

The Choice

by Stephen R Madden

Early morning was the hardest part of the day.

The offensive sound of the alarm blared through his deep sleep, calling for him to awaken. Even after fifteen years of the same routine, he found it so difficult to wake up in the morning. He was not a morning person, never had been. So many times he had promised himself to fix things by going to bed earlier, but those were always empty promises. He paid for those lies every morning the clock sang.

Slowly he pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

Anne, his wife, lay on the opposite side of the bed. For a few moments he watched the silhouette of her side moving gently with her steady breathing. He loved her and enjoyed these quiet moments when he could see her at peace.

His mind raced back to the time when they first met, almost twenty years ago while freshmen in college. It had been a fluke, an accident. The plans he had made with his buddy Bill had fallen through, so John went for a bike ride instead. Riding through the small downtown community, he had been looking in the storefront windows and did not see when the car door opened. He was suddenly upended, landing on his backside on the street, followed immediately by this beautiful young woman apologizing profusely. It had been fun ever since, and he reflected on how chance meetings in life can totally alter the journey and the outcome. This was a journey he was glad to have made so far.

Making fists with his toes, he squeezed the carpet, much like a swimmer on a cold day who tests the frigid waters. He stood and made his way to the bathroom. Oh, but he could sleep a few more hours. It was still dark out, and he groped for the switch on the wall that would light his morning routine.

The bright light made him squint, and he felt his way around, still slowly waking up. Finally he found himself before the mirror and wondered how he had managed to live with his face for so long. He was not ugly; far from it. It was just that he did not consider himself to be handsome. And while this did not bother him, the feeling occasionally surfaced that he

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would have liked to have been a looker. Just to see a fleeting glance his way, a momentary look, a turn of the head to remind him other women besides his wife thought him attractive.

His dark hair matted against the right side of his head, giving him a comical look. It needed to be cut again, if he could find the time. His small, blue eyes yielded very little, and at times he knew concealed a sneaky side. Drawing cream into his hand, he lathered his face, his steady hands performing the duty without hesitation. How many more times would he be before this mirror? How many more times would he have to shave? Not many, according to the “experts.”

His hand froze, the razor hovering inches from white covered whiskers on his face. He had hoped to one day teach his sons to shave. Five and three-year-old boys more than filled his spare time – well it was not spare time any longer. He remembered a story about a man who awaited execution and how every small detail of life was a triumph over death – until the end; then it all seemed a waste. Is that how he would feel? His boys needed him, but they would too soon have to live without him. It was not that his wife could not manage; she was strong. It was just that every boy needed a father.

After a few moments of unsteady reflection, he moved the razor in large strokes on his face, exposing tracks of white skin. Finishing that task and rinsing the remaining cream from his face with water, he brushed his teeth. Even that hurt. The treatment took its toll on his bones, and it was surprising the change in diet he had had to go through simply to eat without pain. He had not had any beef in weeks; no red meat of any kind. The significant changes in his diet had affected him more than he had at first appreciated. The all-natural diet had seemed the way to go, and still he questioned the wisdom in that choice. Too late now to second guess. He had made his decision, and now he would live or die with it. Well, die anyway.

The doctors had warned him of becoming cynical. Watch for the signs, they said. Don't become overly excessive with anything. Don't change your routines. Consider the effects this will have on the kids. Allow them an opportunity for closure. As traumatic as it is for you, it will be even more so on your family. He laughed bitterly, his eyes growing dark in the mirror. He was scowling.

Finishing with his teeth, he stepped into the shower, welcoming the purity that warm water brought. He enjoyed showering more than anything, even more than sex with his wife. It brought the feeling of being clean, as if the water could wash away the sickness eating him

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alive, consuming cells he could not see but could certainly feel. He imagined himself lost on an island in the middle of the Pacific, swimming in the warm aqua waters of a small pond as a waterfall produced white spray over its surface.

And that reminded him of all the things he would not get to do. For years he had worked and saved, always pointing to the future. Tomorrow was when he would do the things he had dreamed of. Perhaps the trip to Tahiti, the wild safari in the Serengeti, a mule ride through the mountains of Tibet; all these things he would someday do. Ah, but the cruelty of it! Always planning for tomorrow, he felt he had never lived for today. How much time had he spent with his boys? Not enough? He had lived life like there was a tomorrow. But tomorrow would soon not come for him. It would be shut like a door on a beggar, knocking to be let in. Death would close him off to a future of unrealized hopes. He felt like he was at the river Styx, had paid Charon his fare, and was now waiting to board. It was frustrating and frightening, but he could not get a refund. He felt so desolate.

The solace of the shower lasted just a short time as he finished. He went about the process of choosing his wardrobe for the day and when finished made his way downstairs to the kitchen where he would have a bite. He made an English muffin spread with grape jelly and poured a glass of milk. This was a cheat meal, but he did not care. Sitting at the table in the gloom of early morning, he stared out the sliding glass door. Only the outlines of the trees were visible, although he could just make out some toys in the yard. A light from the neighbor's house behind shut off; probably someone using the bathroom and journeying back to bed for a few more minutes of precious sleep. The wind blew, gently rattling the window at the side of the house, and a bird began its morning chorus. It would have been a beautiful morning if he had not felt so melancholy.

It was time to go. He returned to the bedroom and kissed his wife goodbye for the day. She rolled over and gave him a hug. Even with her morning breath, he did not mind her holding him close. He cherished these moments more and more as the days wore on and the pain grew.

"Leaving honey? Have a good day. I love you," she said, her arms still grasping him tightly.

"Yes, still doing the work thing. One day we won't have to do this. We'll retire and travel all over the country in a Winnebago." It was out before he could stop it. She held him

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tighter. He wished he had not tried to be funny. As hard as this was on him, it was worse on her.

Finally she let him go. Moisture reflected on her cheeks as she watched him leave. Once again she whispered, "I love you, John. Don't forget that."

"I love you too, Anne."

He stepped into the boys' room after leaving her. Quietly and slowly he walked over to their bunk-bed, not wanting to wake them by stepping on some toy that would scream at him. He stood by their bed and watched their breathing. He loved them so much. He would certainly miss them. Jack and Trevor always looked so innocent when sleeping. Why was it that children could look so beautiful and peaceful when they slept?

He left the room, walking out as gingerly as he had entered. Making his way downstairs and outside, he climbed into the Taurus and began his morning commute. It was almost 6:30 AM now, and it would take almost an hour to get to work. He would miss the morning rush hour, but not by much. Traffic was always so bad, but that was the price of living in LA. He turned on KISS FM and listened to Rick Dees. He liked Rick and his morning show. He remembered the time back in the middle eighties when Rick Dees was on The Hot Seat with Wally George and kicked Wally off his own show. That was pretty funny.

As he drove to work, his thoughts again drifted to his family. He thought about them most of the time now and liked to reminisce about all the good times and places they had been. He had made plans for his sons. He wanted to see them on the high school basketball team. He wanted to see them go to college. He wanted to see them marry and have children of their own. Damn, he just wanted to see them! And as would always happen when he thought of his boys in this way, he would grow angry. The pain would sweep its icy hand across his body and remind him that it would not be much longer. How long did the doctor say? Two months? Maybe six? What was six months compared to the loss of a lifetime, the loss of the relationship with your wife, the loss of the relationship with your children?

He had read stories and heard tales. It was said to cherish the time you *do* have left, to appreciate it and thus leave the world on good terms. This was good for your own mental health as well as that of your family.

His family had been very supportive. His parents traveled from South Pasadena each evening to visit. His mother helped with the chores; his father drove to the store and ran

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various errands. They were helpful and positive, and he loved them dearly. He knew it was hard on them, knowing their son would die before they did.

It was a difficult subject to discuss with his sons. He did not want to be too negative, but still had a hard time telling them what was happening. He told them he would have to leave one day and never return. Naturally they were quite worried by this. Yes, he liked mommy. No, they had not been bad. No, he was not angry. Yes, he would stay if he could. No, it was not something he could change. Yes, he would still play with them as long as he could. The questions were agonizing, but they had to be answered.

The song “Right Here, Right Now” by Jesus Jones came on the radio, and he thought about religion. He had gone to church as a boy but was never religious. He believed in God as he could not accept the evolutionist theory that we were here simply by an accident. But while he did believe in God, he did not know God. His doctor, Dr. Sherpa, had recommended him to seek his peace with God for his own mental well-being, but it seemed shallow to seek a God he did not know only because he was dying. Why should God listen to him when he had never spoken with him before? No, he resolved not to seek God. If this is what God wanted for him, he could take it. Nevertheless, he was bitter.

It was 7:30 when he pulled into the parking lot of J.J. Allen & Sons. He had spent fifteen years working with them and had enjoyed it. They were the second company he had worked for. The first was an architectural firm that had hired him out of college. He had spent only a year and a half there before leaving, primarily because he did not care for their management style. He had thought they would go out of business, but they were still around today and were one of the leading firms in the L.A. basin. He did not regret his choice.

Jefferey Jones Allen had established his business back in the early sixties, designing small bridges to span gullies in the surrounding neighborhoods. His business had grown, and his sons had taken up work in the same field. They were now conducting business as far away as Palm Springs and had even been contracted by smaller communities up north to design bridges. John loved his job and planned on staying with them until he retired. Unfortunately, that time was coming too soon.

Scott and Todd were the sons of Jefferey Allen, and John got along with them very well. They had offered him paid leave numerous times and wondered why he continued to work. John stated he was not going to wait to die; he would live his life as he always had while he still had it. In reality, he knew he was afraid that quitting his job would hit him harder than

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even the physical pain he suffered. So he continued to work, and his co-workers called him brave.

He entered through the lobby doors and made his way to the elevator. The security guard, Sam, waved, saying, “Hello, John. How are you today? Beautiful day, isn’t it? How’s the family?”

“They are fine, Sam. And yours?”

“Very well, thank you.”

The doors opened. “Have a good day, Sam.”

“You too, John. Let me know if you need anything.”

Ascending to the second floor, he made his way to his office and sat down at his desk. The plush leather chair molded itself to his body, and the pride he felt when he first sat in it momentarily reminded him that he was important at least in this part of the world. And just as quickly, pain seized his gut and forced him to double over.

He remained doubled over for a long while, eyes closed tightly, refusing the temptation to lie on the floor and roll to relieve the pain. He slowly reached into the upper drawer of his desk for the Percocet, fumbling the plastic lid open and taking two without water. He continued sitting doubled over, hoping no one would see through the open door. Gradually the pain subsided. He was starting to feel light-headed, the effects of the painkillers that he appreciated.

Each day the pain grew worse. He was not sure how much more he would be able to handle. His memory flashed to the days in junior high when he was on the wrestling team and would run sprints. Pat Flarity would make fun of him and ask, “What’s the matter, Reese, can’t hack it?”

Standing, he walked to the window and looked out. Off in the distance he saw the San Gabriel mountains, standing like guardians over the city. It was amazing how close they appeared but were actually pretty far away. The sun behind him gave them an ugly brown color, like a giant brush had mixed all the leftover paint together and spread it across their surface. But how beautiful the city looked from up in those mountains at night!

Fluffy white clouds sat on the peaks like giant cotton balls. The sky was a deep blue, not yet touched by the brown smog that would come later in the spring. One thing about LA – the rains kept the skies clear so you could see the mountains. When the rains left, the smog was bad and the mountains would disappear in a haze. That was just one reason to leave LA.

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John stood transfixed by the clouds attempting to free themselves from the clutches of the giant peaks. Wouldn't it be great to be a cloud and float on the wind without a care in the world? All the energy consumed making ends meet, all the time spent meeting the demands others placed on him, all the effort getting ahead in the world. All the past work, and now he would not reap the fruits of it. He would be lying in a coffin in the ground, and his family would put flowers in the grass above him, hoping he was in heaven. Surely there was tragedy in that somewhere!

He found himself walking out of the office, back to the elevator, down and out past a confused Sam who hesitated because he did not know if he should stop him or let him go, out to his car and onto the freeway towards those mountains. Remaining transfixed by the clouds, he would not let go of this fetish that had seized him. Making it to the 210, he turned north and drove, then took the exit that would take him directly to the mountains.

Driving past the last houses, he continued on the journey up the curvy road. At times the mountains would hide the city, then coming around a curve the city would silently announce its presence. This gave one the feeling alternately that you were alone, yet not alone at all. The drive lasted almost two hours before he reached the first peak. Radio towers stood above him, but there were no clouds. It was almost like they sensed him coming and had fled, not wanting to betray any secrets they may have to offer. But further north he saw them. They could not escape him that easily.

And so it went for the entire day. He really was convinced they were trying to escape him. No road would take him directly to the clouds, as he had to follow the curves that man had imprinted into the mountains.

The sun passed behind the ridges to his left before he realized the entire day had passed. He had no idea how far he had driven, nor where he was. He could see the glow of the city lights far to the south, but the stars to the east were brighter than he had noticed for some time. He certainly was a long distance from the city. The gas gauge was below a quarter of a tank. Would he have enough gas to make it home? Probably. But where was home? His house? No, surely not. He was just a temporary dweller there. He would die soon of the cancer that ate at him. So, where was his home?

The earth? No, or yes, depending on how one looked at the question. If one believed in God, then perhaps heaven might be his home. If one did not believe in God, then the earth would open its soiled arms to welcome him home. John battled a myriad of emotions:

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confusion, frustration, anger, bitterness, loneliness. Each would raise its head to dominate his thoughts, then give way to another until its turn came again. He felt powerless. He felt weak. He felt afraid.

He had been driving for some time when he noticed the light in the sky. Must be a plane going into LAX. Or a helicopter, though they normally don't fly in the mountains. But after a time he noted it was not moving like a plane at all. In fact, the light seemed to be moving along with him. It was definitely following the contour of the road, off to his left and forward, fairly high in the sky.

He decided to test that theory when he came to a crossroads. He turned left to head in a westerly direction. This road was just as curvy as the one he had left.

The light turned and followed alongside, this time forward and to his right. He came to a gravel turnabout on the side of the road and made a U-turn. Soon enough the light was forward of his position and to his left. It continued to follow him. He came to the stop sign where he had originally turned and made a right, heading back into the high mountains. Sure enough, the light followed along, this time to his right.

High in the mountains he came to another gravel turnabout and parked facing the city far below. He got out of the car and closed the door. It was dark out and the city glowed like a thousand jewels, the familiar design of the streets running parallel and perpendicular to each other. The stars overhead had dimmed, except for the light that had been following alongside him.

Perhaps it was a helicopter? No, there was no sound. The silhouette of the trees behind him stood like giants, foreboding and sinister. He reminded himself that he was alone, that this was California, and that any kind of idiot might be hiding in those trees ready to pounce on an unsuspecting victim. But he could not take his eyes from the light. There were several large boulders around, all contributing to his feeling of insignificance. Yet there was that light.

He sat on the hood and switched his gaze between the city and the light. A cool breeze coming from the north caressed his skin, a reminder that winter, while only a memory, still claimed some parts of these mountains. He shivered yet stared up at the light.

For some time he sat without thought. Eventually, somewhere in the back of his mind a soft voice whispered that his wife might be worried about him. She would have expected him home long ago, and not hearing from him she would worry. This would also affect his

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boys, as they might start asking if daddy had already left. He told himself he should leave and get home to his family. The police might already be looking for him. His co-workers may have been notified, and someone would surely mention seeing him leave in what could only be described as a trance.

Still he stared, not knowing why. Not caring. He lay down on the hood, arms crossed with his legs dangling over the side. He looked at the light like he used to look at the stars when he was a kid. His eyes grew heavy until sleep claimed him.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. The noise continued, ever closer, ever more dangerous. He stood in a barren field of dirt, flat for miles all around. The sound came from all directions. When he ran one way, it seemed to be coming from behind, then ahead, then beside him. The ground moved to its rhythm. He wanted to escape. If he could fly he could get away.

He was in the air, floating on the wind like a cloud. Behind was the sound. Ahead a white light. The sound seemed distant, far off, away. The light seemed warm, safe, close. Then his stomach let loose as he plummeted. He fell and fell and fell. The ground grew closer and closer. The light drifted further away. The safety and security of the light disappeared.

He yelled, “Noooo, don’t leave meeeeeee……!”

He awoke with a shock. Feeling a little dazed, he wondered if the dream was real. He was in the stupor one falls into when a dream is too real. As his thinking cleared, he noticed that it was surprisingly dark. Looking into the sky he could see nothing, no stars or clouds. He looked for the orange glow of the city lights against the clouds, but there was nothing. He looked towards the cliffs of the mountains but could not see them. He looked towards the city, but there was only a faint glow.

Worry crept into him, and he asked if he might not still be dreaming. Was he going blind? Perhaps the cancer had spread to his brain and was affecting his sight. The doctors had said nothing about blindness, but they did not know everything. If he were going blind, how could he get home? He listened for any sound, particularly that of oncoming traffic. Surely someone would help him. But he heard nothing; only his own breathing. His worry deepened; his palms sweat.

Was he also going deaf? Could this happen to him so suddenly? How long had he slept? He did not know. He thought only minutes, but it could have been longer. The dream seemed to last for some time. He felt fear; fear that he might even be going crazy.

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“No, Mr. Reese. You are not going crazy.”

With a shock, he jumped from the hood of the car and crouched down beside the tire, startled and scared. A voice seemingly from nowhere had just answered as if reading his mind. He looked for the source of the voice but saw nothing. It was black, yet not at the same time. He thought if he looked hard enough he could squeeze light out of the darkness.

“Mr. Reese, you are not going crazy. In fact, you are quite sane. This is just different from anything you have ever experienced.”

“Who’s there? Show yourself!”

“It is I, Mr. Reese. I am here to help you. If you so desire it.”

“Who are you. And why is it so dark?” John asked.

“I am Paraklon. And you are in the Logoto dimension.”

“What?”

“I am Paraklon. You are in the Logoto dimension. That is the best I can put it for your understanding.”

“What do you mean, the Logoto dimension? Are you talking about a *dimension*?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Why don’t you show yourself?”

A light appeared...from somewhere. It grew from a small sphere until it was almost the size of a large watermelon. It seemed to be miles away, yet at the same time close enough to touch. It was out of focus, like looking at an object through a crystal. Light then began to swallow the darkness. Colors grew from nothing, painting objects all around.

He was filled with wonder and fear. He had never experienced anything like this, but then again, who had? Something about this was not right, but perhaps it was only fear. Had he already died? In any event, it was wonderful.

As the colors grew, he was in a large field on the side of a hill. A soft, warm breeze blew through his hair. Golden grass waved in the wind like water in a pond. Trees in the far distance moved with the life of animals busy at work. Further in the distance majestic mountain peaks, touched by the white of a spring snow, stood like mighty watchers on the land below. Here and there bees buzzed from flower to flower, busy about their tasks. Large yellow and orange butterflies fluttered about as if in no hurry to get anywhere. And John was lost in the beauty of it.

“It is certainly beautiful, is it not?” said the voice.

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John turned; behind him stood a man who appeared to be middle-aged, but then again he looked ageless. His black hair was combed back and touched by a hint of gray at the temples. Smooth skin wrapped around a handsome face, and a warm smile greeted him. The man's eyes spoke of kindness and wisdom and seemed to hide the mystery of ages. All John could do was return the smile, transfixed by the beauty of this man.

"Yes, I am real. What you see is real. What do you think of it?"

"It is magnificent. Simply magnificent. It is just like out of a fairy tale. Everything is so peaceful and calm. Where am I?"

"The best that I can describe, you are in another dimension. In your tongue, it is called Logoto. There really is no 'where,' although that might be the best way to describe it. Let us suffice the question by saying it is like a doorway between two worlds."

Doubt mixed with a touch of anxiety awoke in John. A doorway between worlds? How could that be? Such places do not exist! After all, he was from a world where everything must be proven by the five senses. If it could not, then it was not real. This was obviously some sort of vision or dream he had conjured up to escape the certainty of his approaching death.

"No, Mr. Reese, it is not a dream. Your kind find it difficult to accept that which falls outside of everyday experience. If you cannot see it, then it must not be. That is what we would call a lack of faith."

"Faith? What are you talking about?" asked John.

"You have been brought here because you face death, or at least death as you name it. We have observed your life and watched you these past few months, as you measure time. In observing your life and your heart, we have decided to give you an opportunity for a different future. We believe you to be worthy, and we have things for you to do. It is left to you to choose."

"I am sorry, I don't understand. Who is 'we?' Where do you come from?"

"John, I will not be able to answer all your questions. We do not have the 'time,' as you call it. There are boundaries which even we must accept. We exist, shall we say, in another space. It is not really a place, although you could call it that to help you understand."

"So, you are telling me that I am not dreaming?"

"Correct."

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“And you are also telling me that you do not come from a place, but you really do come from a place?”

“No, I said that *you* could call it a place. It is real. It is where you can be.”

“What are you saying?” asked John.

“You have a choice before you. You have cancer, and by your own estimation you will die soon. That frightens you. You desire a life with your family, but that is no longer in your future. We know the day of your death. We offer you life, but you must enter our world. If you choose to leave with me, we can cure you of your cancer, and you will never be sick again. What we offer is not utopia. There are problems even in our world. But you will have life. You will have meaning. You will have a future.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that you have an opportunity to live.”

John paused to let that sink in – because he believed it to be true. An opportunity to live. To be cured. Was he dreaming after all? It could simply be wishful dreaming. He had heard that people often dream about things they most wanted or most feared. Maybe this was one such dream. Besides, it was obvious this man could read his thoughts. That could only happen in a dream. But as he stared at this man, this Paraklon, somehow he knew this was real. Somehow he knew this was not just in his head. This really was an opportunity for him to live!

Think of it! He could beat the odds. He could be cured of brain cancer. He could go somewhere that no man or woman had gone before. Or had anyone? And why should someone from another dimension give him such an offer? He would be cured of cancer and live, but what did they expect of him? What was it they wanted?

John began. “Let me make sure I understand you. You say that you can cure me of cancer and that I can live in another dimension where there are things that you want me to do. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then, what is the price? What will it cost?”

“The price. A good question. You cannot know the entire cost, as you have no way of knowing what a future with us holds. You cannot know all the ramifications of choosing to come with me, nor can you measure what that life would mean to you. So I give you the options before you. That is all I can do.

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“You will die if you remain here. That is certain. After you die, you will no longer be with your family; your wife, your sons, your relatives. They will all be gone to you as you will be to them. You have some time left with them, but not long. I am not at liberty to tell you the exact hour. This is before you now on Earth.

“We offer you life beyond any you have ever known. You will not live forever, but you will live longer than what lies before you now. In terms you can understand, you will live next to forever. You will be happy. But, you will retain all the memories of what you have known. That carries its own burden. In addition to this, there is one further stipulation. You must forego what little life you have left on this earth and come with me. You cannot say goodbye to your family. You cannot see your family. You cannot visit your family. There will be no more life for you on Earth. Your new life will begin right away. Your old life will end right away. That is the choice before you.”

Immediately, everything shifted and John was standing next to his car. The cliffs rose behind him like dark sentinels into the sky. The stars sparkled overhead like tiny gems. He could see the city lights below, and the orange glow against the night sky. A cool breeze still blew, and the trees rustled a gentle reminder he was home.

So, he thought, it was a dream after all.

“No, John. It was not a dream.”

He turned and saw Paraklon, standing near the edge of the cliff wearing a dark robe and holding a gnarled staff. John said nothing, his mouth agape but words failing him.

“It was real. And it still is. You are wondering what just happened. We knew that you would be skeptical of what we offered you. So we took you to another dimension to show you the power of our words. We also knew that once seeing the power of our words, you would think it not real. So we are back in your world, your Earth, to show you that we are not a dream. What I have said is real. It is a choice you have. But you do not have much time to make it. That is part of the price of accepting the new life we offer you.”

“But why are you offering me a new life?” John asked.

“We offer it for many reasons. They are important to us, and important to you. None will harm you or cause you physical pain. But while this is true, it is also true that choosing to come with me has its hurts. The most hurtful will be not seeing your family again, not saying goodbye.”

“But what if I don’t want to come? What if I choose to stay?”

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“That is an acceptable decision. You will remember this encounter. That we will not take from you. But you will not be able to come with us after this. Once you have decided, here, tonight, the decision will be final. There is no going back. There will be no second chances. In a sense, your second chance is now.”

“So, if I choose to go with you, I won’t get hurt in any way?”

“I have already answered. How could I promise you that you will *never* be hurt? My promise is that *we* will not cause you harm. Hurt comes in many forms, not all from outside ourselves.”

“So I can be sure that I am not entering my doom?”

“Surely not.”

“Must I decide now?”

“The time on your clock is now 2:30 AM. You have until 4:30 AM to make your choice. I will wait. Should you have questions, you may ask. However, you already know what you need. It is now time to think. Think well on it.”

Paraklon turned towards the city, immobile and resolute. John stared at him awhile, numb and unsure what to believe. Was this possible? Or was he so desperate that he would believe anything? Could he believe this figure, this man from out of his dreams offering him life?

He knew he was going to die, and he already knew it was not going to be much longer to the end. Additionally, there was no guarantee he would be able to say goodbye to his family, only the assumption that he would continue to wither away until his body stopped. What should he do?

Time. He had time. He had time now to decide. He had time to be with his family if he decided. But he could also live “next to forever” if he went with Paraklon. His immediate reaction was definitely to go. He did not want to die. He could live. And he could experience something new! Something that maybe no one else had ever experienced before. Why him? Well, that question had not really been answered, except with the statement that he was “worthy.” That was good enough for him.

What could he do with a new life? Apparently, anything. He imagined what it might be like to travel to new galaxies, to see black holes and supernovas, to watch the birth, life, and death of a star. Maybe he could even travel through time. After all, Paraklon had implied that time was not a constraint that would hold him. Could he see the dawn of matter? Could

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he witness the birth of life? Could he unravel the mysteries that men had never been able to answer? Like the “ultimate equation,” as it sometimes had been called, the equation that tied quantum mechanics with Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity? Would he know the secrets of travel through other dimensions? He had once heard that there were sixteen dimensions. He even remembered the movie *Buckaroo Bonzai* and chuckled over that.

What would there be for him to accomplish? Paraklon said there was work for him to do. Things he could not even dream of. He thought of *Star Trek* and the many adventures they had. He thought of the *Guardian of Forever*, and what it might be like to have that kind of power. Or did they even have that kind of power? There was so much he did not know about Paraklon or his people – or were they a people at all? What did matter was that he would not die. At least not any time soon.

What was life like where they were from? Were there wars, famine, disease? Was there cruelty, hatred, strife? Or love, order, and happiness? So very little he knew. He supposed there were probably more good things than bad. He had not asked Paraklon these kinds of questions. Should he? No, he would not. He really did not need to know the answer anyway. His own world had all these negative things. If the other did, then he was no worse off. If it did not, then he was better off.

His thoughts raced as he considered the possibilities this new life offered. But somewhere in the middle of them, when he was so positive about starting a new life, a thought occurred to him. His boys. Jack and Trevor were still young. He wanted so desperately to be part of their lives. But the cruel hand of fate had decided otherwise. And now he knew beyond any doubt that he could not escape fate’s hand. Even so, should he not give what little time he had left to his boys? Did he not owe that much to them?

He remembered the birth of his first son, Jack. It was such a new experience for him., so surreal. He and Anne had prepared for Jack’s arrival but could not have imagined the change in their lives as a result. Jack was so beautiful, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Until Trevor was born. They were both wonderful and filled his life with such joy. He had planned on doing everything right. Oh, he had made mistakes, but he always gave them time. He was never too busy for his boys.

He loved them so much and wanted to give them so much. He wanted to help them learn, to help them grow. He wanted them to be fine men and outstanding examples to others. So many plans. None would be realized. But he had a little time left with them...if he stayed.

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Was it not selfish of him to simply leave without giving them the time they deserved? Should he not give of himself to them while he could, and not rob them of their father too soon?

And what about Anne? She loved him. No doubt she was worried sick about him. Probably had the police looking for him now. Should he not spend his remaining time with her? He knew he would miss her more than anything. He loved her deeply; they were soulmates, kindred spirits walking the path of life together. How could he leave her without a goodbye? Would his family assume he had abandoned them? Or died alone somewhere? Would they look for him? Would she spend the rest of her life searching for him, all the while knowing he was probably dead? What was the right thing to do?

Before he knew it, it was 4:20. Looking up, Paraklon stood before him.

“John, your family will not know what has happened to you. There is no way you can alert them or say goodbye to them.”

“May I leave a note in the car? Just to let them know I am gone of my own accord?”

“No, that is part of the price you must pay.”

“But what about my family? It would not be right to simply leave without word!”

Paraklon looked at him with sad eyes. He seemed empathetic to what John was feeling, but clearly had spoken all that he would. He offered no more words of solace.

“It is now 4:30. Have you come to a decision?”

John hesitated. He was nervous and afraid. The ridge of the eastern sky where it meets the land started to turn a deep blue, and the birds were singing loudly in the trees. The breeze had all but stopped, and the chill of the night would soon leave with the coming of a new day. His car sat behind him like an old friend, and he imagined it had a sad look, like it knew it would be missing an old friend too soon. He kicked the gravel under his feet and took a deep breath. He looked to the stars in the sky, then rested his gaze upon the lone figure standing before him. He had come to his decision only seconds ago, but he knew to his very core it was the correct one. There would be no regrets, no looking back. His wife and children would understand, if he were to tell them. They would accept that it was right. But they would never know the monumental decision he made that morning.

“Yes, Paraklon, I have made my decision.”

“Then speak, and it shall be.”

And so John spoke.

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Many believe each of us decides based entirely upon personal preferences molded through a lifetime of choices and experiences. Homer believed all men behave the same, and that all men choose the same when confronted with similar circumstances. Hence the battle and fall of Troy, which happened because a prince favored beauty and love over all else. Who knows for certain?

But that morning, John chose what was right in his heart, and no man can argue that it was the wrong one.

Which did he choose?