Visions

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So I’m at my ex-wife’s place, I’ve just dropped the kid off after another weekend of asking what she’s doing with her life and being told, “Nothing much.” I’m sitting in my car in the driveway, I didn’t go inside because I don’t need to hear Cheryl asking, “Where’d we go wrong?” for the two thousand and sixth time, I’m dreading the drive home and I’m feeling depressed as hell, and sort of empty—I get that way when I drop Annie-Beth off, sometimes, and the drive back doesn’t help any, you can get really morbid alone in your car. It is not an emotional high point. I’ve got the key in the ignition but the car’s turned off, Annie-Beth hates getting out when the motor’s running, she’s always afraid the car’s going to start up by itself and run over her foot or drag her away by the seatbelt or something. She’s gone inside, the door was unlocked, I didn’t see Cheryl, and I’m just sitting there wondering why I don’t start the car and get on with it, when this golden light pours in, the color of honey, like I’m parked under the golden arches, or one of those weird yellow streetlights they use some places, only it’s richer than that, it’s the color of the yellow in the stained-glass windows I saw as a kid—I never see that color any more, they don’t look the same any more.

For a minute I just stare at my hands, there in my lap, and everything looks rich and strange, and then I realize the light’s coming from somewhere in front of me, and I think oh my God, Cheryl’s garage is on fire, so I look up, and...

I can’t describe it. It’s not a fire. It’s a cup, hanging in the air right above the hood ornament, but it’s not just a cup, and it’s not exactly there, it’s like it’s everywhere at once, like I can see right through it into all of the world at the same time, and this golden glow is pouring off it in waves, in surging tides of light, and then it’s gone and there’s just Cheryl’s garage with the old bracket where the basketball backboard fell off years ago and the knothole in the fascia with the bird’s nest sticking out.

And I just sit there, staring, with my mouth open. I don’t jump out to look for it, which would have been the sensible thing, I just sit there. I don’t know why. It’s only after I’ve been staring for a couple of minutes that I realize my God, that thing was beautiful, it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, it was fabulous.

And I’m still sitting there, gaping at the air, when the door of the house opens and Cheryl comes out, and she stands there on the top step with her arms folded across her chest, and calls to me, “What’s the matter, won’t the car start?”

I shake my head, more to clear it than to say no, and I wave to her and say, “No, I was just thinking.” Then I finally start the car and I back it out onto the street before she can ask what I was thinking about.

And I drive down the street and turn the three corners to get out of the subdivision, and I cruise down the highway, and all the time I’m not really thinking, I’m on autopilot, I’ve driven this route a hundred times so it doesn’t need any thought, and my brain is still in a daze, because it was so beautiful, shining there, and it was so strange.

And then when I’m pulling onto the interstate it finally hits me, it registers at long last, that what I saw was impossible, it just couldn’t have happened, golden whatchamacallits don’t appear out of nowhere and hang in the air and then vanish, not in real life. I start thinking up all these cockamamie explanations, how it could be a hologram, or a trick of the light, or something wrong with my eyes, or all this stuff, but really, I know all along it isn’t any of those things.

And I know what it was, too, I’m not stupid and I had a half-decent education, but I can’t buy that, not yet, I’d have to think I was crazy, or that the whole world was crazy.

Real people don’t see visions of the Holy Grail in their ex-wives’ driveways.

But my God, what else could it be?

(My God. That’s good. That’s just exactly right.)

So I’m cruising down I-70 at sixty or so, and the sun’s going down behind me and my lights are on, the sky’s all rose-colored fire to either side and going dark straight ahead, and it’s one of those days when you think you can really see the earth is curved, that if you aren’t careful you’ll just fly off into space, gravity seems weak and temporary, the kind of evening when I get feeling weird anyway, I’m not depressed any more but I’m feeling very weird indeed, and after awhile, somewhere around Exit 76, I stop trying to rationalize it, and I say, “Okay, Rob, old boy, you saw the Holy Grail. You had an honest-to-God vision.”

Actually, I start to say it a little more profanely than that, I start to call it “a fucking vision,” but that’s wrong, I can’t get the word out, so I switch to “goddamned vision “ and that’s worse.

An honest-to-God vision. That’s what it was. That’s what I say.

And when I say that, when I let myself say that, let the words come out, I see a golden light ahead of me, and at first I think it’s headlights coming the other way, then I think it’s a fire, maybe Baltimore’s burning down, then maybe it’s just the city lights, but then I see it and I know what it is.

It’s the Grail, going on before me.

It’s the vision of the Grail, anyway.

You know, I wish I could tell you what it was like, but I can’t. There aren’t the words. You can’t think about it in words when you’re seeing it. You can’t really think about it at all. It just is, and you have to accept it, you have to look at it and accept it. It’s a little like that feeling you get from TM, when it goes just exactly right, and it’s a little like sex, when that’s really good, but it isn’t really like anything.

The peace of God, I suppose it is.

It scares the hell out of me, and it feels wonderful, all at the same time. So I slam on the brakes and pull over to the shoulder.

It hangs there, in the sky in front of me, beckoning me, and I close my eyes, and I have to fight to keep them closed, so I can think. I can feel that golden light through my eyelids, like sunlight all over me. I try to ignore it, because I want to think.

And what I think is, “Why me?”

In the old stories, the way I remember them, it was the pure young knights who were granted visions of the Holy Grail—Perceval and Galahad and that crowd. Role models of male chastity who go barging around the countryside killing people in fair fights.

This is frankly not how I picture myself. As far as I know I have yet to kill anything bigger than the beagle I backed my dad’s car over once when I was a kid, which was not a fair fight, nor were my mortal combats with house mice and cockroaches and the like exactly formal duels. And while I have sometimes been sexually inactive for a few months at a stretch, it was never, after the age of seventeen, entirely intentional. If you want to get away from the hard-core chastity angle and look for a model of undying faithfulness and true romantic love, Cheryl will tell you that while I could certainly be worse, I am not exactly the perfect example there, either. And finally, while I am convinced that my work as an insurance adjuster is respectable and necessary and that I deserve my salary, while I have sometimes helped out folks in distress, always assuming their premiums were up to date and the claims looked legit, I will be the first to admit that this does not make me the moral equivalent of a Knight of the Round Table.

So I am forced to conclude that either God really does move in mysterious ways and we’ve all misunderstood the whole schmear these last thousand years or so and I am somehow worthy of this honor, or that I’m going completely crazy and none of this is happening, or that it happens to a whole lot of people who just don’t talk about it and it’s worked its way down the scale to me, or that the whole thing is completely random.

None of these is what you might call a comforting view of the universe, but with that golden light on my eyelids it’s sort of hard to think that the universe might be a nasty place after all. I am not depressed at all when that light’s shining on me, the empty feeling I usually have after I drop Annie-Beth off is not there at all, I feel full right to the top, if you see what I mean. It’s an effort to not just sit back and enjoy it, and I force myself to think, about anything.

I try to imagine what I will say about this at the office. “So, Rob, how was the weekend? Have a good time with Annie-Beth?”

“Oh, sure, had a fine time. Saw the Holy Grail on the way home.”

This does not strike me as something that will go over well. I try to imagine the answers.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen that. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Get in your way while you were driving? I hate it when that happens.”

“You just wait right here, Rob, I have a call to make to a doctor I know.”

This does not appeal to me, even though I’m giggling like an idiot, which seems like a pretty undignified reaction to the Holy Grail itself, but I can’t help it.

And under the giggling and the euphoria I am beginning to feel seriously put upon. I mean, I didn’t ask for this. I’m no King Arthur looking to keep a bunch of bored homicidal maniacs in armor busy. I’m no Galahad out looking for new worlds to conquer. I’m not even Indiana Jones. And wasn’t the Grail supposed to have been taken into Heaven?

And what am I supposed to do about it? Visions mean something, don’t they? The traditional thing is to go questing after the bloody thing, right? But I don’t want to go questing.

So I open my eyes and I call out loud, “Why me?”

No one answers, of course; I’m sitting alone in my car beside the interstate, there isn’t anyone else there to answer me. God doesn’t appear. No angels descend from Heaven.

“What do you want me to do?” I shout.

Nobody answers. The thing just hangs there, shining God’s glory down on me. I sit there and stare at it for a moment, and then I say, “The hell with it,” and I throw the transmission into drive and I pull back on the highway and I go home.

And when I get to the Beltway, I go south, and the Grail goes north.

This is a shock; I’d been figuring it would go on ahead of me and hang over the city somewhere, maybe over the Inner Harbor, or maybe it would go on out over the Atlantic. I hadn’t figured it would be following the roads, you know? In fact, I’m so surprised that I pull over on the shoulder again, and I turn around in my seat and I watch, and the whole thing, cup and halo and glow, vanishes behind the sign pointing to I-95 north to New York, and it’s gone, it doesn’t reappear.

And isn’t that a kick in the head. If I decide I do want to go questing, it occurs to me that New York might be the place to start.

Which figures. After all, if you want anything in this great country of ours, don’t you go to either New York or L.A.? I’ve always heard you can get anything at all in the Big Apple, but it hadn’t occurred to me before that very moment, there on the Baltimore Beltway, that that included the Holy Grail.

And with the glow gone, I suddenly find myself thinking about a whole bunch of stuff that I hadn’t before, stuff that I am not happy about. Isn’t there something in the stories about no man gets more than one shot at the Grail? Have I just ruined my entire life by not making a U-turn across the median and heading north? Am I going to spend the rest of my life regretting the loss of that nifty warm feeling I got?

Jeez, I don’t like that idea. Makes God sound like some kind of drug pusher, luring in the suckers with a taste of the Grail’s light, getting them hooked. And giving someone one chance at something without telling him what the hell is going on, or that he’s got the one and only chance, or what it is it’s a chance at...what kind of God would do that?

I’m giving God more thought sitting there on the Beltway than I had in years, you understand. I was never very devout, either—yet another way I’m no Galahad. But when there’s a thing like that...

I don’t feel like I’m going to suffer because the thing’s gone, but you can’t always tell right away about things like that, maybe it’s just afterglow, maybe I could still turn around and go after it, maybe I could turn at the next exit and head for New York.

And I reach a decision. I put the car in gear and I get back on the highway, and I drive south to my exit, and I don’t turn around. I go home.

Because I am not interested in spending years questing after that golden glow. I am not interested in proving myself to anyone, not even God.

All my life I’ve been looking for things, and being disappointed with them when I find them—if I find them. I’ve been looking for things without knowing what I was looking for, looking for love and money and sex and all the things people look for. The Holy Grail would be one more. I might know what it looks like, but I don’t know what it is, or what I’d do with it if I found it. And if I found it, and it was a disappointment—think of that for a minute. Think how empty I felt after my marriage broke up. Think how I feel when my kid is bored with me. Think how I feel when my job turns dull and the clients hate me because I won’t pay enough and the company’s pissed that I’m paying anything.

And think how much worse it would be to touch the Grail and then lose it.

Besides, I realize that I don’t need any new quests. I haven’t finished the old ones.

And when I get in the house I go straight to the phone and I call Cheryl, and I apologize for bothering her. I ask if she really wants to talk about where we went wrong, because if she does, maybe I’m ready to listen.

I’m not sure, you understand, but maybe.

And I’m planning ahead. I’m thinking about getting back together, or if we’re too far apart, of at least tying up the loose ends. I’m thinking about getting to know my kid. I’m thinking about doing my job right.

We talk, and we make a date.

And when the vision of the Grail turns up again a few days later, I just smile and enjoy the glow.

It’s been coming every week or two ever since, and I don’t know why any more than I did that first time. No one else ever sees it. It doesn’t get any closer or any further away. It always heads off to the northeast. Maybe it’s not a visitation from God at all, maybe it’s just a UFO or something; maybe I’m about to be kidnapped by aliens. I don’t know. I don’t let it bother me.

I tell Cheryl about it, she just laughs and says that if there was ever anyone less likely than me to go haring off after a Holy Grail, she can’t imagine who. She doesn’t see it, doesn’t feel the glow, but she laughs.

It’s good to hear her laugh. And I’m not going on any quest for the Grail.

I have plenty of old quests to finish up.

And maybe, when they’re all done, maybe someday when I’ve finished the ones I started, maybe then I’ll take a trip up to New York, or wherever it leads. Maybe I’ll see what I find there. Maybe I’ll take Cheryl and Annie-Beth.

And if it’s not the Holy Grail we find there, well, what the hell. I’m pretty sure that these last few weeks I’ve found something.