

21. Hobson's Dream: The University of the Chosen

Grace, exhausted, sore and confused, was pushed into a holding cell whereupon she collapsed on the floor. The crowd of young people milled around her. They too were sore and hurt. They were her fellow protesters and they had just been deposited here after the violent confrontation they had against police in front of Washington's Capitol. Someone lifted her up and placed her on a bunk, where she lay, in a swoon, a dream emerging from her mouth as if she were a character in a comic book. She tried to sit up, but felt an unbearable weight on her shoulders, and fell back. And then, under the weight of many hands, strange cold hands, her dream took off, a journey, one full of hope, to who knows where it would take her. But the weight on her shoulders held her back.

She was accepted into the University of the Chosen and the day had come for her to leave her Celestial Suburb and say good-bye to her parents, Pride and Doting. They called to her in unison: "Take care our little white girl, take care! Drive carefully!" Grace opened the door of her new electric car that she had Christened "Savior," but the weight on her shoulders stopped her from entering. She brushed and slapped at her shoulders, but the more she did so the heavier the weight. Then suddenly, the weight on her shoulders revealed itself. It was a wizened little monkey-looking thing as fat as it was tall, skinny hairy legs which it tightened around Grace's neck.

"Let me in and I will show you the way," said the disgusting smelling monkey.

"Who, who are you?" cried Grace, shaking in fear.

"Just call me Luke," answered the monkey, with a devilish grin.

What a strange name! She had never heard it before. In any case, Grace complied without thinking any more about it. She just had to get to university, it was all she had thought about for the past year. She said the magic words, "Phi Beta Kappa," the car door opened, the weight on her shoulders lifted, and she slid into

the seat, only to find Luke sitting at the steering wheel.

“I’ll drive. I know where to go. University of the Chosen, wasn’t it?” Luke growled.

What else could Grace do but sit back and accept? But no sooner had she done so than they turned a corner and were suddenly in a the suburb of economic deprivation. Or that was what she guessed, never having been in one before.

“Don’t worry. These are all my friends,” said Luke.

“All of them?” Grace wished she had as many friends.

“All of them.”

The car stopped at a corner where Grace pointed to a group of young African Americans chatting and laughing.

“You shouldn’t use that word, you know,” said Luke.

“What word?” asked Grace, feeling a massive weight return to her shoulders.

“You called them niggers.”

“I said no such thing. I didn’t utter a word!”

“They don’t call me Devil for nothing, you know. Now apologize.”

“I thought your name was Luke?”

“It is. Short for Lucifer, don’t you like it?”

“Oh No! You’re the Devil that Proud and Doting warned me about!”

“At your service.”

Devil lowered the passenger side window where Grace could lean out to say her apology. “Now apologize! Go on then, say it!” he ordered.

Grace had always done what she was told. This was no exception.

“Guys, I mean you people, I’m sorry!” called Grace in a weak voice.

The group turned to her, made cat calls, called her white bitch and invited her to sleep with them.

Devil intervened. “You can’t sleep with them. They’re black and you’re a white supremacist.”

“What? I don’t want to...”

“Yes you do. You’re disgusting. Imagine what Pride and Doting would say if they knew that’s what you want at the University of the Chosen.”

“But we’re not at the University of the Chosen yet, are we?”

“Not quite. But you see that guy standing on his own, all dressed so nice and his hair combed flat with a perfect part?”

“He’s one of the Chosen?” asked Grace, wide-eyed.

“Now you’re getting it.” Devil called out. “Hey you there, blackie, get in.”

The well-dressed boy or girl of the ghetto came over, as if called like a dog. Grace opened the door. “Climb in. We can all fit in the front,” she said in her most friendly voice.

“Hello,” he or she said. “Before I get in, you should know that I’m not what you think I am.”

“She knows that,” grinned Devil, as they sped off and out of the suburb of economic deprivation.

“I don’t know,” said Grace once again feeling that weight on her shoulders.

“Yes. I’m not a full African American. I’m a half-caste,” said the boy or girl or whatever.

“So what?” said Grace, feeling confident, “that means nothing to me.”

Devil intervened. “Careful, Grace. Careful what you say.”

“My name is Algy,” said the half African American with a grin.

“That’s a nice name,” said Grace, entranced and puzzled. “Is that what makes you so different?”

“Yes, you could say that. It stands for LG. Get it?”

Devil nudged Grace in the ribs. “Come on, say it, you know what it stands for.”

“You mean LGBTQIA?” she asked nervously.

“That’s about right,” answered Algy with a smile that displayed his sparkling white teeth. His hand was already on her thigh.

“That’s amazing. You’re the first!” exclaimed Grace.

“Okay, you two. That’s enough,” ordered Devil. “We’re there anyway. Where all the white girls are, is your door, Grace. The rest go in the other door.”

Grace thanked Devil and offered to pay for the ride. “No need,” said the Devil. “I’ll keep an account. You’ll pay soon enough.”

“But my car?”

“Don’t worry. It will be in the Chosen carpark waiting for you.”

Grace turned to look for the campus, its beautiful old porticos, carved wooden doors. But she could see hardly any of this, just the tall spires peeping out above the haze. And there before her, was a large oily looking lake that lay between her and the entrance, her door, to the University of the Chosen. She looked for Algy who had quickly left her and disappeared into the haze. Maybe he knew of a secret way into the University. She stood there, puzzled. Between her and the dim outlines of the Chosen lay an uninviting lake, dark in color, almost as thick as black mud. The weight on her shoulders had returned, though it had slipped on to her back, like a knapsack full of stones.

She had come so far, the university almost in reach. Yet, there was no way she could get there. She dipped her toes in the lake, but pulled them out quickly. It was like a bog. She could not swim in it. The weight of Despair descended upon her, forcing her to drop down on her haunches. She wept. And in between the sobs, she looked up hoping that the haze would recede and the lake depart. Then she prayed, she knew not to whom or what. She had heard about people praying, but knew nothing of it. She had seen movies in which Muslims prayed and Buddhists chanted. Perhaps that was what she should do?

Now she lay down on the muddy grass, its coolness helping calm her small bosom. But under the weight, she heaved and sobbed, cried herself into a disturbed sleep. At which point help arrived.

Out of the gloom appeared a boatman, whistling joyfully as he rowed his kayak with gentle and rhythmic gusto. "Hey, you over there, are you one of the Chosen?"

Grace awoke. Was she having a dream within a dream? She stood and waved. The boatman was maybe an answer to her prayers? She had not asked for it. Had not asked for anything specifically. Only crying out for her wish to be granted. To get to the University of the Chosen where she knew she belonged. She waved and called out in her weak thin little girl's voice, "I'm here! I'm Grace, I want to go to Chosen University, but can't cross this awful lake! Is this the only way in?"

"My dear, this is the Slough of Decency. It is not a lake, per se. It's a bog, which the Board of the University of the Chosen refuses to drain. They say it would disturb the natural environment. There are ways around it. But those are reserved for

the special few as part of the University reparations agreement.” The boatman put out his hand. “Come, I will row you across, though you will have to take up an oar as well. It’s a two person boat.”

“Oh, thank you kind sir!” cried Grace, full of joy.

“It’s what I’m here for, my dearest.”

As soon as Grace climbed into the boat, the weight of Despair fell right off and into the Slough of Decency, which bubbled and gurgled in response.

“Hang on!” Cried the boatman. “It may be a rough crossing!”

“And what is your name, good person?” asked Grace, putting on the best air of Decency that she could.

“They call me Morality, because they say that without it, there could be no Decency.”

“Then Mr. Morality, why are you in the Slough of Decency. I thought all moral people would always be Decent?”

“Well, that’s the trouble. And it’s why there is such a bog of Decency.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Too many people claim morality, see it in everything and everyone, especially words,” said the boatman. “You have to be really careful in what you say, and even if you are, there’s always someone who can denounce you as immoral. So everyone’s scared to say or do anything. There’s an excess of Decency, that’s what.”

“An excess of Decency? What’s that?”

“It’s this bog. That’s what it is. Each and every day the claims of Decency grow and grow and the Slough gets bigger and bigger.”

“That’s terrible, Mr. Morality!”

“Shhhh! Careful what you say, someone may hear you,” whispered Morality, “you can’t say Mister.”

Grace fell silent, thinking. Then the outlines of the spires and stone porticos became much clearer, and so did her mind. “Mr. Morality, or is it Miss, Ms. or Mrs?” she asked a little cheekily.

“I’m a lady, if that’s what you’re asking,” answered Morality. “There are no moral men, even at your young age, you should know that.”

Grace put her hand to her mouth. “What a horrible lady,”

she thought to herself. And at that moment, there was a sudden jolt of the boat and the boat-lady changed into the ugly monkey she recognized as Luke, the Devil. "You're not a lady, she cried, you're Devil!" She felt the weight once more on her shoulders.

"We're here," cackled Devil.

With great difficulty, Grace struggled out of the kayak. "You horrible man," she said, "all those nasty words you used. You should be ashamed of yourself!" She threw the oar that she had never used right at Devil's snarling face. He ducked, and it flew into the bog which gurgled and bubbled. And Grace felt the oily mud rising up to her knees."

"You better hurry if you want to make it to orientation!" cackled Devil.

Grace struggled, her feet feeling like stones. But she was determined. Nobody, nothing, would stop her from getting into the University of the Chosen. The weight on her shoulders pressed down, but she would not sink, not here. And with an Herculean effort she pulled her feet out of her Nikes and made one unholy leap to the shore and landed with such a thump.

When Grace awoke she found herself in a large hall, surrounded by empty mahogany chairs. The weight was no longer on her shoulders. She looked around but saw no one. Yet she felt that she was not alone. She brushed at her shoulders, afraid that Devil was sitting there once more. But it was not. She looked up and was dazzled by the high ceiling that seemed to reach to the heavens, decorated in gold leaf. And there were flying humans, they had wings, painted, or were they moving? She shook her head and cried, "where am I?"

One of the flying humans descended from the ceiling, her, or its, massive butterfly wings fluttering, causing Grace's hair to waver in the cold breeze. "Who are you?" asked Grace, frightened that it would be Devil yet again.

"I am your Archangel," sang the flying human or whatever it was. "I am here to guide you on your journey."

"But I thought my journey was over. Have I not arrived at the University of the Chosen?" asked Grace in her quivering little voice, feeling a little like Alice in Wonderland.

"You are almost there, my dearest. But you must, before entering, wash your feet clean of the mud you have brought with

you from the Slough of Decency.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry. I apologize for all the bad words I have said,” cried Grace putting her hand to her mouth.

“And what of those you have not spoken?” asked the Archangel with a frown.

“But, but I can’t stop words coming into my head,” pleaded Grace. They’re not bad unless I say them, are they?”

“Bad thoughts are evil thoughts just the same, when you are at the University of the Chosen. Surely you knew that before coming here? It was written very clearly in the brochure for new students, it’s right there in the mission statement. Let me show you.”

Archangel fluttered her wings and pulled out from under her, or its, flowing white silky robes a scroll that said:

“The University of the Chosen is dedicated to excellence in education and considers free speech that expresses the mission of the university to be the right and duty of every Chosen student. Excellence is demanded at all times and in all things, and our diversity-inspired curriculum reflects that dedication.”

“That doesn’t say anything about bad thoughts,” said Grace nervously.

“You have not read the footnote,” replied Archangel.

Grace strained to read the footnote. It stated: “Speech is defined as any word spoken or not verbalized, hinted at, or conveyed by any sign or action, or kept secret and not shared with others.”

“You see, my dear?” said the Archangel with an exaggerated, loving smile.

“Oh dear! I didn’t read the footnote. Doting and Pride I am sure did not either.”

“Never mind, Grace. We can fix that up easily. After all, that is why the University of the Chosen has a crash orientation course for every new student. Follow me through the wicket gate at the end of this room, this is called the mahogany room by the way, and the orientation room is called the blue and gold room.”

“Those are the colors of the University!” observed Grace, excitedly.

“That’s right,” beamed Archangel, “and soon you will be wearing them!”

“I am so happy!” chirped Grace, feeling like Dorothy in the

Wizard of Oz. She felt herself scooped up in Archangel's arms, transported aloft, then swooped down straight through the wicket gate. And there, resplendent in the room of blue and gold she found herself standing before a crowd of Chosen students all talking excitedly.

Grace stirred on her bunk. Her eyes fluttered a little and she saw through the blur the rest of her fellow demonstrators milling about in the holding cell. Some banged on the bars, chanting "Free-dom! Free-dom!" But Grace was too overcome by exhaustion and confusion, it was easier to close her eyes and return to her dream, if that is what it was.

The crowd of Chosen students gathered around her. Archangel had departed to the heavens. She found herself kneeling, hands clasped together, head bowed. The Chosen began to chant.

"Inno-*cent* or ignor-*ant*?! Inno-*cent* or ignor-*ant*?!"

Was she on trial? But this was a university. Was it not the haven of freedom?

The Dean of Freshly Chosen stepped forward and signaled for the chanting to stop. "Silence please, fellow, I mean..."

She was interrupted with boos and hisses.

"Silence please, chosen ones!" she cried. "We have before us our newest and freshest student. She, I mean who, has overcome many challenges on the journey to this, the Chosen University, the sanctuary of excellence and freedom!"

"Inno-*cent* or ignor-*ant*?! Inno-*cent* or ignor-*ant*?!" chanted the Chosen.

The Dean raised a hand signaling silence, and the chants gradually died away. "Let me say this. You know the old saying, though nobody knows where it came from, 'Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do?'"

The student response was a buzz of muttering and joking. The Dean was of course a person of authority and so should be treated as such.

"I am sure, in fact I know, that every Chosen one in this room has acted out of ignorance, especially before you were bathed in excellence at this grand institution of highest education."

Applause and cheers filled the splendid room of blue and

gold, and on cue, the Chosen chanted, “Blue and gold! Blue and gold!”

The Dean looked down on Grace, still kneeling, her bare knees stinging with pain. She looked up, as though pleading. In fact she was pleading, pleading for admission.

The Dean raised her arms signaling another silence. The Chosen complied. It then placed its hand on Grace’s head and said, “do you, Grace Dolly solemnly swear allegiance to the University of the Chosen, so help you?”

“I do!” whispered Grace.

“Speak out, Grace. We didn’t hear you,” said the Dean in her or its strong voice.

“I DO!” cried Grace. “I do, I do, I do!”

The Dean then announced, with one hand still on Grace’s head, the other raised aloft in a Nazi-like salute. “I hereby proclaim you innocent, and may your ignorance be left behind from whence you came!”

Deafening cries and cheers filled the great blue and gold room. The Dean continued. “Rise Grace Dolly, once of the Celestial Suburb! Rise and become one of the Chosen!”

Grace rose, all weight was lifted from her, so much so that she floated up above the crowd of Chosen, like Saint Catherine floating above the stairs.

As they say, what goes up must come down. And so it was with Grace. For that splendid moment of ecstasy, acceptance into the Chosen, wafting above the crowd of Chosen, she looked down upon them—and here’s the ironic part—it caused her to feel superior. She had been Chosen. She was one them, no longer one of the deplorables of the Celestial Suburb. They were not chosen. And she heard Pride and Doting Dolly, her mom and dad, calling out to her, their voices so distant. She called out to them, “Mom! Dad!” and then regretted it so much. But it was too late. The crowd of Chosen had heard that plaintive cry, and they yelled out as one, “She’s guilty! She’s guilty!”

And suddenly all the lightness that had held her aloft disappeared, her balloon had popped and she fell to earth with a terrible plop.

She awoke to see the blur of faces staring down at her. Her fellow protesters had taken a moment to ask if she was all right.

She had fallen off her bunk.

Anyone here called Grace? Your father has bailed you out!”
called the jailer.

