

**The Leaching
of
Ian Burns**

By
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CAST OF CHARACTERS 452

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In the End, the Beginning

The pain was indescribable. A spray of sharp needles flying at my face wouldn't hurt as much. Instantly, it spread to my chest and then to my belly. *'Help me! PLEASE, HELP ME!!'* My legs were next. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't scream. I couldn't see. I fell to my knees; then forward onto my face. Prone in the fire, through the fog of agony, I thought, *'What have I done? WHAT HAVE I DONE?'*

I became dizzy from lack of oxygen, but the pain seemed to be fading. I felt warm; not hot. And very light. I sat up (I think) but I couldn't see anything. I panicked. *'I'M BLIND! Nooooo! Take my hearing, my sense of smell, my legs, anything BUT MY SIGHT!'*

"Chill out, would you please," a calm voice near my shoulder said. "I'm here to help, but you've got to help me, too. I can't do this alone, you know."

"WHAT!!! I'm burning alive and I'm supposed to help YOU!!?"

"Yes. Now, just take a deep breath and relax."

"RELAX!!!!? RELAX!! Are you crazy, or what!!?"

"At least TRY to help me. Relax, and open your mind. Ask your question again, but mean it this time."

I groaned. But, I suddenly realized, not from pain. There was no pain. Not even my usual old age aches and pains. My panic waned. *'What question could this voice be talking about,'* I thought.

"The one you asked just before you started whining about not being able to see," the now slightly annoyed voice said.

My mouth was agape (I think). *'She can read my mind!'*

"Well? Do you want to know what you've done or not? We can't stay here forever, you know," she said impatiently.

"NO! I DON'T know! Who are you? Am I dead? Where ARE we?" I was starting to feel rather frustrated.

"Gee, they told me you'd be an easy one. Okay, maybe 'chill out' wasn't a good choice of words, but you don't need to be in such a snit!"

I had expected a guardian angel to be a bit more patient and helpful. "Are you taking me to hell?" I asked worriedly.

"Aarrgghh!!" was her response. "You know you're not evil! You're just cranky. And stubborn. And cantankerous. And too curious for your own good. Now, do you want to know what you've done or not?"

She was right about the curiosity. "I want to know what's going on, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Instantly, the darkness was transformed into a warm, bright mist. It felt so good. So soft. So fuzzy. I didn't care if I ever saw anything again. I'd be perfectly content to stay in this suspended state forever, which is saying quite a lot, for me.

A glimpse of the family and friends I'd leave behind ran through the depths of my mind, but they seemed ready to let me go. They didn't look too unhappy, though I thought I sensed a tear or two from one of them.

I was dead, whether I liked it or not.

I soon felt myself drifting down like a leaf in the autumn breeze. The fuzziness stayed above us, but the 'feel-goodness' stayed with me. *'Not a cranky bone in my body for the first time in my life!'* I thought.

My angel cleared her throat loudly. "Did you forget already? You're dead. Or at least the old you is no more. Look at yourself."

I was a wisp of my former self. My basic form was the same, but I could see through my hand and I could slice my hand through my forearm with minimal resistance.

"Does this mean I don't have to eat any more to stay alive-I mean to stay dea--I mean to exist?" Eating was a waste of time. There is, or was, so much else to do.

"You can do as you like. To eat, or not to eat, that's up to you. Here you can basically do whatever your soul desires. You can play football, golf, read, talk with friends, watch the mist swirl up above, play cards, or anything you wish you had more time for in life. Except sleeping. Sleeping is different here. It can really wear a soul out. Even the most productive sleepers have to wake up for a few hours to rest."

I pinched myself, or tried to. My fingertips just touched each other through what looked like a skin-like substance. Did I just hear her say sleeping was hard work? I had lived to sleep! When I wasn't trying to sort out something interestingly complicated, that is. But, now that I thought about it, I didn't feel the least bit sleepy. Hummm, I could get used to this place.

I looked around. We were at the top of a large treeless hill, or mountain, or volcano of some sort, ringed with various sized, shaped and colored bubbles connected by a conduit or conveyor belt sort of thing. A few feet away from where we had landed was a contraption making a humming noise. I stood up to get a better look.

It could have been straight out of the airport baggage pick-up area. "Am I finally going to get all my luggage those darn airlines lost!? This really IS heaven!" I exclaimed happily, although I knew full well I would never need ANY luggage here, and my old stuff was gone forever. "I had heard that lost baggage is what makes up the rings of Saturn," I joked.

My angel wasn't amused. She looked like my first grade teacher, oh so many years ago. "Since most new arrivals are elderly, we let them ride to their pod," she responded matter-of-factly.

'*She doesn't look so young herself,*' I thought, forgetting she could read my mind. But she actually smiled, and I got the feeling that being old here was a not necessarily a bad thing. After all, she did say I could play football if I wanted to - at my age! "What's a pod and how do I know which is mine?" I asked.

"A pod is the living space for a collection of kindred souls," she explained.

"No!" I felt a small surge of dread, though not as much as I'd have felt at the same thought in life. "I thought I was rid of the b-----!" The end of this feeling filled word did not come from my mouth. Rather, a small light gray dart flew out towards the angel at a fairly slow rate of speed. She dodged it without any apparent thought and little effort.

"There is really no need for strong words here. We can read your feelings as well as your thoughts," was her response.

'G—A-----,' I thought. A small tan fluff came out of my ear as I thought this less than heavenly phrase. *'Is there no privacy here? How's a fella to pick his nose, or relieve himself?'*

NOW the old bat laughed. It was a happy laugh, not filled with sarcasm. Somehow I knew why - bodily functions here are not necessary. "But a bit of freedom from prying angels has to be a rule here, doesn't it? I mean, some of us humans are, or were, bashful souls, *'(alright, maybe not me)'*. I just don't want my thoughts out in the open for all to enjoy. Surely there are some limits to this invasion!" *'A guy could develop a healthy case of paranoia in this place,'* I thought.

I became more than a bit annoyed, as an answer was not to be had. She just shook her head like the schoolmarm she most certainly had been. I swear I heard her cluck a *'tsk, tsk'*, even with the smile on her face.

Luckily, another, more helpful looking soul appeared. "Hi, I'm Karl. I'd been assigned to you for years now, Mr. Burns. Sorry I couldn't be the one to bring you here, but events can't always be altered or predicted. I didn't expect you to do something so silly at your age. I thought you had a few more human years left in you."

"No harm done," I said dryly. "This tremendously helpful lady kept me entertained with 'guess what I'm thinking' while I was trying to decide if I was dead or alive." I was sure to emphasize the helpfulness of my angel of deliverance. "By the way, you don't look much older than a

teenie bopper, sonny.” I shot a sideways glance at Mrs. Cratchet as a comment on HER age.

They looked at each other knowingly. "We are both MUCH older than you are, by decades. And her name is Pearl. Or Ms. Gates, if you'd like," Karl offered.

"Well, if you ask me, neither of you are dry behind the ears. If I were your boss, you'd both be fired! What kind of place is this? Can't a human being get better service than having a fill-in angel sent when he's dying, for C-----'s s---?" A small brown thumb tack flew out of my mouth instead of this phrase. It bounced off Karl's ear. He didn't even flinch.

"Being trusted to the less potent souls is an honor of sorts. It means you have more good in you than some, and needed less intervention. Or maybe I should say, you asked for guidance less often," he said. "You could have saved yourself a lot of headaches if only you had asked us for help more often."

All this gibberish was very irritating. *'Why the h--- would I have wanted THIS kind of help?'* I became more and more furious the more I thought about it. A puff of chocolate brown grit snorted from my left nostril.

"Time to get to your pod, then," Karl said abruptly. I think he saw my innards start to churn with frustration. I couldn't handle any more of this kind of information. It was too illogical and I was starting to decompensate. Maybe Karl knew me pretty well after all.

Riding the conveyor belt gave me time to calm down a bit. It moved quickly with just enough bumps to make the ride interesting without fear for one's life. Not that one's life needed to be worried about here....

I thought about being able to do anything I wanted here. I wondered if the golf courses were any good. "Hey!" I suddenly realized I had no clubs. "How am I supposed to play golf without MY clubs?! I can't use just any clubs, you know" I glared at the angel of deliverance with this question to see if the 'you know' phrase annoyed her as much as it had me.

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