The Dead Man Who Appears

by Jason Sturner

"Well, what did it taste like?" I asked, fighting the urge to laugh in his face.

The old man lifted his dirty head and scratched thoughtfully at his unshaven chin. His left eye blinked chronically. He ran a grimy hand through his scraggly gray hair. "Like… chicken," he answered in a scratchy voice. "The universe tasted like chicken."

A short pause passed between us; his chapped lips were curled into a grin. He looked at me curiously and shook his head, as if realizing something funny, then bent over in hysterics.

"Chicken. How imaginative the demon alcohol has enabled you to become," I grumbled.

It wasn't the answer I was expecting, and it had deteriorated my objective to mock him. For the past twenty minutes I stood here listening to this street hobo ramble on about alternate universes and gods and life after death – I couldn't believe it had all led to some ridiculous punch line. My next impulse was to shove him aside and continue walking home, for it had been too long a day to put up with such nonsense. Nevertheless, I accepted it as an adequate conclusion to his story, considering the potential state of mind he was in. I stared back inquisitively and waited for him to speak.

He did not, however, respond to my comment. Instead his grin dropped and his bad eye stopped blinking. He looked me dead in the eyes, his long hair blowing back with the cold wind. A faint glow emanated from his skin and his pupils went large like a cat. "You haven't any faith, have you, boy?" he snapped accusingly.

The city seemed quiet just then, as if my reply was to be heard by all.

"Well," he asked impatiently, "have you?"

"If you're asking me whether or not I believe in God," I began nervously, "then the answer to that question is no. I don't believe in a god, or an afterlife for that matter."

His expression stood as it was, remaining so even as people bumped into him as they passed. I freed myself from his stare, noticing the shadow of a crow as it flew over the cracked sidewalk, and put a hand over the back of my neck to protect it from the cold. It seemed nearly a minute before his countenance changed.

Then, without a word, he reached out his hand and opened his palm. It was dirty and scabbed. I looked and saw that he held nothing.

"What?"

"What do you mean 'what'? You owe," he said dryly. "Remember our deal? I give you something to ponder over in exchange for a 'handout' – five dollars I recall?" His concern for my lack of faith had seemed to drift away.

As his shaky hand waited, I turned my head arrogantly to the west and studied the sun as it disappeared beyond the city, watching its yellow-orange rays soak into the buildings around us, illuminating them like magnificent gold towers in some alien kingdom beyond the stars. For a brief moment I thought I'd like to visit such a place.

"Hey!" came that scratchy old voice again.

I shook myself from the daydream and stood firm.

"Well then, Mr. … Harry Earles," I said, reading the name sewn onto his tattered gray army coat. "I suppose I did agree to a cash payment. Can't say it was worth it though." I reached into my pocket and withdrew a crumpled five-dollar bill. A portion of the top right

corner had been torn off, but he smiled at it nonetheless. I gave it to him hesitantly, tried to give the impression that I wouldn't be so easily taken next time – not that there would be a next time.

"Much gratitude, dear friend," he said rather politely. "Your kindness has just opened many doors. There may be hope for you yet."

"Whatever," I said.

Then I pulled my crossed arms to my chest and looked up at the sky. That's when I became aware of my breath as it glistened in the translucent orange of the setting sun, a simple observation which unnerved me after noticing no such cloud coming from my acquaintance. I looked at his face and a bluish glow seemed to be coming through the pores of his skin.

I took a step back.

"Boy, what I told you is true," he said, noticing my discomfort. "All of it, 'cept the whole chicken flavor thing. Needed to throw you off. Needed to beat you to the punch – Oh, I bet you didn't know, did you? That I knew you were going to laugh at me and walk off? Leave without so much as a 'thank you' or the five bucks you promised?"

My heart began to race. How did he know I was thinking that? I convinced myself he had made a lucky assumption, probably having told his bizarre stories to every passerby willing to pay. I figured they too had all walked off laughing and shaking their heads.

"But everything else is true," he went on, "because like I told you, the mighty spirit… well, he let me swallow the entire universe and all its secrets – not literally, of course. I just opened up my soul and in they went. Now I know everything. I'm a chosen one, you see. Only catch is, now I'm stuck for eternity guiding stubborn souls like yours into the right direction. If I fail, you may wind up drifting in the Void for all of forever. You think it's cold here?"

I chose not to answer that.

"Your god wants you to believe in him, and in yourself," he continued, pointing a grubby finger at me. "Without faith in those two things, life beyond flesh and bone will be very lonely, my friend."

Then, seeming content with his words, he turned and began limping towards a dark alley between two rundown buildings. He disappeared around the corner, and when I ran after him he was gone.

"You're a crazy old man!" I cursed into the shadows. "You're an idiot!"

I swung an arm at the air and convinced myself I had won the argument. Right then a bag lady appeared from out of the dark, pushing a cart full of aluminum cans. She looked at me with a puzzled expression as she passed.

"Get a job!" I yelled after her.

The wind began to pick up as I walked home, and I shivered beneath my jacket. The old graveyard across the road, which had never really grabbed my attention before, now drew my eyes to it like some strange, newborn fetish. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling – due, I surmised, to the old man and his words, which had begun to fill my head with bizarre images of death and afterlife experiences.

That night my mind was viciously attacked by a multitude of dreams, all of which were disturbingly realistic, yet hypnotic in their grasp, and even stranger, brimming with imagery so haunting that I detected, on occasion, I was holding my breath in sheer awe of it. And although I could not see him, I knew that Harry was in those dreams, guiding my mind's eye across vast landscapes of images and emotions which no words could accurately describe. It felt as if I were a living shadow, observing other worlds through a reversed perspective, with distorted eyes not meant to <u>see</u> so much as <u>sense</u>. Perhaps I can call it a journey within an illusion, or a walk

through the opposite side of air. The indescribable beauty of it all put my mind into a state of tranquility. And as I "drifted" past cities inhabited by myriad life forms, unbound by time and bursting with every known wavelength of light, I began to feel something akin to homesickness – all of it was somehow familiar to me. It was as if I'd been to those places before, had once encountered those same beings; yet, I couldn't seem to figure when, because every time a memory came it would be gone before my mind could catch it.

At one point I literally jumped from my sleep into a confused, blurred state of consciousness. I looked around the room in a nervous fashion, and as my eyes ventured past the window I could've sworn I saw the old man's face peering in, laughing eerily with that long hair floating up and down like snakes. When my eyes darted back for a second glimpse he was no longer there, and at that moment an overwhelming realization struck me: what I had witnessed in my dreams was nothing short of a multidimensional trip through the eternal realms of Heaven, and Hell.

I awoke late the next morning in an almost meditative state of mind. My mood was pleasant, for the sun shone brightly through the windows of my apartment, giving character to all things around me. Outside, goldfinches chased each other playfully, and I was surprised to have even noticed. There was no denying that my encounter with Harry and the contents of my "dreams" had somehow altered my perception of reality, had triggered some deeper understanding which I'd always had but that didn't reach the surface of my conscious thoughts.

After I left for work and was outside walking, there came, naturally, a fear of running into the old man again. But the fear subsided as I observed the city, noting to myself all the details which had eluded me over the years. Unfortunately, the city did not offer many pleasant things to see, and there was such an abundance of garbage and graffiti that I wondered how I

could have ever wanted to live here. Considering that thought, I decided to take a much-needed trip to the country, maybe even look for a job out there.

"The guys at work would all get a kick out of that one," I chuckled to myself.

With my freshly-brewed ideas I began to take notice of the people around me, wondering if anyone else was having an experience similar to mine, if they too had been affected by a meeting with Harry. I focused on their breath as it rose into the brisk air, and suddenly got an urge to cross the street and visit the graveyard.

When I reached the front gate I had an overwhelming presentiment that Harry was inside – not dead, but there among the world of the dead which he seemed so knowledgeable about. I opened the gate and walked in, all the while feeling the proximity of an unseen presence. I turned and looked behind me, nothing there but a crow walking the fence top. Curiosity got the better of me, so I walked further in.

Overall, the cemetery was peaceful, silent and tucked away in its urban location. There were even trees and shrubs scattered about, their fallen leaves blanketing the overgrown grass and old tombstones which leaned and crumbled with the passage of time. I wondered about the people buried beneath me, wondered what they had believed in while they were alive, and if those beliefs had any semblance to what they knew now.

Realizing I was very late for work, I started for the gate but was stopped in my tracks by a rather plain and rectangular headstone bearing the name Harry. The last name was hidden beneath a pile of leaves, but a part of me knew what it said. I brushed the red and orange leaves aside and gasped as the full inscription lay before me. It read:

Here lies

Harry Earles

1810 – 1911

I was even more shocked to find, lying at the base of the tombstone, a five-dollar bill with its top right corner missing. I hesitated for a moment then picked it up. Right then a warm, soothing breeze cut through the air and blew over me, stopping only briefly to caress my face before passing through the graveyard, causing the crow to take flight.

After closing the gate behind me, I took a long, final look at the graveyard and placed the torn bill inside my pocket. I should've been terrified by what was happening, but I wasn't; instead, I felt calm. And as the sun arced its way towards noon I peered into the chaos of the city, catching sight of a café. I walked towards it and pulled out some change.

"Sorry Mike," I told my boss from the café phone, "I overslept this morning and I'm feeling pretty sick. Gimme a few days to get over it, okay?"

The idea of engaging in some self-discovery seemed like a good idea at this point, not that I was planning on attending church or buying books on occult wisdom or anything. But for the first time I felt like considering my options. Perhaps this ghost, Harry Earles, was nothing more than a bizarre subconscious illusion or some strange consequence thereof. I guess it doesn't really matter. I never saw Harry again, and I suppose I never needed to, because if a god, or gods, sent him to open my eyes, well, then he's probably off on his next mission – somewhere out there in the cosmos, limping his way through time and dreams….

"What'll you have, sir?" asked the waitress when I sat down at the counter.

"I don't know," I replied. "What's today's special?"

"Chicken sandwich," she answered with a smile.

Bio: Jason Sturner was born and raised in the western suburbs of Chicago. His stories and poems have appeared in such publications as *Space and Time Magazine*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Flashes in the Dark*, and *MicroHorror*. He currently lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. Website: www.jasonsturner.blogspot.com