vases of flowers stood on the table. Crystal glasses held what looked like wine.

"Have a seat," someone cried.

I sat down and sipped at the wine. I nibbled at a piece of fruit.

I wasn't hungry.

Suddenly I was filled with disgust. All this was made of something like air?

"Take me someplace else," I demanded.

**A** great castle stood by a sparkling lake. Tall pine trees made a backdrop on one side and palm trees on the other.

Pine trees and palm trees growing in the same place? Fake, I thought, everything here is a damn fake.

I heard dance music as we entered a great hall. Brightly dressed people thronged around, laughing and dancing. I watched for a while.

"How do you tell the girls from the men?" I asked Jimmy.

"Well, we don't really have any need for gender here," he said. "That goes with the physical body."

I was really getting mad. "Everything here is pretend," I said. "It's like children playing with mud pies. I haven't seen anything here that's real."

"Did the Being of light strike you as real?"

That stopped me. The Being had seemed the most real thing I had ever seen.

"Why does the Being put up with such nonsense?"

"There's a serious purpose. Just as little girls making mud pies are unconsciously learning skills they will need, so we who arrive from the Earth level are learning how to do things we will need later. It is not a small thing

to be able to create beautiful flowers from pure energy.”

As we glided along, I noticed gardens and fields. Buildings rose where none had been before.

We came upon a woman seated on a garden bench. Beside her was what appeared to be an enormous pile of candy bars.

“Come here, young man,” she called to me.

I went to her.

“Have some chocolate! It will help you feel much better.”

She went on munching one candy bar after another. “See, it doesn’t make me fat, either.”

Of course not, I thought, it’s that fake stuff she probably made herself.

Jimmy said, “The poor soul is terribly unhappy. Of course it won’t help her to eat candy bars, but she has to find that out for herself.”

“Isn’t there anything she can do? Is she going to go on forever sitting there pretending to eat candy?”

“She can turn to the light and put herself under the Being’s care. But the Being won’t force her to do that.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “I thought if you survived death, you were either in Heaven or Hell. But we’re not dead and we’re not really alive either. We’re just ghosts playing games. Surely we’re not here just to be driven mad! Will you tell me what in the hell this is all for?”

“You really can’t understand it all at once, but I do appreciate that you’re trying. We are all here to learn.”

“Learn to make mud pies?”

“Learn about life. Learn what things are really important. One lifetime on the Earth level isn’t enough time, so it’s arranged that we have many chances to find out what we really want to do.”

I was astonished. “We are here to learn? Like in school?”

Jimmy smiled. “To a certain extent. But you know, most of the things you have learned were not learned in school. As a baby you learned how to walk, as a child you learned the rules of games and how to get along with



your playmates. But the most important things you have learned are about understanding and caring for other people."

"I guess I didn't do too well with that," I said slowly.

"Neither did I," said Jimmy. "That's why I'm here. It takes a long time to really learn what life is about. That's why the Being gives us another chance to keep learning the things we didn't learn on the Earth level."

"This is about learning?"

"It certainly is. Some things we learn better on the Earth level, and there are other lessons we learn better here."

"Are there schools here?"

"Yes, from small ones to big universities and research centers. But we learn the most from getting to know other people, and learning to understand them."

"I haven't seen many other people."

"You will. After a little time here most people choose to go to school or volunteer at some kind of work."

"What kind of work do they do here?"

"Mostly things to help other people. Right now I'm volunteering to show people around who are confused because they just got here. Sometimes we can get involved at the point when they are making the transition."

While we had been talking I began to notice a lot of movement going on around us. Some kind of small things I couldn't see well were dashing about. A very faint light seemed to be going about with each of them. Somehow it reminded me of squirrels playing in trees.

"Are there animals here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. All sorts of animals. When they die they come here for a while to rest and prepare for their next trip back to the Earth-plane."

"They go back? But how?"

"They are born again into another body."

I was so astonished, I could hardly think how to ask my next question.

While I was thinking about that I heard something that sounded very much like barking.

“Are there dogs...” I began, but suddenly a soft body impacted mine. I could hardly see it, just a very faint light, but I could hear the joyful barking. The dog was becoming easier to see, long brown and white fur, a plume of a tail, soft drooping ears and those expressive eyes. It was Jack!

When I had been quite small I had been very fond of him. But then he was hit by a car and died. It was one of the early experiences that turned me towards anger and bitterness. Now here he was! I buried my face in his long fur.

Another voice sounded. “Oh, Jack, you have found my grandson!”

There stood my grandmother, looking just as I remembered her from the days when she used to babysit Nancy and I. She was around for several years, but then she got sick and soon disappeared from our lives. It was when I visited Grandma’s house that I used to play with Jack.

“Oh, this is wonderful!” Grandma said. “Do you mind if we sit here on this bench and talk for awhile?”

“I’ll be moving on, if you don’t mind,” Jimmy said. “You can ask me questions any time. You know where to find me.”

We sat and watched Jack running and leaping about with a greater freedom than he ever had on Earth.

“I’m so glad Jack found you,” said Grandma. “I came right away when you left Earth-level, but you were so frightened and confused that I couldn’t get through to you. Then I lost track of you.”

“I was pretty scared,” I admitted.

“We all were,” said Grandma. “But Jack has been such a help to me. When I got cancer he seemed to know I needed special comfort, and he spent most of the day lying by my bed. After I died it wasn’t long before he got in that accident. He was getting to be an old dog, and he didn’t get away from the car fast enough. It took him a while to understand this new place he came to, but then he looked me up. He is such a good dog. He spends most

of the time running and playing with the other animals, but he comes to see me every day.”

“Can you tell me,” I said, “why Jack was practically transparent when he came to us, but now he looks like he did back then?”

“He doesn’t need his beautiful fur. This is his mental and emotional body he wears here. But when he saw you it reminded him of the way he used to be, and he wanted you to know him.”

“But it isn’t real?”

“It’s a mental image of his physical body. Just as those neat clothes you are wearing are a mental image of clothes.”

We talked for a long time about when I was little and I used to play with Jack. I had seen these things during my life review with the Being of light, but I was mostly thinking about how the Being would see what a bad boy I had been. Now I realized that I had been good as well as bad, that my parents and grandparents loved me, and that Nancy and I had had some really fun times together.

Finally I asked Grandma where I was going to spend the night. I wasn’t surprised when she said I could make myself a mental image of a bed. But then she added, “On this mental and emotional plane you need to be comfortable emotionally. Make a place to rest that appeals to you emotionally.” She showed me the little garden nook she had created for herself, and we made plans to talk again later.

I wandered around by myself. Things were beginning to make a little more sense as I got used to the place.

The almost transparent figures that glowed faintly were ghosts—I could think of no other word. But they did refer to themselves as people.

That got me thinking. Was I still me?

I certainly wasn’t anybody else. But I didn’t look like me.

My clothes had disappeared gradually while I had been thinking about other things. I could more or less see through my arm. Instead of being planted on solid

ground, my feet were a kind of foggy stuff in a land of uncertain substance.

I was a damn ghost. I didn't want to be a ghost!  
Unfair!

But then I thought of Grandma. She seemed to be quite comfortable here. Didn't she mind being a ghost? I needed to ask more questions.

I found myself in the little building that reminded me of a tourist information place. The angel was there, although I couldn't tell whether it was the same one.

"May I help you?"

"I want to know if I'm a ghost," I said. "I know it sounds silly, but I don't want to be a ghost. And if I'm not a ghost, what am I?"

The angel smiled. "It's not silly to want to have information. If you were on the Earth-level and someone managed to get a glimpse of you, you might be called a ghost. But you wouldn't be called that here. Most of us here would just call you a person, but to make the point that you are no longer wearing your physical body, you might be called a soul."

Again I was astonished. "A soul, like in church?"

"Well, yes. But you have to realize that 'church,' as you call it, is not set apart from the rest of life. It's all part of reality. Whether on the Earth level or here, learning to live as the Being would have us live is what life is all about."

"Er... what is a soul?"

"The soul is that part of us that keeps the physical body alive. When something happens so the physical body is no longer in proper working order, the soul leaves."

"What happens to the soul? Does it—I mean we—stay here forever?"

"We stay here long enough to think over our life on the Earth level. When we are ready, we can take up life in the physical body again."

"You mean my body will come back to life?"

"You don't want an old, used up body. It's much nicer

than that. You go to Earth as a brand new baby, with a new chance to see what you can make of yourself."

"Could I go back right now?"

"People who die young usually go back soon. But, no, this is too soon. You have more to learn. This is not such a bad place when you get used to it. And before you take on your new body, you should go to a special school for people preparing to reincarnate."

"What should I be doing meanwhile?"

"You'll gradually find things to do. Would you like to join a group of young men playing baseball?"

"Baseball? Here? How?"

"One of the things you learn here is how to create the environment you want. It's true to a great extent on Earth, too, but you don't get such an immediate response. It's easier to learn here, but when you get back in the body, one of the really important assignments is to learn that to a great extent you do create your own environment."

This was all pretty confusing. "Show me how to get to that baseball game," I sighed.

*A*fter a while I became very good at baseball. I gradually made friends and slowly learned how to live in this strange sort of place. There were interesting things and beautiful things and people I enjoyed talking to.

Once in a while I went over to talk with Grandma.

"A strange thing happened," she said one time. "Jack came to me bringing six new-born puppies. I could sort of feel their pain and terror. I think they must have been taken from their warm mother, dumped together in a bag, and drowned before their eyes were even open. I got a brief feeling of their panic as they struggled for breath in the icy water."

"What did Jack do with them? I asked. "How could he help them?"

"I suppose he helped them just by being a peaceful loving presence, in a doggy sort of way that they could

somehow relate to. I think possibly that they might have suffered so much fear and anger, without even knowing anything about the world, that when they are reborn they would be angry and nervous dogs. If I'm right about that, what Jack did might have made it possible for them to be much happier, well balanced dogs next time. I know the Being welcomes every creature as it comes over here, but he leaves it to us to carry on. After all, when he was on the Earth level, he said to love others as he has loved us.

"I don't know how it works, but some people say that when dogs have learned all they can in the dog form, they are able to come back as human beings. I think that Jack has somehow learned to listen to the Being in his heart, and that he might be ready for that."

My head was swimming with all these ideas.

"You think Jack might sometime be a person?"

"Yes, perhaps. But I dread to think of all the temptations that innocent dog would face as a human being. As a dog he is mostly guided by instinct, without having to make moral decisions. I know he has gone way beyond that, but if he comes to Earth as a human there will suddenly be so many possibilities open to him, for either good or bad. It's rather frightening to think what responsibilities we take on when we are born as a human."

I went back to my ball game in a very thoughtful mood.

**I**t wasn't long after that that I met Rob.

"Hi," I said.

He looked at me doubtfully.

*It's no use carrying on our fight under these circumstances,* I thought. I invited him to join our ball game.

Later we were talking. I told him about Jack finding me, and how he was still being loyal to Grandma.

Rob told me about finding his great uncle George, who had helped him understand this new place.

Then Rob said, "Have you ever been down to the Earth level?"

"I didn't know you could go."

"We can, but I guess not many people do."

"Why?"

"It's too painful. You can see and hear what's going on, but you can't take any part in it. You try to talk to relatives, but they don't know you're there. I wanted to see my little son. I found him, but he couldn't see me or hear me. I tried to hug him, but my arms went right through him. I found his mother, but she was talking with another guy. I don't think I'm ever going back."

Later on I got thinking about what Rob had said. I decided to try to go back and see what Mother and Nancy were doing. With the thought, I found myself at their old apartment.

Nancy was crying. "I can't go there," she was saying. "The last time you told me to go to that store was the time my brother was shot. I was going down the street, just sort of singing to myself, when I heard the two shots. I ran to look, and there he was, lying on the sidewalk in a pool of blood. I still have nightmares about it. I'm never going on that street again!"

"I know, honey," Mother said. "But we still have to go on living and doing things."

"You weren't there. You don't know how awful it was."

Mother started crying too. "Don't you think I feel bad about this? My only son is gone. You're the only one I have left to help me. What am I going to do if I can't depend on you?"

"You're only thinking about yourself," Nancy yelled. "I'm the one who had to see it, and talk to the police. It will haunt me the rest of my life."

Both of them were thinking about themselves.

"Aren't you interested in what happened to me?" I said, but of course they didn't hear me. I could see that under the excuse of grief for me they were heading for a career as martyrs.

I decided to look for Clara.

Clara had a job as secretary in a large office. She seemed to have some position of responsibility as people

came to her with questions, or asked her to review their work.

I watched as a well-dressed man came in from another office. He talked with her and made a few jokes. He asked her to have lunch with him.

It was obvious that Clara was doing all right for herself. There was no place for me around there.

For this I got killed?

I decided to walk around downtown a little and see if anything had changed.

There were a couple of new buildings, and some businesses were closed. Somehow it no longer felt like my hometown.

I was about to leave when I saw someone who looked a little familiar.

Could that be Betsy? I thought she had gone to live with an aunt in another state.

I looked at her closely. This woman was much older. She looked tired, and she had two children with her. One was a girl about three or four. The other was a boy, perhaps ten or twelve.

I stared at him. There was no getting away from it. The boy looked a great deal like me.

I quickly counted the years. (What year was it now, by Earth time?) I told myself it couldn't be, but as I stared, the conviction grew that I was looking at my son.

Suddenly I knew that I desperately wanted to know my son. I wanted to have held him as a baby, guided his first steps, heard him say his first words. I wanted to try to help him make a better adjustment to school than I had. Fat chance. He wouldn't even be able to see me.

No wonder people didn't like to go back to Earth level.

I tried talking to him anyway. "Hello," I said. "What's your name?"

The boy looked around uneasily. Was it possible that in some way he sensed my presence?

I tried again. "I used to know your mother." (Not that she probably wanted to see me again anyway.)

The boy stopped walking and looked up and down the



sidewalk.

"Come on, Charley," Betsy said irritably. "We've got a doctor's appointment."

A doctor's appointment? Was Charley sick?

I followed them all the way to the doctor's office. It turned out the appointment was for the little girl. Betsy told Charley to take her to the toy section and keep her entertained. I knew he was bored, but he patiently started a game with a toy dog. He's nicer than I ever was, I thought, remembering times I had to take care of Nancy.

I returned to the level where people are ghosts. I had a lot to think about. After a while I went to see Grandma.

"Have you thought about going back to Earth level?" I asked.

"Well, yes, I've been back a couple of times."

"How did you find it?"

"It was pretty discouraging. Nobody could hear me or see me. I tried to talk to you a couple of times and warn you that you were getting yourself in trouble, but of course you didn't know I was there."

"Do you think that sometimes a person might sort of guess that one of us is there, sort of sense something without being sure?"

"It might be. In fact I think that some people are more sensitive than others. But how could you explain about this level to someone living on Earth?"

I went back to Earth level a few more times to check on Charley and his mother. It was disappointing. I never was able to talk to Charley, and he looked to his stepfather as he should have been looking to me.

"Grandma," I said one time, "have you ever thought about going back for rebirth on the Earth level?"

"I have thought about it," she said. "When I first came here, I was so tired from that long struggle with the cancer that I was glad to just rest. Then Jack came to keep me company, as a dog can, and I made other friends. But now I am thinking about applying to go back. Jack has left for his new life, and so have some of my friends. Perhaps it's time for me to go."

“How do you apply to go back?”

“I think you ask one of the angels to help you.”

“So,” said the angel when I brought up the subject, “You think you might be ready for a new life on Earth level?”

“I think so.”

“You do realize it’s a big responsibility?”

“I guess I never really thought about it that way.”

“The purpose of life is to learn to be a better person. In fact it is only as you make progress toward real goodness that you are truly happy. And every time you interact with another person, you have an influence. You are helping that person either toward or away from his life goal. It’s a heavy responsibility.”

“Gosh!”

“Think it over. If you’re still feeling brave, I’ll set you up with a counselor, and he can explain everything to you.”

“Yes,” said the counselor, “the Being allows a great deal of leeway in when we reincarnate. It is best, though, if we take time to follow a few rules.”

“What happens if we don’t?”

“It depends on the circumstances. One possibility is that the mother’s body might refuse to complete the pregnancy, even if the mother is not conscious of making such a decision. Decisions are made at many different levels, you know. Or you might find yourself in a situation which you have no possible chance of controlling.

“The Being allows us the greatest possible amount of free will. But most people do cooperate, at least to a certain extent. Leaving behind the memory of the body you are familiar with and starting on such a great adventure as reincarnation is pretty awesome.

“We try to find where a baby is expected to be born under circumstances that fit your soul need. Remember, the entire purpose of life is to learn to become more and more like the Being Himself. For most of us it’s a long

hard journey. For this reason you may find yourself in very unpleasant situations.

“As long as you cooperate, you will be allowed to preview the circumstances into which you will be born, and you are free to refuse any situation.”

“What happens if I refuse every situation you set up for me?”

“It might be a very long time before you leave this level.”

After further discussion, I agreed to go to a special school where there would be formal study of the matter. We reviewed various case histories of how people were born into difficult life situations and saw how this helped their soul growth toward perfection.

Finally I felt I was ready to make the big step. I went back to see the counselor.

“We have a situation here that might interest you,” he said. “The mother will be very kind. The father has a highly respectable job. The family will have problems, but they will be extremely fond of their little daughter.”

“What?” I yelled. “Are you saying I would be a girl?”

The counselor explained that it was necessary to have experiences with both sexes in order to learn what we need from Earth life. I had heard of this, but it had never once occurred that it could happen to me.

“No,” I said firmly. “I am not going as a woman.”

The counselor sighed. “What sort of situation do you think you would want then?”

“I want to be in a rich family for a change. I want to get a real good education and be somebody of importance.”

“I’ll resume my search,” said the counselor. He sent me back to play baseball with my friends.

After some time he sent for me again. He showed me a preview of the prospective family. I would be reared with all the advantages and have every opportunity to become a handsome and powerful man. I would probably have attractive children. It seemed perfect.

“But,” said the counselor, “you know you have free

will. The way things turn out will depend on how you make use of the situation.”

I took another brief course in preparation for entering this new family.

Then, bidding my friends goodbye, I took an early look at my new mother. She was quite pretty, with a healthy looking fetus tucked snugly in her body.

It would be up to me to decide the exact moment I took residence within the new baby.

It was only after I had made a firm commitment that I suddenly wondered if I could be making a serious mistake.... ☯



**Dorothy Rosella Rands** (1920–2007) was born on June 9, 1920 in Darlington, Maryland, the daughter of John and Una (Clingan) Rands. She married her first husband, Richard Drury Gowin (1913–1986), on January 3, 1944. They settled in Alaska, first operating a poultry

farm in Palmer, and then staking out a claim under the Homestead Act in the wilderness of the Copper River Basin area. They built a log cabin and lived on the homestead for five years, from 1950 to 1955. Three children were born during this period: Forest Richard Gowin (1949–1966), Dale Robert Gowin (1950–), and Alan Roy Gowin (1953–2008). The family moved to the city of Anchorage in 1955, where the older children were enrolled in public school, and that year the fourth child, Anola Rose Gowin, was born. A year later they relocated to Phoenix, Arizona, and then settled in Connecticut in 1959.

Dorothy's first marriage ended in divorce in 1972. In 1974 she achieved a lifelong goal by graduating from the University of Connecticut with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Inspired by meeting with imprisoned antiwar activists Dan and Phil Berrigan, she became involved in the Quaker prison ministry. She was involved in the establishment of the first Quaker meetings inside the prisons of New York State, and she worked as a volunteer with the Alternatives to Violence Project, leading workshops inside prisons. It was through this work that she met her second husband, William Sims. They were married in Auburn, New York, on April 23, 1990.

Dorothy worked for decades as a nurse's aide in nursing homes and as a home health aide. Both in this professional work and in her extensive volunteer work, her life was defined by compassionate service and informed by her Quaker spiritual beliefs.

In 2001 she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. The last years of her life were spent in the Rosewood Heights nursing home in Syracuse. She died on April 22, 2007.

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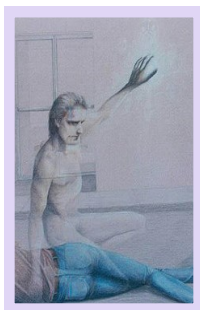
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I had thought at first that I was dying—that Rob had returned his shot, and we had killed each other. But now I realized I felt all right. It must have just been a hard jolt.

But there was that irritating voice nudging at my attention, and a very bright light a little over to the side.

“Turn off the damn headlights!” I roared.

I heard running feet, and a woman’s scream. Jumping to my feet, I looked around. A man lay sprawled on the asphalt, his shirt a bloody mess. A sobbing woman was crouching there so I couldn’t see the face, but damn, that was my sister Nancy. What did she think she was doing?

“Shut up and let me think,” I yelled at Nancy.

The man on the asphalt was wearing clothes like I had worn today. I moved to see the face. Damn if the bastard wasn’t a dead ringer for me!