

The Stranger's Deal

Ryan E. Hazelton

Mr. Beckham sat drone in his hospital bed, lulled into comfort by the autonomous movements heard in the medical equipment attached to him. Alone in his hospital room, he began to reflect on how much technology had changed; how simple medicines from years ago were astounding to his young mind. But now, carrying the burden of elder years, he was barely able to remember what machines he was connected to; ignorant of what purpose they served in keeping him from death. He slowly closed his eyes as he began reminiscing on his past.

Remembering everything from years before, he recalled great experiences and accomplishments. There were no major regrets Mr. Beckham had held onto, and he couldn't help but smile a bit as he felt true happiness in all of the memories he silently relived. The warmth began to fade, however, as Mr. Beckham soon rememberd what would await him at the final moments of his mortal life.

During his midlife crisis, Mr. Beckham dabbled in the occult; first as minor curiosities, but gradually evolving into more complex practices. Through a technique known as astral projection, he discovered a way to separate his soul from his unconcious body; visiting transcendant worlds while his body slept. Unlike many inexperienced travellers of this technique, he played in his unfamiliar surroundings intelligently;

naturally instinctive on what was safe and what was to be avoided.

During one of his travels he met a very peculiar individual; appearing somewhat human, but felt like something beyond comprehension. The being was tall and lanky, garbed in only a black hooded robe, adorned with a golden trim that shined like actual golden metal. The hood covered the entirety of the being's face in pure darkness – All but the eyes.

Mr. Beckham only looked upon them once in their continuous encounters, but never forgot the sight of them. They each shined as white stars, emitting a radiant glow, until they began to change. As he continued looking upon them, he watched them evolve into supernovas, wildly writhing out of control and transforming into black holes. They did not hold this form long, as they slowly began growing back into the stars they were before. It was a beautiful but haunting sight, and Mr. Beckham felt an instinctive reaction to never to look upon them again.

Where they met was always the same - an endless desert all around with a dimly glowing moonlit sky illuminating their surroundings. The only noticeable landmark was a large dead tree that the stranger always stood underneath, as if the stranger and the tree were rooted together. Mr. Beckham would visit in almost every travel, joining the stranger under the overhang of the tree's limbs and conversing like long-time friends.

They mostly spoke on things Mr. Beckham was familiar with – things he'd

experienced in both his natural life and his astral projections. While Mr. Beckham spoke sentences that were broad and descriptive, the stranger always spoke in short sentences; previously declaring unnecessary words were a waste of time . Despite safe travel with every visit, Mr. Beckham couldn't shake an ominous sense of danger amongst the stranger's presence; as if his very soul were laying on pins and needles. With every meeting, they sat upon uniquely crafted wooden chairs, placed under the tree's shade, looking up into the stars as they spoke; both sharing a fascination of the grand chaos that was space.

Mr. Beckham was always careful with his words, but one day felt an unusual boldness surge through his soul, and pushed past his fear to ask something more direct to the stranger. "For as long as we've met under this same dead tree, I've never once heard anything about yourself or your experiences. I admit a curious fascination with you, stranger – you appear and behave in a human manner, but I'm convinced you are much more than your appearances show. Would you share an experience of your own with me?"

The stranger took a long, quiet pause after this inquiry, looking out at the barren wastes of the sandy desert they were meeting at; contemplating a response to Mr. Beckham's bold request. When the stranger spoke, a light echo trailed every word; as if speaking multiple times in the same moment, each voice speaking at a different speed than the others.

"Your soul is not strong enough to understand what I've experienced. You require sight that looks beyond the present; as you would be peering into present, future, and past

simultaneously. The mortal soul you inhabit only reacts to five senses with each circumstance, while I have existed in moments that required twenty or more just for basic comprehension. Understanding my experiences takes a power you cannot achieve naturally.”

Discouragement swept over Mr. Beckham as he heard the stranger's answer; he was confined to inferiority by the soul he unwillingly inherited. And yet, he couldn't help but linger on the wording of the stranger's last sentence. “Then, there are ways to achieve this power unnaturally?” The stranger slowly nodded before speaking again. “I can temporarily ascend your soul's power. But if you accept this gift, your soul will be surrendered to me after your mortal body perishes.”

Silently, Mr. Beckham's mind raced as he debated this offer internally. Would his eternal fate be better or worse to accept such a condition? If he refused now, would such an opportunity be available again? His life, up until this point, had started to descend into mediocrity; he chose to explore the occult to experience something greater. This was a rare chance to surpass the ordinary, an experience no other mortal soul could normally achieve.

“I see no reason to fear your company for all eternity. A free soul filled with regret is not a soul I'd be proud to have. While others may see your offer with dangerous concern, I see a chance to ascend my mind beyond its basic understanding. I refuse to continue life as a grain of sand in an endless desert of ignorance; I want to experience what no other

mortal soul will ever achieve.”

The stranger simply nodded its cloaked head slowly, taking a bit of time to stand up and face Mr. Beckham. As the stranger now stood before him, its hand extended from the arm of the robe to reveal an open-palmed hand. This was the only time the stranger's skin was visible, and it was much different than Mr. Beckham had assumed. It appeared pitch black, almost perfectly matching the robes it wore, with gold rings scattered across each finger that flickered from the reflection of the moonlight.

As Mr. Beckham's eyes fixated on the stranger's palm, he noticed something crawling beneath the skin of the hand, slithering somewhat violently towards the center of the opened palm. When it arrived there, it quickly stopped in place and slowly began to grow out of the stranger's hand – A set of tentacles writhing outwardly like a blooming flower. Inside the center of this “flower” sat a closed eyelid, throbbing lightly from the movement of the tentacles surrounding it. It did not stay closed for long, however, as seconds later it finally opened to reveal a large, black, overdilated pupil that stared intensely at Mr. Beckham.

Intently focused on this watchful eye, the small tentacles began lashing wildly back and forth, as if they were climbing out of the stranger's skin. There was no time to react, as the tentacles flew forward and pierced Mr. Beckham's eyes; the impact felt similar to spears stabbing his defenseless pupils. An intense need to scream overcame Mr. Beckham, but he found himself silent and paralyzed from this event. He began to realize he had no form to

react with, as he felt himself in a omniscient perspective throughout the vision he began to witness.

At first, his sight was nothing but a blur of colors, slowly coming into focus on the sight of a busy, metropolitan city filled with energetic human beings devoid of eyes. Their footsteps clattering against the concrete was the only thing Mr. Beckham heard, as despite what looked like many of them conversing with others, no sound emitted from their mouths. In the distance behind the skyscrapers of this busy city, he suddenly saw a large, green explosion followed closely by a thick, green gas. As it encompassed every inch of the city, the sounds of footsteps were now replaced with agonizing, pain-filled screams.

Immediately after the thick gas began to clear, Mr. Beckham saw the people transform into abominations of their former selves. Their normal limbs began mutating as new limbs began to grow in unnatural places, all flailing wildly in unending torture. Mr. Beckham's perspective began moving upwards towards a bizzare red sky filled with orange churning clouds, producing continuous lightning storms that struck the ground beneath them. His sight began focusing on one of the unusual clouds, zooming in closer as if he were flying directly towards it.

The center of the cloud housed an unusual creature, similar in resemblance to a 12-armed starfish. Its body had an oily-black, moist complexion; multiple eyes and mouths scattered around it, each opening and closing as the body wriggled uncontrollably. While the arms of the creature flailed wildly about, they produced bolts of lightning from their

tips that projected down to the planet below. After witnessing another bolt escape one of the creature's arms, Mr. Beckham began to follow its trail; striking a motionless humanoid laying upon a wasteland of hardened, maroon clay.

Once the flash of the lightning bolt faded, Mr. Beckham saw this humanoid figure slowly rise and stand, as if brought to life by the energy of the previous lightning strike. He continued watching curiously as this featureless, grey-skinned humanoid picked up a perfectly cut black stone from nearby and slowly carried it away. The perspective began to slowly pan away from the humanoid, now revealing where the black stone was being taken to. Not far from the humanoid stood a large black pyramid that more featureless, grey-skinned humanoids were heading towards; each carrying a similar black stone.

The humanoids now surrounded the pyramid's base in a perfect circle, all standing completely still for a brief moment. In perfect unison, they began to set down their stones in front of them and started kneeling before the pyramid. Placing their faces down onto the stone, as if staring directly into it, they began to chant together; speaking a language unfamiliar to Mr. Beckham.

The stones began emitting a red glow as the base of the pyramid began to lightly shake from their chanting. Mr. Beckham's perspective began slowly moving towards the pyramid's cone, watching it detach from the structure and slightly levitate above it. As it floated, it began slowly spinning in place, gaining momentum after every rotation. Within seconds, it was achieving incredible speed, but suddenly halted in place and hovered

slowly towards Mr. Beckham; stopping once it was right in front of him.

As he stared curiously at it, his sight slowly began to fade away until his vision was shrouded in complete darkness. From behind, Mr. Beckham felt an unsettling presence, instinctively turning to look upon it. His vision was blurry at first, but slowly began to regain focus as he looked upon a large, naked, obese man sitting cross-legged before him. It stared down lifelessly as it played a large, cracked flute with stubby fingers; empty eye sockets staring down at the ground beneath his instrument. Though there was sound coming from the flute, its tones were indescribable to Mr. Beckham; unable to truly hear the music this flute was producing.

All Mr. Beckham could do was watch as the flute player continued mindlessly playing, at first doing nothing but moving its fingers to alter the sounds it created. This did not last long, however, as the flute player slowly began to lift its head away from its instrument; the flute still producing its sound despite the individual no longer interacting with it. Its head slowly turned and looked over to where Mr. Beckham was watching; its eyeless gaze fixated directly on where he was observing from.

Staring intensely at one another, the flute's volume began to grow, causing the perspective to slowly shake and distort. It only continued growing louder as they continued to stare at one another, until Mr. Beckham's vision began fading out into complete darkness once again. The peculiar music of the flute began to slowly fade away as he sat helplessly in this endless darkness, until he felt absolute disconnection from anything and everything.

Stuck in this void of emptiness for an immeasurable amount of time, Mr. Beckham finally began to realize that he had witnessed more than his soul could handle, an overwhelming fear was the only sensation he now comprehended. As this unnatural fear began to grow, Mr. Beckham heard a violent, deafening scream followed by thousands of bloodshot eyes all opening from within the darkness; staring directly at him.

Without warning, Mr. Beckham's body jolted upwards from his hospital bed as he gasped for air. He began to hear the screams of his medical equipment going off, reminding him of his current surroundings. It took him a moment to catch his breath and calm his body as the machines began to cease their sounds of warning. He slowly put a hand to his chest, making sure his heart had not escaped from his body, letting out a heavy sigh of relief.

Reliving this unnatural vision put an exhausting strain on Mr. Beckham, and he looked around the room once more to reassure himself his soul was back in his own body. In the chair next to him sat the stranger from so long ago, the golden-trimmed hood facing Mr. Beckham directly. This came as no surprise, however, as he now knew his time was coming to an end; remembering the agreement he had to fulfill. He smiled a bit to the stranger while closing his eyes, starting to lay his head back down on the pillow behind him.

“I thought you'd come sooner to collect on your end of our deal. I spent so many years in fear of our bargain; and yet here at the end of my time, there is no fear left to

muster.” Mr. Beckham spoke sincerely to his long-time acquaintance, showing no resistance to the agreement made long ago. The stranger responded with a slow nod, and spoke with the same echoing trail behind every word.

“It has been a long time, and yet, you've barely changed. Your body may have aged, but you are still as interesting as you were long ago. Your mortal coil is diminishing, and the deal must be kept – a temporary ascension of your mortal perceptions in exchange for your soul.” Mr. Beckham sighed and nodded his head, ready to accept his end of the deal. As the stranger began to slowly rise from the chair it sat upon, Mr. Beckham felt an old, familiar boldness come over him once again; his eyes slowly opening and looking one last time to the stranger.

“If I am to go with you, stranger, I request only one thing. Make certain I am near you, so we may converse like so long ago.” The stranger, now standing directly in front of Mr. Beckham's bed, simply nodded slowly as it held out an open palm towards him. “You will always be near me. Your soul, like all others who have made similar deals with me, will become a grain of sand under my dead tree.”