

Oh, Hell!

A short Story by ©Vicki Wootton

The last thing Ephraim remembered was his body flying through the air and landing face down on the wet sidewalk. The final words he heard were, "...and don't come back."

He woke slowly, feeling disoriented and confused, but completely free of pain. This was the first time in years he'd woken up without a hangover. When he opened his eyes, he felt even more confused. He didn't recognize anything about his surroundings. The light was dim with a reddish glow, as if there were a fire burning outside the window, but as he looked around, he couldn't see any windows. The room—if it was a room—seemed to just fade away into shadows. He noticed some indistinct, shadowy figures standing around him, apparently watching him as he lay on table or bed, whatever it was. Maybe a slab at the morgue, he thought, half seriously.

"Where am I?" The old cliché.

"You'll soon find out," someone replied in a voice that was neither masculine nor feminine.

Ephraim shivered. He was cold. He glanced down at his body and realized he was completely naked. Startled, he looked again. Then he screamed.

"What have you done to me?" he moaned. "Where are my...?" he couldn't say it. It was too horrible to say it aloud.

"You'll get used to it," an indifferent voice replied. "It's the way things are here."

Someone giggled. "I love this part. They always react as if it was the most important thing in their existence."

"You wouldn't know, would you, bitch," another voice. "All you had to lose was your tits."

"And her ..."

"Shut up, all of you. We have to get this one out of here. There are plenty more waiting to be processed." A cold hand grabbed Ephraim's arm and tugged him into sitting position. "Come on, on your feet."

Ephraim's bare feet landed on the floor which was cold and clammy. He noticed that his body was a bit lopsided; one leg seemed to be shorter than the other. "What's wrong with my leg?" he asked.

"You can't expect perfection here," someone replied.

"What is this place?" he asked. "Is it a hospital? What am I doing here?"

Several people snickered.

“Too many questions,” the person who’d helped him stand upright replied. “You’ll find out everything soon enough. For the moment, you have to hurry to your next appointment.” He handed Ephraim a coarse grey robe, similar to a nightshirt made of canvas. “Here put this on.”

Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting, he saw that there were about eight people in the group, all looking very much alike: grey robes, no hair—no hair! The only variations were in the shapes of their bodies, none of which displayed any sexual characteristics, only certain misshapeness, minor deformities. For example, there was one person with an abnormally long, thin head; another had one fat arm and one thin one. He dismally recalled the person’s comment about perfection and scratched his head. Like the others, he was completely bald.

“Jesus,” he said.

“If you don’t mind,” someone said, “we don’t use that name around here.”

“What?” He was beginning to feel as if he were in the middle of one of his spectacular binges when nothing was what is seemed to be. Hey, wait a minute—maybe he was and this was a new form of delirium tremens.

The floor felt slimy under his feet. “Have you got anything for my feet?” he asked.

“Here, take these.” Someone handed him a pair of slippers, similar to deck shoes. He slipped his feet into them and of course, they were not his size. Luckily, they were too big, not too small.

“This is taking too long. Let’s get moving. Who’s going to take him to orientation?”

“I’ll go.”

A very tall, thin figure stepped forward.

“Good,” the original speaker said. “Go with Mary,” he added to Ephraim. “And don’t forget to sign out.”

“Come on,” Mary urged. “They don’t like to be kept waiting.”

“What about signing out?”

“This way.”

As they advanced, a rough wooden counter about shoulder high emerged from the gloom

“Name.” a voice demanded.

“Ephraim,” he replied automatically; he was familiar with bureaucracy and its mindless routines. “Ephraim Savage.”

“Middle name.”

Ephraim sighed, thinking how many Ephraim Savages could there be? “Stanley.”

“All right.” A pile of grimy papers appeared under his nose and a fat finger with a dirty nail pointed to a blank line on the top page. “Sign here, here, and here.” The finger moved down the page with each “here”.

Ephraim took the proffered pen and signed his name four times then offered it back.

“Every page,” the voice said.

He turned over the page and saw four more blank lines; the third page had five, and so on. When he had finished signing his name about thirty times, he pushed the papers and pen across the counter. “What am I signing for, by the way?”

“Don’t worry about it; it’s just routine.”

“Come on; we’ll be late.” Mary started across the floor so fast, he had to run a couple of steps to catch up.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll find out,” Mary replied.

Why were they being so mysterious? Why couldn’t anyone give him a straight answer?

They emerged through an irregular-shaped opening in a grey wall and entered a miasma of fumes and noise that was almost intolerable. The first thing that came to mind was rush hour in Mexico City. Although he could see no vehicles, he could hear a steady blare of horns and sirens with an undercurrent of discordant music and the occasional scream. The light out here was no more illuminating than it had been inside and the air was just chilly enough to be uncomfortable. Everything was softened by a poisonous-looking yellow-grey fog, not a pretty effect at all. All he could see through the gloom and mist were a few slab-like structures that could be buildings with shadowy figures in grey robes slinking by. Some of them were singing—if you could call the soulful dirges and maniacal screeches singing. Ephraim thought they were probably mad. The ground underfoot may have been paved at one time, probably with good intentions, he thought. It was now pitted and littered with rubble, some of which looked highly suspicious and smelled even worse than the air.

Mary, who had got ahead of him, stopped and beckoned. “Hurry up.”

“I’m coming.”

They had gone, he guessed, about two blocks when a car alarm started to blare frantically. It sounded very close to where he was standing. He spun around, expecting to see a car, but there was no sign of one.

“Why do you hear traffic noises when there is no traffic?” he asked. The din was driving him crazy.

“It has nothing to do with traffic,” she replied. “It’s the noise.”

“What do you mean?”

“Figure it out.”

They turned a corner and came upon a group of robeless people. Ephraim looked curiously at their naked bodies. They came in many shapes and sizes, but they all looked like department store manikins, smooth and hairless without any sexual characteristics, not even vestigial nipples. The only thing that distinguished them from one another, apart from their varying sizes, was that each had some kind of flaw or minor deformity: a crooked leg, limbs that were too short or too long, something out of proportion with the rest of the body. Their skin color was uniform grayish beige and their eyes had a reddish cast.

“Why are they naked?” he asked his guide.

“Probably too hot,” she answered, staring down at him. “They must be part of some ‘Hell-fire’ cult.”

They turned left and went under an archway into a large courtyard. “This is it.” Mary said. “Wait here until someone calls your name.” She indicated some stone benches lining the walls in between dark openings that he guessed were doorways.

“I thought they were waiting for us,” Ephraim grumbled.

“They are. Now you wait.” She turned and strode out of the courtyard without looking back.

There were several other robed figures sitting around on the benches, but when Ephraim started to ask one of them a question, the response he received was a “Shh.” A finger was placed across the lips of the respondent and then pointed at a sign on the wall.

TALKING FORBIDDEN.

The noise from outside the courtyard was now overlaid by an arrhythmic drumming that seemed to emanate from all around him. Ephraim found it extremely irritating, but then, he had always been sensitive to noise.

He looked around at the other people waiting in the courtyard. Some of them appeared to be sleeping—one was lying curled up on his bench—one was humming tunelessly, another talking to himself, but mostly they sat with glazed eyes and looks of bored resignation. One of them even looked slightly familiar, although Ephraim couldn’t put a name to him.

He started to analyze his feelings. Primarily he was scared. He didn’t know what was happening, what he was doing here, or what was in store for him, but nothing he’d seen so far looked promising. He put those thoughts aside, unwilling to delve too deeply into them. His immediate feelings were boredom, irritation, and impatience. Suddenly, the old craving returned. He felt he would die if he didn’t get a drink. It gnawed at him, made him feel jittery and restless. He got to his feet and walked towards the archway that led outside. Maybe there was a bar nearby.

“HALT!” a disembodied voice ordered. “Sit down and wait.”

“I’m tired of this bullshit! I need a drink. What in hell are we waiting for, anyway?” he yelled.

“SILENCE!”

A bolt of electricity shot through his nerves and threw him to the ground where he lay stunned for a moment. Eventually, he managed to gain his feet and stagger to an empty bench.

Some of the others exchanged headshakes, and the one he thought he recognized was smirking, but Ephraim ignored them. Bunch of pussies.

Even though he was not tired, boredom eventually drove him into a restless nap. He woke once to check and see if there’d been any change, but everything seemed the same, so he pulled his legs up to lay along the bench and returned to sleep.

He was awoken by feedback noise coming from some sort of sound system followed by the same disembodied voice.

“The following candidates will report to station G: Mohammad Ismail el Sharif, Kung Li Yang, Irina Maximova Kamarova, Antonio Paulo Montessori, Donald John Trump. Follow the red light, and hurry.”

Ephraim was startled by the final name. He looked at the five candidates and somehow recognized the former president, although in his present body, he bore little resemblance to his previous self. To Ephraim, the clue to his identity was his confused expression and the self-satisfied smirk. He was now tall and thin, with a bent back and abnormally short legs.

Ephraim watched them file through an opening with a red light above the lintel. He exhaled with relief; they were moving finally.

“Marie Lucille Belanger, Ephraim Stanley Savage...” at the sound of his name, Ephraim jumped to his feet, eager to move on and maybe find out what was happening. “Alphonso Mendoza Obregon, Juliet Ann Hastings. Follow the red light to station K.”

The first light had been extinguished and another doorway was illuminated. Ephraim’s group entered a narrow hallway with openings off both sides. A figure stood in front of them calling their names and pointing to different openings. Ephraim was directed into the third on the left. The room he entered was illuminated by a golden glow that appeared to have no source unless it emanated from the amazing figure that confronted him. It was at least two meters tall, dressed in a golden robe that fell to the floor. The first thing that came to his mind when he observed the face of this being was “angelic”. It was the most beautiful face he had ever seen, noble and compassionate. It even looked pleased to see him, welcoming.

Ephraim decided not to complain until he knew more about his situation.

“Come in, Ephraim. Sit down over there.” The voice was mellow and soothing, neither male nor female. It indicated a chair made of some sort of hard shiny material.

Ephraim sat down, too awed to speak. He gazed up into that sublime face, his hopes rising.

“My name is Azrafel. I’m what you might call a counselor. Before you start to ask questions, there is something you must watch. Are you ready?”

Before he could reply, the lights dimmed and Ephraim found himself in his childhood home. He was about four years old and was stooping to raise his baby brother from the floor. Young Joseph, attempting to take his first baby steps, had fallen down and was in tears. Ephraim watched mesmerized as his life progressed before his eyes. His emotions ricocheted between elation and remorse, satisfaction and shame, as every deed, every choice he’d made passed before him. His delinquent teens, his straightening out and choosing of a more productive path; college, his marriage to the lovely, gentle Sarah; the deterioration of their relationship and the dissolution of his marriage, followed by his steady decline into alcoholism and drugs. He had tears in his eyes by the time it was over. What a waste!

The light brightened and Ephraim was once more face to face with Azrafel, the counselor.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” he stated.

“Your mortal life in the flesh is ended,” Azrafel confirmed.

“What happens now?”

“There is one more thing you must see before we continue.”

Ephraim lay stunned for a moment, before pushing himself up onto his knees. He glanced around, shaking his head to disperse the fog in his brain, trying to recall where he was. The drizzle was still falling. He looked at his hands, which were stinging, and saw they had been scraped by his impact with the sidewalk. His chin also felt sore. He pushed himself off the ground into crouching position, then, holding onto a light pole, gradually straightened his legs. A wave of dizziness compelled him to maintain his grip on the pole while he tried to think. He put his free hand in the pocket of his jeans and found a bunch of keys. Car! Yes, he needed to get home. But where had he left it? He shook his head, hoping to jar loose the information he needed, not that it helped much. He was facing west, so that was the way he decided to go. Staggered around the next corner, he saw his battered old Buick halfway up the block.

It took him several minutes of fumbling and cursing before he was able to fit the correct key in the lock and open the door, then another couple of minutes to insert the ignition key and start the engine. He looked at the various controls, confused, until habit took over and he released the hand brake. Fortunately, the Buick had an automatic transmission, so he

didn't have to think about coordinating his foot actions to control three different pedals; brake and gas were about all he could handle in his current condition. It took him a moment to choose whether he should put the car in drive or reverse before he settled on drive. There was nothing blocking his way forward.

Ephraim stopped at the corner while he thought about his route home. Nodding his head, he started moving again and eased around the corner. So far, so good. He was in control. He saw a green light ahead and speeded up a little.

A figure walking along the sidewalk on his right distracted his attention for a moment. While his attention was wandering, the light changed to amber. He faced forward again and continued on his way.

A violent crash rocked the car and sent it spinning out of control across the intersection with the screech of tortured metal and shattering glass, then a blinding light blocked out everything.

"Oh Jesus!" he exclaimed. "Is that how...? Did I...? Was anybody else...?"

"That's how you ended your mortal existence. And yes, there were other casualties as a result of your reckless stupidity and irresponsibility. A young man was taking his wife to the hospital where she would have given birth to their first child. The mother and child did not survive. The young husband is now paralyzed from the neck down. He could remain in that condition for another fifty years, remembering the night a careless drunk ruined his life."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry. If only I could...."

"There's nothing you can do."

Ephraim rocked back and forth for a moment, stunned by what he had learned..

"We now have to talk about your future," Azrafel announced.

"Will I have to stay here forever?"

"That's up to you. You have three choices: you can opt for immediate death..."

"What do you mean?" Ephraim interrupted. "I thought I was already dead."

"Not quite. Your mortal body is dead, but your soul is still alive, here. Death means complete oblivion. Total annihilation of everything you ever were or could be. Now, to continue: your second choice would be to reinstate yourself. Most people choose this option. It means you would meditate on your wasted life and try to rehabilitate yourself."

"How would I do that?"

“By the way you live from now on. Being of service to your fellows and ridding yourself of all negative impulses, emotions, thoughts, and actions.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

“Wait until you try it before making such a judgment. It may be harder than you think. There are many conditions here that will try your spirit.”

“I’ve noticed. How long does all this take?”

“That’s up to you.”

“What’s the third option?”

“You can stay here and do nothing. Thus, nothing will ever change throughout eternity.”

“If I chose number two, could I change my mind later?”

“Yes. Any time you want. Now, do you have any questions?”

Ephraim thought for a moment, and then asked, “I assume I know some of the ... people here. Is there any chance of getting in touch with them?”

“Certainly. There are records in the Hall of Rolls. Anyone can give you directions. A word of caution though: Think about whom you wish to contact. It is not advisable to associate with people you knew in your material life who may provoke negative reactions and impede your rehabilitation.”

Ephraim had been thinking of finding his father and telling him exactly what he thought of him and the way he had treated his family, but he didn’t want to admit it.

“Not a wise idea,” Azrafel cautioned. “You don’t need to add to your burden of negative emotions and feelings. Remember, he’s probably working on it himself.”

“He’s here, though?” How could the bastard not be?

“Yes,” Azrafel replied. “Anything else?”

“I’m curious. How come everybody speaks and understands English? I heard all kinds of names from all over the world.”

“They don’t. There is only one language here. It is not English or any other Earth language.”

Ephraim is surprised. “So how do we understand it?”

“It’s a matter of perception.”

“I see, I think. Another thing I was wondering about: What about all the noise, traffic sounds and so on... I didn’t see any traffic.

“Again, it’s your sensual perception. Everyone has a different experience of the environment here according to how he perceives it.”

Ephraim did not understand.

“You may have to think about it for a while. Now, if there’s nothing else....”

“Is there any way I can help the woman and baby I killed?”

“No. They’re not here. Now, it’s time for you to start. I will send someone to help you find your way around and get you settled in. You’ll need to find a place to live and where to get nutrition and so on. Wait here.”

A new figure entered. It had a hunched back, but otherwise the body was well proportioned.

“My name’s Boswell Brinks, he said, “Come with me.”

“How long have you been here, Boswell?” Ephraim asked.

“Don’t rightly know,” he answered. “Got it in Hungary during the Crusade with King Richard the Lion-heart.”

“Jesus!” Ephraim exclaimed. “That’s more than eight hundred years ago.”

“Let me give you some advice. You’ll get along much better if you don’t keep saying that.”

“What? Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“Well what can I say?”

“You might try *Satan*, or *Lucifer*, even *Caligastia*.”

“Who’s he?”

“Prince Caligastia. The one we called *The Devil*.”

“But I thought those were all names for the same person, or ... whatever.”

“No. That is a misconception. They are three distinct beings. But enough of this. Let’s get on with your orientation.”

“Are they here? Will I see them?”

“I’m afraid not. They’ve been on an extended leave of absence since *He* was on Earth. I’ve seen likenesses of them, though. The most beautiful beings you’d ever hope to see. Not a bit like the monsters you used to see in paintings; they looked like angels. Now, let’s hurry, we have to line up at the Hall of Nutrition. It’s time to eat.”

“What about a drink?”

“No. Nothing like that here.”

“Oh, hell!”

The End