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Flight of Fancy

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FLIGHT OF FANCY

The day was warm as Michael strode briskly along the gently meandering walkway. He moved with confident, graceful serenity; long robes flowing in the breeze, wings folded neatly at his back. Soft, white light, like the sun through heavy clouds, seemed to radiate from everywhere, giving his face a rosy glow. Always warm, always day, and always white, he thought. He smiled with resigned contentment. He liked it here, and enjoyed his work.

The walkway was broad, winding up a subtle grade in a way that caused a traveler no extra effort. It was paved in finely polished white stones, laid with orderly haphazardness. As Michael continued up the path, whisps of clouds drifted over his feet, taken by the soft winds to merge with the billowing cloudbanks, hanging lazily in the air, so close to the ground that they appeared part of the landscape.

Michael reached the top of the grade. A limitless plateau sprawled before him, seeming to embody the vastness of the universe itself. The plateau was covered in fine, cream-colored sand. Set upon it were thousands of low white buildings in neat array, extending in ranks to eternity.

The structures were elegantly ornate, built and decorated in a less gaudy rendition of the late Gothic style. When compared, none of the structures was exactly like any other. All of them differed slightly—a subtle change in an arch or doorway, a different expression on the face of a statue, varying patterns etched in the brick.

Michael stopped a moment to regard the scene, warmed by its simple majesty. Massive cloudbanks drifted in and out of sight like tall ships. Birds soared effortlessly among them, their calls floating on the warm winds. Countless times he had stood here, and still the beauty moved him.

Best begin, he thought. Michael turned toward the east wing, where he was working now, and like the birds that drifted overhead, lifted easily into the air. Gaining altitude, he leveled and spread his wings wide, soaring eastward.

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Jonathan wriggled slightly, suspended in darkness, conscious only of the silky, liquid warmth that surrounded him. He didn't know who he was, or where—only that it was no longer comfortable and protecting. He felt closed in, smothered. He turned, struggling, as an undefined force pushed him downward.

Another forceful contraction. He felt cold at the top of his head, and sensations he could not interpret near his face and ears. He was being pushed and pulled at the same time, the cold spreading down his body. He felt more of the strange pressure; heard sounds he could not understand. He sensed brightness behind his closed eyes. He swung his arms, kicked his legs. He was free. Everything was foreign, bewildering to him.

He felt something soft wrapping him. The cold went away. He was lifted, suspended in the air. The soft warmth slid away and the cold returned. He breathed, deeply and haltingly, not understanding his need to do so. There was a sharp, searing feeling at his back. It stung and burned him. He didn't understand his pain. He cried out, and finding relief in it, continued to cry. He was rewrapped and passed into new hands, drawn close to a new warmth. His crying began to subside, and soon he was asleep, lulled by the soft surrounding warmth and the strange sounds that meant nothing.

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Michael gazed down upon Jonathan as he winced slightly in his sleep. Studying his chiseled features, Michael brushed his hand against the shadow of stubble darkening Jonathan's rugged jawline. Jonathan soon slept peacefully again, Michael's hand resting gently on his shoulder. Michael smiled at the unseeing, unknowing man.

Jonathan slept in one of several brass beds in a starkly furnished room. Other men and women occupied other beds. A white placard rested on a small bed table, JONATHAN MATHESON inscribed on it in elegant gold leaf. A crystal vase held a single red rose. Michael adjusted the placard, pulled the quilts up over Jonathan's shoulders, and with a satisfied sigh, moved on to the next bed.

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Jonathan stared ahead through the windshield, momentarily mesmerized as the car sucked up the endless stream of yellow lines. His roundish face wrinkled in puzzlement.

"But Grandpa's not gone, Dad—he was there. I saw 'im!"

Jonathan's father sighed and looked from the road to his son, then across to his wife. His eyes asked for help, but she raised her eyebrows and shrugged, not knowing what to say.

"Grandpa's body is here, Jon, but his spirit is gone. That's what happens when you die. Then you don't need your body any more. That's why they bury it."

Jonathan nodded, comprehending but vaguely reassured. The memory of his Grandfather, lying so still in the big wooden box, wouldn't go out of his head. He looked so white next to all the flowers, like a dummy. Jonathan tried to touch him, not believing Grandpa was real. His father scolded him harshly, though, and took his hand away.

Jonathan tried to remember his Grandfather before he died—they way he really looked, how he talked, the way his face felt when he hugged him. He couldn't. Only the white face, looking so old in the box, came into his mind. He closed his eyes tightly to make it go away.

"Will Grandpa's spirit come back some day, Dad?"

"No Jon, it can't," his father replied.

"Is it in Heaven?" Jonathan vaguely understood Heaven.

"Mm Hmmmm...."

"Will I go to Heaven, Dad?"

"We all will someday, Jon. Then everyone will be together."

That didn't sound too bad. Jonathan nodded again and let his eyes fall back to the road and infinite string of yellow lines, quickly disappearing.

* * * * * * *

The quarterback joined the huddle and called the play rapidly. He looked up and quickly scanned the faces of his teammates, looking for any sign of misunderstanding. He asked throatily, "Right?"

The team responded by clapping their hands once loudly in unison, and barking out a half-grunt, half battle cry of affirmation. The huddle broke and team took their positions. Jonathan ran around to the end of the line, vaguely aware of the crowd's cheers and the voice of the announcer in the background.

"...will have to be the last play tonight, but it could put Central ahead and into the finals...."

Blood pounded in his ears as he put his mouthpiece in and crouched into a three-point stance. The quarterback began to call his signals. A defensive
The lineman glared menacingly a few inches away, and Jonathan returned his gaze coldly.

The key signal was called and the team sprang into motion. Jonathan leapt nimbly aside of his opponent and surged forward. A linebacker picked him up as he neared the end zone. Jonathan continued, timing the run half-aloud.

"...37.....38.....39...."

He crossed into the end zone, jumped forward onto one leg to fake his pursuer, lunged the other way and spun around. The ball was there, a little high. He vaulted upward, raking it in, taking it to his stomach. He was tackled as his feet touched the ground, but it didn't matter. The catch was good.

As he stood up he heard the final buzzer go, and the last triumphant cheer of the home crowd. He could hear the announcer shouting as his teammates raced toward him:

"...spectacular play! It's Matheson with the catch in the end zone, making tonight's final score 24-20. Looks like Central High School is going to the state finals!"

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Spoken in a rich, English-accented baritone, the words resounded in the domed auditorium. Tension among the crowd seemed to increase as the commencement speaker closed his oratory.

"...and it would be this, if nothing more, that I would leave with you."

The speaker finished and stepped down. Smatterings of applause rose from the crowd, and quickly became a loud, enthusiastic hiss, like static on a radio.

The Dean of Harcourt University stepped to the podium as the crowd gradually fell silent.

Jonathan sat, tense, in front of the long dais from which the Dean spoke, surrounded by almost 1400 friends and strangers. His hands were sweating, and he ran them along his gown to dry. He only half-listened to the Dean's speech. Four years ago this had been little more than a dream, and tonight when he went to sleep he would be a college graduate.

As the Dean began calling names, Jonathan became immediately attentive. He waited forever, it seemed, before hearing his own. He climbed the short flight of stairs and crossed to the podium.

"Congratulations, Mr. Matheson."

"Thank you, sir." He felt the paper in his hand.

Jonathan reached up, flipped back the tassel of his cap and continued across the stage to join the other graduates. He waited easily now for the ceremony to end, suppressing a satisfied smile.

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A young warder in a loose, toga-like robe put a fresh rose in the vase on Jonathan's table. Jonathan turned, deeply asleep, a faint smile on his lips. He felt the cap fly out of his hand as he and the other graduates cast them into the air, cheering. He could hear the applause and see his mother and father coming toward him, beaming.

The warder adjusted the quilts at Jonathan's shoulders and moved on to the next bed.

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Jonathan sighed heavily in exasperation, dropping his wrinkled cravat on the dressing table and leaning close to the mirror. He stared across at his harrowed face. A clip-on bow tie would do just as well. He picked up the crumpled silk and began again, his hands shaking. No use.
Finally he cursed softly and spun around to fling the tie across the room. A tall, lean man stood in the doorway, grinning.

"Nervous, Jon?"

"This thing is driving me out of my mind!"

Jonathan turned to face the mirror again, looping the cravat around his collar one more time.

"You know how to work one of these things, Trev?" he asked.

Trevor walked to the table and Jonathan turned to face him, his hands shaking noticeably. Trevor smiled, proferring his own hand.

"See—steady as a rock!"

"All you have to do is look pretty and give me the ring when it's time!"

"That hurts, Jon. This is a big responsibility." Trevor said with feigned distress. "Nothing like marriage, though. There's a responsibility."

"Have mercy, man. I'm bad enough as it is. What time is it?"

"Time we were on our way, buddy," Trevor replied, glancing at his watch and heading for the door.

Jonathan took a deep breath, adjusted his coat, and followed him out. Trevor was already further down the hall, and Jonathan ran to catch him.

"No hurry, Jonny—I'd enjoy these last moments of freedom if I were you...." They looked at each other and laughed. Trevor clapped Jonathan warmly on the back as they walked out of the building into the spring sun.

A hollow boom sounded over the water, followed by the sandy hissing of the wave surging over the shore, depositing a montage of debris. It sucked back suddenly, taking some of the waterline flotsam that wound like a path down the beach—departing quickly, like a thief escaping with his spoil.

The saltwater felt icy as it surged over Jonathan's feet. The late afternoon sun beat down on his back, and radiated thick, pleasantly heavy heat. Jonathan walked slowly along the water line. His darkened skin stretched taut over his sinewy muscles. He struggled along the familiar path, his joints cracking as he raised his arm, shielding his eyes from the glare. A gentle breeze stirred the thinning silvery hair covering his head. He continued walking, the coarse sand and shells feeling good under the hardened soles of his feet. After a while he reached the end of the key, where the water came around and behind the beach, forming a cape. His weathered face crinkled into a smile as he reached the cape and sat down in the sun. He watched the water, shielding his eyes from the sun's reflection.

Standing next to him, Michael watched, intrigued, as Jonathan unconsciously struggled from under the quilts covering the bed. Jonathan was sweating, his eyes shut tight as if squinting into a glaring light.

Michael moved on, leaving Jonathan sleeping soundly.

Leaving his wife sleeping, Jonathan walked out of the plain, four-room apartment. The sun, just rising, was a pale glow hidden in the overcast skies. The cold of the night lingered in the sand, chilling Jonathan's feet as he walked toward the water. The wind blew in forceful gusts, whipping through the few remaining strands of hair at the back of Jonathan's bald head. Be rainin' soon, he thought, and encouraging his tired body, he picked up his pace toward the shoreline. He hadn't missed this swim in years. He wasn't going to miss it because of rain.
The sea pitched majestically, the winds pushing the water into foam-clefted mountains. Jonathan jogged in up to his knees. The cold took his breath away. His heart pounded in his chest. The fierce drag pulled hungrily at Jonathan's feet, and he fought hard to keep his balance. The waves broke around him, some nearly knocking him over. He could see the sand bar further out, and lunged forward.

Jonathan stroked steadily, the waves pushing him back faster than he could swim out. He stopped, treading water. His chest was heaving. He could feel the pulse of his heart through his whole body.

He was over the bar but still could not stand. The huge swells raced at him, breaking over the bar in a fury of churning foam. Jonathan heard only the thundering, hissing of the breaking waves; the blood pounding in his ears. He ducked under to avoid the savage, engulfing curls. Out of breath, he surged upward. Too soon. He was caught as one of the great swells crashed over him. The curl took him, hurling him against the bottom.

He sought the surface, disoriented. His lungs ached, burning within his chest. He could feel the waves jetting over him, surging and breaking. He was too weak and too frightened to fight any more.

Jonathan couldn't stop coughing, inhaling the burning saltwater. As his lungs filled he weakened and began to lose consciousness. Nothing felt real any more.

His panic began to flow away. A sense of peace filled him. His arms and legs drifted listlessly in the water. His heart eased to a stop, and he felt a pleasant surge of blood to his head, then intense euphoria. His head fell back into the soft sand of the sea floor. With the last of his strength, Jonathan closed his eyes.

* * * * * * *

Jonathan opened his eyes.

A bolt of white rushed into his dilated pupils, and he shut his eyes again, unaccustomed to the light. He opened them again, squinting, and let them adjust gradually. He was warm, and felt a pleasant softness surrounding his body.

At first he saw only whiteness—everywhere. As his eyes adjusted and his senses returned he became more aware of his surroundings, the details materializing a little at a time from what seemed an enormous, empty page.

He was in a large bed, covered in white quilts. A small table beside the bed held a vase with a single red rose. A placard lettered in gold stood next to the vase. He thought he could make out other beds. Now that he could see it, the room was a soft white.

Jonathan started as a young boy appeared and looked down at him. He had longish, golden hair, and was wearing what looked like a Roman toga. The boy laid a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. It was warm and soft, and Jonathan felt strangely comforted.

"Rest," the boy said, and departed.

He returned shortly with a taller figure. As the tall one came closer, Jonathan swore he had wings—huge, feathered wings growing from his back. Then Jonathan remembered.

"Jesus!" His head fell back abruptly. He stared, wide-eyed, at the ceiling. Michael chuckled warmly. "You flatter me."

Jonathan looked up at him. His hair was a tawny gold, and flowed over his shoulders. He wore layered robes of silky white cloth, and did have wings at his back. His expression was calm and friendly, his voice strong yet benevolent.
Jonathan felt more comfortable. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. His hands brushed against his now thick beard.

He mumbled half-aloud "But all my hair... it was never this long..." He looked at Michael, puzzled. Michael smiled a friendly half-grin, apparently familiar with Jonathan's reaction.

"Are you an angel...?" Jonathan asked. His voice was foreign to him, but he liked it.

The man looked off, thoughtfully. "Yes...yes, you could say that. My name is Michael. Come, we should be going."

Jonathan stood, and found he was wearing a sort of half-toga; half-loincloth. He also noticed that his body was different—young, taut and powerful, not the gnarled, sun-tanned one he remembered. Michael led him out of the room and into a long hallway with many doors. They walked slowly down the corridor, Michael slightly ahead, Jonathan more than slightly confused.

"Michael..." Jonathan spoke tentatively.
"Mmmmm."

The angel turned and regarded Jonathan with casual good nature, beckoning him to walk faster.

"My hair... beard... my voice, body—they're all different—younger. Does that happen when you come here?"

Again the thoughtful, distant stare.

"No, I don't imagine. You see you really can't come here. There's nowhere to come from, my friend."

Michael spoke slowly, wanting Jonathan to understand. Jonathan thought he had been misunderstood.

"Well, I mean Earth... mortal life."

Michael smiled. "There is but one life, Jonathan," he said. "This life, that you always have, always will live. There is only here—heaven, as you say." Jonathan looked stunned; bewildered.

"But my life... Earth... my wife, my home—are they here?" They were nearing the end of the hallway.

"Well in a sense, yes, for you are here. They are with you. But in actuality, no, not really."

"But then where have I been? What was I doing for... 62 years? Was it all—Where was I?" Jonathan looked distressed.

"My friend, do not try to comprehend too much, too soon. You have been... asleep." He said the word slowly, clearly.

"That may be why you feel a little dazed, shocked even. Everything will be new for a while." Michael squeezed Jonathan's shoulder reassuringly.

They reached the end of the hallway. Michael opened a door and they stepped out onto what seemed like an endless beach of fine, cream-colored sand. They began walking down a broad avenue that ran between two rows of beautiful white buildings.

"Asleep?" Jonathan looked at Michael, then off into the distance, his young, bearded face reflecting his struggle to understand.

"Then it was all just... everything, all this time I was only..."

Michael turned and met Jonathan's eyes with his own compassionate gaze. The angel nodded slowly and spoke—

"...dreaming."

Brad Gustafson

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