

## The Gates

So I'm standing at the Pearly Gates, see, and this tall old guy in a white robe comes up without any wings on, but I figure it's probably St. Peter anyway, or whoever's on duty for non-denominationalists or atheists, and he says, "I'm sorry sir, but we don't take third-party checks."

And I'm thinking, *That's not right. It's not even fair.* So I say, "How am I expected to pay my dues?"

He smiles in a kindly, churchy sort of way, looking earnest but obviously not engaged. "That's not our problem, now, is it?"

If he'd said, "Tough shit," I might feel better, but this fluffed up response means exactly the same thing and it's insulting. I wonder if real-life priests, pastors, parsons, ministers, rectors, vicars, and all the others of that profession actually think their flocks or parishioners or disciples or whatever fall for such time-worn passive-aggressive cop-out tag-lines. *You're a worthless lost soul, now, aren't you? This extra umbrella isn't for you, now, is it? There's no particular reason you shouldn't go straight to hell, now, is there?*

I'm out of my element, and I have no idea what my options are. So I ask him, "What am I supposed to do to get cash up here? I didn't bring my credit cards."

He puts on another wan non-committal smile and doesn't say anything, which leaves the ball in my court.

"Well, I didn't know I'd be coming," I say, beginning to feel a cold wave of desperation. Does it matter if he notices I'm getting nervous? Maybe this is some kind of test. Hell, he must have seen millions of other chumps like

me, fidgeting around outside the gates, looking down, shuffling our feet, jamming our hands in our empty pockets.

I'm wondering why my pockets came with me, but none of the stuff that was inside them. Maybe they just don't want people turning up butt-naked. But isn't God supposed to see our true selves anyhow? Now I'm wondering if my true self is as seriously unappealing as my flabby ancient body. That could be a problem.

St. Peter, or whoever he is, still smiling, finally says, "Well, you can come back any time if you find the required resources."

I look around. There's nothing but clouds, and this pearly wall stretching out to infinity on either side, and a little futon on a low wooden platform, which is where I arrived. God, unsurprisingly, is not yet in evidence.

When I turn back to St. Peter, he's already gone back inside, and the gates are just closing behind him. Figures.

There's a little metallic clank, like a wrought-iron garden gate, and it rings a little. The ringing expands and grows harmonies, and gets louder and louder, until the whole place is resounding with this huge chord of bells and gongs and a faint chorus singing descant in the background. It's very celestial, except for my situation, which is not, except for the neighborhood.

So what do I do now? I consider banging on the gate like I did when I first got here, but I don't want to be a pain in the ass, and obviously they have rules, so it's not anybody's fault, except supposedly mine, if I'm right that only the deserving get inside. But that's all part of this whole tricky business, maybe, just letting me feel unworthy so they don't have to worry about it. Maybe it is a test. Maybe I'm supposed to stand up for my rights and demand to be let in. Maybe you only get in if you really want it.

And then I start thinking about what it's like inside. If getting in is this devious and condescending and choked with bureaucracy, then it could be unbearable in there. What if everybody has to just stand around and sing hymns, from their respective denominations, or play harps, or whatever other ethnic instrumentation is available. I was more or less an atheist, never baptized, never went to any churches or anything, so maybe I'll end up in the low-rent district up here, too, just like I came from.



Earlier that day, I'd run out of ideas on the short story I was working on. I've been rewriting the first six pages for about two weeks, hoping to build some momentum to traverse the big blank at the end, but all my great ideas ended in the same hole and I couldn't write my way out of it. Each time, the starting premise was weaker and less interesting, until finally I was boring myself as I typed. As a last resort, I gave up and hit Ctrl-Alt-F4, Down, Down, Down, Enter. My old PC was extraordinarily slow, having accrued hundreds or thousands of add-ons and plug-ins and updates from God knows where, so it takes almost ten minutes to boot the thing up, and saving my manuscript now, even just a six-pager, took about five.

It was late morning in late spring, normally a pretty appealing time and date for New York City, although not as appealing as lunch time at Rockefeller Center when all the secretaries and executive assistants come flooding out of the elevators in their spring outfits, all spiffed up in case some young tycoon happens by.

But I didn't head that far West from my dump in a warehouse district just off the alphabet streets, and instead I scuffed my way up the east side to 62nd, and then headed over to the Park. I would have stopped for a cuppa joe, but I was running low on cash, and my checking account was also hovering just above E. I didn't dare use my one remaining Visa card, because I knew once I got started it would seem like real money and I'd end up owing all my future income, if there was any, to some bank in Hackensack. That damn little rounded rectangle of plastic was burning a hole in my wallet, though.

The sidewalk along the edge of Central Park is paved in little hexagons, like no other sidewalk in the city, and the Park itself is raised up on the other side of a low stone wall. Benches are bolted onto the hexagons, facing the street so you can sit and watch a hundred million yellow cabs drive past, and hundreds of waving tourists, who seem to think cabs actually look for passengers in all that pedestrian chaos. After about fifteen minutes watching the crowds milling around, I wandered into the Park and headed uptown.

Eventually I was strolling behind the Met, over by Cleopatra's Needle, and I saw a park bench with only this old man sitting on it, and he didn't look diseased or predatory so I sat down next to him because my legs were

starting to give out. He was feeding the pigeons with pieces of stale bread from a paper bag. In good weather you can buy a paper bag of stale bread for \$7.00 from a pushcart vendor. It always looks like the same pushcart that's in about 500 locations throughout the Park.

We sat there for a while with about a half acre of pigeons milling around cooing and burbling at our feet, while he threw pieces of bread at them at random. Waves of pigeon would roll and break over each morsel as the subtle pecking order of pigeondom worked itself out in front of us.

Larger waves, pedestrians and bicyclists, ebbed and flowed around our bench, creating eddies at the fringe of the pigeons. They came from all directions, strolling down the walkway from the museum, and flowing out from the tunnel by Cleopatra's Needle, pushing strollers, walking dogs and cats, leading toddlers in harness, holding hands, carrying bundles, dragging shopping carts, chewing gum, smoking cigars and pipes and cigarettes, and wearing all the bright colors of spring with just the slightest dark frosting of soot.

So I said to the guy, "That's quite a menagerie out here, isn't it?"

He turned to me with a look of extreme disapproval. "Don't you ever, *ever* use that word in a short story."

I opened my mouth, but he put his finger up to shush me. "Don't use it as the narrator, and don't make one of your poor stinking half-formed characters use it. Absolutely not."

I closed my mouth and looked away. After a moment I faced him and said, very quickly before he could shush me, "Menagerie? Why the hell not?"

"You know why," he said. "Don't you read your own critics?"

"Well, no," I said.

"Figures. You should always read your critics. You should read every word every one of them writes about you."

I said, "I don't think that's a good idea. Practically every writer in existence says not to do that."

"Well, *you* should. They're all God's creatures. If you don't, you'll be sorry."

"The menagerie or the critics?" I said.

"What?"

"God's creatures. Who did you mean? What god?"

“Don’t scoff,” he said.

“I’m not scoffing,” I said.

The old man snorted and tossed a large handful of bread chunks into the seething mass of pigeons. The seething intensified greatly.

“Do I know you?” I said.

“Of course not.” He held up a piece of dried crust and looked over it at me. “But God knows you, obviously.”

“He’s read my work?”

“What work?”

“Never mind,” I said. Obviously the guy was a religion kook. Not being diseased or dangerous doesn’t make you normal. In New York the balance may swing in the other direction.

I got up and walked deeper into the park. It still wasn’t lunch time, and there was no point heading toward Rockefeller Center, so I just went west, toward the Natural History Museum and the dinosaurs and dried starfish and stuffed wildebeests. On the grass, thousands of people were sitting on blankets or chasing frisbees or furtively allowing their pets to squat near the trees and lamp-posts. Kids were running around screaming and leaping over supine sun-bathers and picnickers, dodging among the bicycles that wove through the flow of people.

I was standing on a shady sloping area under a tree when a frisbee came sailing toward me. I could see the kid who threw it, his mouth open in dismay as his orange disc floated in among the trees. He noticed me looking at him, and waved his arms, and I could see him shouting for me to catch it. So I turned and ran a few steps toward his flying saucer, and caught my toe under a root right by the low wall along 79th Street, which winds through a deep slot in the park from the Met to the Natural History Museum.

My arms and legs began an intricate series of maneuvers that far outstripped my brain, and I remember wondering how they could possibly accomplish anything from what looked like purely random flailing as we, my limbs and I, floated over the wall and slowly descended into the rushing traffic below.

We probably hit the front of an oncoming bus before getting anywhere close to the pavement, and it seems likely we were separated from one another by an escalation of caroms between vehicles moving in opposite

directions at high relative velocity. Whatever the case, once the cars and trucks and buses had come to a stop and all my bits and pieces were in their final positions, I was long gone, banging on the Pearly Gates and wondering why there was no one in sight.



I've been sitting on the futon, staring down into the cloud, for God knows how long. It can't be a real cloud, because it goes on forever in all directions, and it's never that cloudy in the real world, and of course there's that infinite wall, too. It doesn't seem fair to be stuck here, and I'm getting more and more upset. Nobody else has come, and that's strange, because supposedly somebody somewhere dies every other second, and surely a lot of them would end up here, right? Also, if I have to pay some kind of dues, then why did they empty my pockets on the way up?

Come to think of it, just because this looks like it's in the sky, is it really up? I need a lot of answers. I had hoped this was the one place I might finally get some, but here I am completely alone and denied ingress solely for lack of cash—filthy lucre, the root of all evil. And did I really fall over that stupid wall, which should have been at least a couple feet taller, just because I don't read my critics? Or because I said 'menagerie'? No way. Something's not right, like I said at the beginning.

I get up and go back to the Pearly Gates and start banging again. For a long time there's no response, but at least I have time to notice that my fists aren't getting sore, and I'm not feeling tired from the exertion. So I get into it, banging with an interesting syncopation, punctuated by yelling out "Hey!" and "Yo!" and "Open up!" The gates themselves have an unusual resilience, especially in the pearliest sections, between the stiles, which are like white enameled metal. I get the best sound by pounding just along the edges of the bigger panels, so I'm focused there, banging out a nice Caribbean rhythm, and starting to make a kind of sing-song melody with my chanting, and suddenly there's a big clank with that same long, drawn-out echoey bell-and-choir thing, and one gate swings out and St. Peter, or whoever, is standing there in his white robe looking annoyed.

He glares at me without saying anything, and I'm just panting, trying to catch my breath. I hadn't expected anyone to come, and I was pretty

carried away, and although I'm not getting tired at all, I do have to breathe, obviously.

Finally, I say, in my best affronted-customer voice, "I'd like to know what the heck these dues are, and where the heck you think I'm gonna get any money up here on this darn infinite cloud." It's awkward using 'heck' and 'darn,' but I'm not about to take more chances until I know what the rules are.

"There's no need to swear," he says, and I about pop my cork.

"You know darn well I'm not swearing," I say, even more indignantly.

"You're swearing inside," he says, "And it shows, so don't deny it."

"Does that mean I can say 'hell' and 'damn' and it won't make any difference?"

"What do you think?"

It's another of those cheap tricks to turn the tables on you, which pisses me off, but now I'm even more edgy about pushing his buttons.

So I take another breath, and force myself to calm down a little. He just stands there, like he's waiting for a vending machine to finish pumping out hot cocoa, so I figure I don't have to rush now that the gate's open again.

"Did I really buy the farm just because I don't pay attention to my critics?" I say.

"Oh," he says, "the guy feeding the pigeons?"

"Yeah, that guy. And 'menagerie.' What's up with that?"

"He's just a religion wacko."

"Then what did I do wrong? Why now?"

"No particular reason," he says, like there never is.

I'm stumped. Falling into 79th Street mid-day traffic for no particular reason? I stand there for a while, completely at a loss. Then I figure I might as well get back to the problem at hand. "So what are my dues?"

"You just paid them," he says, as if it should have been obvious.

"I did?"

"You sat on the futon for a couple hundred years, and did your penance. And then you begged forgiveness. So there you are."

"I didn't beg forgiveness," I say, and then a wave of doubt comes over me. I probably shouldn't admit that, under the circumstances.

"You pounded on the gates for a good three decades," he says. "Sounds like begging to me."

“Oh, that. Yeah, I’m totally sorry about that.”

“No problem.” He stands to one side, leaving a direct path to the open gate. “Are you coming inside or what?”

I’m up in a flash, and I walk right in. The gate slams behind me, with more grandiose celestial sound-effects, and I heave a sigh of relief. St. Peter flips a big gold latch on the huge gates, and I take a look around. Clouds. Infinite clouds, stretching out forever in all directions. And the big fence and the Pearly Gates.

I’m stunned. “What the hell?” I say, because apparently I don’t have to worry about that rule anymore.

“What?” says St. Peter.

“Is this it?” I say. “Where the hell is everything? Where are all the people? The angels?”

“What people? What angels?” he says, like he never thought of it before, which seems to be how he reacts to pretty much everything except my reggae gate performance.

“Is this all there is?” I say, straining to see anything at all in the infinite sea of clouds.

“Well, gee,” says St. Peter, shrugging. “Were you really expecting something?”