

A

A large man moved into the light and reached his hand out to shake mine. He had a jolly face and a pleasant, almost mischievous, smile. He was wearing an old, tattered tweed suit. He looked a little like someone I had seen pictures of, but he was glowing so much I could hardly define his features. The light coming from him was so bright at first I shielded my eyes. He turned his face to me and smiled, and for a moment I thought I knew who he was.

“Are you?”

“Please, stay seated,” the man in the suit said.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Mr. . . . You are . . . *him*, aren’t you?”

“Please, call me Jack. I suspect we are going to spend a good deal of time together.” He looked frumpy yet wise. Joy seemed to emanate from his face.

“Now,” Jack said, “let’s talk about the man in the mirror, shall we?”

Trembling, I said, “I would rather talk about you, I mean, if you are him. Your writings changed my life. I—”

“I am not here to be flattered. I am here to serve. In fact, now that I have crossed over, I can truly say

34 JAMES BRYAN SMITH

that flattery will get you nowhere! I am here to be your guide.”

“My guide? To where?”

“Ernie already told you, I suspect. You are in your Father’s house. And there are many, many rooms. And there is a special room, just for you, a room of marvels, where you have been invited to go. I was asked to be your guide. Right now you are in a kind of welcoming room, but your ultimate destiny is much greater.”

“Again, forgive me, but are you . . . C. S. Lewis, the famous author?”

“No.”

“But, you . . . you look, I mean, you seem like him, or, what I imagine him to be.”

“Up here we go by our real name. I suspect you read about that in your Bible. Revelation 2:17: ‘To everyone who conquers I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.’ So you see, my real name, well, only God and I know. But please, call me Jack, Mr. Hudson.”

“Only if you call me Tim.”

“Very well, Tim. Now take a look in that mirror and tell me what you see.”

A long silence passed between the three of us. Ernie stood holding the mirror. It was no ordinary mirror. It did not merely reflect physical features; it reflected the condition of one’s soul. In that mirror I saw myself as I truly am, not the self I want others to see, or even the person I try to convince myself I am. I saw my true self. My sinfulness, my weaknesses, my evil thoughts were revealed. I pulled back in horror.

“I can’t look at it!”

“I know it is hard, Tim, but please look again.”

I turned to look into the mirror. I could see my sad face looking back at me. I looked into my own eyes, and all I could feel was despair.

“I would rather not, Jack.”

“Why?”

“Shame,” Ernie interjected. “Isn’t that so, Tim?”

“Shame is too mild. I hate what I see. I am a mess. I am a fake. I am a hypocrite. I know the depths of my own depravity. I know the hundreds of resolutions I have broken. I know who I am. If you knew all of the sins I have committed, you would not be standing near me.”

“Oh,” said Jack, “but we do, and are! A man is more than the sum of his sins. Look a little harder, Tim.”

I took a deep breath and peered into the mirror. At first I only saw my own hideous reflection, but then, like those line drawings that, when your eyes relax, reveal something you could not see before, something emerged. It was me, really me. Not a two-dimensional portrait, or a three-dimensional reflection, but a multidimensional exposure. I saw my true self in that mirror. Flawed, broken, wounded, and imperfect, but real.

“Nothing—no one, is more beautiful than you, Tim, since God, beauty itself, has fallen in love with you,” Jack said.

“What about . . .”

“Your sins?” Ernie asked.

“Yeah. I mean, what about them? Isn’t there a big black book up here, where they keep all of the records? My book must be several volumes.”

36 JAMES BRYAN SMITH

“Yes, there is a record,” Jack said, “and their effects written in our souls. We weren’t made for sin. It damages us. Your sins can be seen by the effect they have had upon you. But up here it all changes.”

I continued to stare into the mirror until I began to sob. Ernie and Jack each put a hand on my shoulders and gently rubbed my back.

“You *are* forgiven, Tim. He died for *all* of your sins, not some of them. God loves you. All of the time,” Ernie said.

God loves me. This was not a new thought; it was an old thought I had long ago abandoned, especially in the last year. I had lived for years believing that there is something I must do, something I must be, in order to get God to like me. When bad things began happening to me, I was sure that God was punishing me. After Madison’s birth there were many times of introspection where I asked myself, “What did I do wrong? If I had only been a better Christian!” As I sat in the chair, I thought, how comically tragic, that all of my efforts to be loved were a waste of time and energy. Jack and Ernie continued to massage my shoulders, and it felt like the heavy weight that had been pressing on my back was lifted.

I whispered these words, “I am sorry . . . thank you,” and when I did, the room was brighter than it had ever been. In fact, it was as if the sun had just come over the horizon. Jack pointed to a door I had not noticed before and motioned me toward it.

“You are ready to go through it now. The door would not have opened for you before. Now that you know who you are, and whose you are, you are ready for your journey.”

5



hen we walked through the door, I was once again outside, but it was no longer dark. It was more like early morning, when the rooster crows because the sun has just appeared. I was struck by the utter stillness of the place. Though it was full of life—birds singing and insects humming—it was an entirely peaceful sound. The trees were large and beautiful, like they were people, each with a different look about them, as if they wanted to say something to me.

I was also struck by the vastness of the place. It was a larger sort of space, as if the sky were farther off than I remembered ever seeing it on Earth. I had the sense that I was, for the first time in my life, truly “outside,” in a place much larger even than our solar system. I felt liberated and yet exposed at the same time.

It was not yet light, but the whole sky was beginning to glow. The light was coming from the distant horizon, as if there were a sun just below it. The beams were not yellow or even white but rosy as they lit the clouds above us. The air smelled rich with life, like a forest after the rain. Jack motioned me to walk with

him. We began hiking up a trail that led through the woods that surrounded the cottage.

Now that we were out in the light, I could see Jack more clearly. He looked very different than he did in the room. The best way to describe it is to say he looked a bit like a hologram because when I looked at him from different angles, I saw different dimensions. From one perspective he looked like a jolly Father Christmas, but from another angle I could see he was like a shining Olympian rippling with power, as if he were hiding himself from me so as not to frighten me with his glory. The path was on a gentle incline, but I was soon growing tired. Within a few steps I found that I couldn't go on. I stopped in my tracks as my breathing became labored.

"Having a bit of trouble?" Jack inquired.

"Yes, I . . . can't catch my breath. How is it that I . . . who am relatively young . . . can't stay up . . . with a dead guy?"

"Hardly dead. I am more alive than ever! Let's rest awhile."

We sat down on a nearby rock. He looked around and smiled. I was still catching my breath. There was a nice moment of silence. Then my thoughts turned back to Ernie's mirror. A deep sense of shame returned to me once again as I recalled how many sins I had committed. The envy, the anger, the lust, the gossip, the hate, the prejudice, and the pride—and those were just the sins of commission; the sins of omission were even more troubling. It was too much to think about. But I did think about it, and as I did, I became more and more ashamed.

"I can't go on, Jack."

“Why not?”

“Because I am not worthy to be here. I need to go home and . . . change my ways or something. The things I have done and left undone—it’s too much,” I said.

“Self-improvement is not the way to heaven. If you were to go back and try to change, it would only be to try to earn something, to once again put yourself in control. Here’s the good news—you are not in control!”

“Jack, I am not good enough to be here—to be in this place, to be here with you. I am not worthy . . . to be! I have made a mess of it all. God gave me enormous gifts, and I squandered them. I am wretched! After what I have seen . . . I can’t even bear to look at this place.”

“Let me ask a simple question. Who made your eyes?”

“What? That is something a two-year-old would ask?”

“Who made your eyes?”

“God? Is that what you are looking for?”

“Precisely. It was God, and he wants you to use them to see his marvels.”

“But, Jack, you don’t understand. You haven’t seen what I have done with these eyes. Instead of beauty all I see are terrible things. It is as if I have ruined them. I haven’t used them to see his glory. Please, Jack, let me go where I deserve.”

“Yes, it is right to feel shame. Judging is a part of loving, and back in that room you were able to see who you are. But that mirror does not get the last word. I have something special I want you to see, Tim. Come with me.”

He pointed to the summit of the hill.

“Let us walk a bit,” he said. “Lean on my arm, and I will strengthen you.”

40 JAMES BRYAN SMITH

Jack's strong arm supported me as we ascended. We walked up to the top of the hill, and there stood a cross. My body began to tremble as I realized that I might be looking at the actual cross upon which Jesus had been crucified. I let go of Jack's arm and ran to the foot of the cross and fell to my knees. I ran my hands up the rough wood and gazed upon the blood stains that ran down toward me. I hugged the wood and blubbered like a baby.

"I am so sorry, Lord, . . . so sorry," I said as I kissed the blood-stained wood.

"He bore the blame and took away your shame, Tim. Isn't it wonderful!" Jack said from behind me.

I looked up at the blood stains on the cross piece where his hands had been pierced.

"There was not, nor will be," Jack said, "from the first day to the last night, an act so glorious and magnificent."

I stood up full of courage. "I am ready to serve him with all of my heart," I said.

"That is not why he died for you, Tim. He doesn't need your service. He died for you because he loves you. He doesn't need you to do anything at all. Now you are faced with a more difficult task: to let him love you in the midst of your shame. He did not die to coerce you into service or into moral improvement. All he wants . . . is you." I stared in silence at the blood-stained wood.

"You must let him love you as you are, not as you intend to be. Let him love you as you are, without a single plea for reform. It is all about grace, Tim. All of life is grace. We deserve nothing; we are given everything. Until now you have only experienced the drippings of grace. You have longed for

the real thing, like the longing for the scent of a flower you have never been able to find, or the echo of a tune you have not yet heard, or news from a country you have never visited. Well, now you have found it. Grace is the thing you have been searching for, and it is all around you.”

“I thought you might be needing this again,” said a voice from behind us. It was Ernie, standing by Jack, holding the same mirror. He handed it to Jack, who walked to my side and put it in front of me again.

“Now, look again at the man in the mirror.”

I wanted to look away, but he held it there, refusing to let me escape the face in front of me. As I looked this time, a new feeling came over me. It was the first time in my life I had ever really looked at myself without contempt.

“Jesus called us to love the least of the brethren,” Ernie interrupted. “It appears to me that right now the least of the brethren . . . is you. Do you think you could love yourself for his sake?”

I just kept looking at the face. In my own eyes I could see a thousand failures, countless hurts and losses. I looked up at Jack and Ernie in confusion. I was no longer angry with the man in the mirror. I felt pity more than anything else.

“God has forgiven you, Tim. Now you must forgive yourself, unless you think you are a higher judge than God,” Jack said. “If he has forgiven you, who are you not to forgive yourself?”

I looked again into the mirror and could see Ernie’s smiling reflection. I focused again on my face, took a deep breath, and said softly, “I forgive you.”

Jack and Ernie helped me to my feet, and together we walked down the other side of the hill. There were scores of

42 JAMES BRYAN SMITH

angels surrounding the path, bright and shining and brimming with radiant power.

“What are they doing here?” I asked.

“Angels do not understand mercy. They marvel at it. They often wonder why God bothers with us humans. But every now and then they see an act of love or mercy or forgiveness, and they stand in awe. What you just did—forgiving yourself despite your failures—is something that amazes them,” Ernie explained. As I walked by them, the angels covered their faces so their shining glory would not blind me.

When we reached the bottom, there was a fork in the path, and Ernie turned to us and said, “Well, boys, I think my work here is done. Tim, it has been a pleasure you cannot imagine. Jack, a joy as always. Good-bye.”

We hugged, and then Ernie turned and walked away, and I watched in amazement as my old, dead-but-alive barber ambled along, laughing and waving his scissors and comb in the air.

“Now you have seen with the eyes of God. You have seen yourself as God sees you: a sinner who is nonetheless loved,” Jack said as we walked along our path, putting his arm around me and hugging me as if I had just hit the game-winning home run.

“Am I ready to see this room you have been talking about?”

“Not yet. There is more to see before you get there.”