

The Man Who Sold the World

Written by Ryan Meier

Franklin Bonnet had decided many years earlier that he would kill himself. He hadn't ever specified when he would, nor did he ever have an exact plan in place. Mostly, he thought of it as a type of backup plan, a future release from the inner turmoil that boiled quietly underneath the surface.

Frank found it easy to calm himself down after each unexpected life calamity by repeating his mantra on how it would all be over when he was finally ready. There had never been urgency behind his desire, and the fantasies he held were private, intimate details that he shared with no one. After years of waiting, he was sure. Positive his day had come.

He stared blankly out the windshield of his white Honda hybrid. The responsible, eco-friendly vehicle idled quietly in the dusty, rut covered parking lot. The hiking trail at Bear Neck Ridge stared back at him from across the parking lot, an open maw welcoming him home for the last time.

The local hiking area was one of his favorite haunts, frequenting the park more and more often as his personal relationships crumbled. Frank had spent hours upon hours traversing the trails, bird watching, and reading books under his favorite trees. The hiking was not difficult, nor was Bear Neck as large as the nearby state parks, but it offered a few gorgeous overlook views that had stolen Frank's heart. He sat, idling, in the empty parking lot, surprised to find it empty. He didn't complain.

The last minute and a half or so of one of his all-time favorite songs, Nirvana's live cover of the 1970 David Bowie classic, *The Man Who Sold the World*, blared loudly through the Honda's speakers. The lyrical presence of the song had long passed, leaving only Kurt Cobain's chilling guitar playing to intertwine in a sensual dance with the band's accompanying music. Goosebumps covered his arms, they always did.

Frank killed the car's engine as the last note rang out, cutting off the upcoming applause from the recorded live crowd. That performance stuck out as a vivid memory from his childhood. Even right then, in the small space between the engine dying and the driver side door opening, he could feel that night with all of his senses. In that moment he was back in his childhood home, lying chin-in-hands on his parent's bed, watching the iconic concert play on MTV.

Frank's iPhone illuminated at his touch, a background picture of his two kids overlaid by large clock letters. 2:43. He scanned down the growing list of missed calls.

He snorted, noticing all eleven of the calls were from the office. Not one from anyone who might have *actually* cared about him. Sure, his secretary, Tamara, had developed a friendly enough relationship over their years of working together. She and her husband hosted Frank for dinner every few months and a good time was always had by all. But she didn't truly care about him. He didn't always know how he knew that, but he was sure of it.

The same could be said for dozens of his acquaintances. They would have nice times catching up over dinner or drinks, enjoying small talk about family, politics, and work. Their busy lives would lead them away after the night ended, and that was it. No depth, no true caring. And how could anyone blame them? He certainly didn't.

Frank's phone vibrated in his hand once again, the screen illuminated with another call from his office. He couldn't be surprised. After all, he had a sterling reputation for his attendance. His sudden disappearance likely had the whole office in the beginning stages of panic. Right now, 37 miles from here, there was an angry, self-important client sitting in Frank's office, furious at the fact that Frank was late for their meeting. He couldn't lie, it made him smile.

A subtle click preceded the slow opening of the car's trunk and Frank circled the vehicle and removed the large hiking backpack seated in the spotless, recently vacuumed back of the vehicle. He tossed it over his shoulder in a swift motion before slamming the trunk closed behind him. He wondered if he would miss this vehicle; he wondered if on the precipitous of the cliff's edge he might think of it. He hoped not.

Frank had always found the insurance business to be cold, heartless. Life insurance provided a huge safety net to families, and each policy a company wrote had them betting on your loved ones to live long and healthy lives. From the outside that makes them sound like saints. But the truth was dark, a pessimism that pervaded Frank only a few short years after starting.

People don't realize how many times life insurance companies attempted not to pay out claims to devastated families. They don't realize that the agent who asks polite, well-crafted questions about their background is really a wolf in sheep's clothing. It never begins that way, new agents are full of dreams, full of youthful idealism of helping their clients. Unfortunately, if they don't adapt, they won't feed their family. Those bleeding hearts find themselves out of the

industry quicker than you could calculate the life expectancy of a middle-aged professional with a history of high blood pressure.

Frank had clung to his enthusiasm for about six months but caved to sales culture after writing only a contract a month, eating a diet of Ramon noodles and grilled cheese. Before he knew it, Frank found himself in his mid-thirties, managing a small, yet very successful, group of agents. Over time he found it easy to ignore his nagging idealism, especially when he was collecting his paychecks.

He hated to talk about his day to day business like that; there was a true need for insurance, and he knew it helped people. But, like other aspects of his life, he tended to view things negatively. It wasn't on purpose, and he didn't blame himself for his viewpoints; life was cruel, and suffering was everywhere. What the hell was the point of pretending to be happy about that.

The cool fall air blew across the lot as he strolled away from his car for the last time, dropping both his keys and his cellphone onto the ground behind him. Maybe, before the night was over, a teenager up to no good might collect both and go on a joyride. That was something Frank wouldn't have considered when he was younger, not even if his life depended on it, but he let his thoughts live vicariously through the fictional teen anyway.

The path leading up Bear Neck Ridge started wide and rocky; the first stretch of the trail speckled with jutting stones, some large enough to be called boulders. He knew from experience his hike wouldn't intensify until farther up the mountain, past the first two lookout points.

Frank's shoulders tensed at the heavy burden of his pack, chiding himself harshly about why he bothered to bring any of this stuff anyway. A backpacking tent, sleeping bag, plenty of water, and two meals worth of food? What in the hell was the point? But the logical truth led to the eight-hundred-pound gorilla on the trail with him; why bother coming if he had left himself such an open opportunity to change his mind?

The thought of it only made him angry; and that anger only steeled his resolve. His supplies might have reeked of backing out, ascending all the way up there to the pinnacle of his life only to come back down with his tail between his legs. No. He would not do that. The shame alone would ruin him, no less the attempt to cover up why he had really missed his meeting.

Frank lived alone; his small, sparsely decorated apartment stood as a perfect representation of his life. He simply didn't care. All the material things in the world couldn't fill the void inside of him, he had tried that before. And after ruining his own marriage through a mix of substance abuse, terrible communication, and drunken infidelity he had no desire to rebuild a new life. He wanted his old one back, but his ex-wife had been through too much to make that mistake twice. He didn't blame her.

A decade of long days at the office, unfulfilling sales meeting after sales meeting, and countless client meetings left Frank feeling tired; tired in a way that another decade of sleep couldn't fix. He faked happiness well enough, his cheek muscles that controlled smiling were well practiced, but the inner turmoil provided him no reprieve. There was no escaping himself when he looked in the mirror. He just wanted to rest.

It took Frank a few hours to pass the two most visited lookout points of Bear Neck Ridge. To this point the trail was kept well-trimmed. Although there was a summit higher up, the hiking became more difficult and the best views existed at the first two lookout points; but he passed them with little thought. He held no interest in taking one a last look. He knew if he stopped he wouldn't be able to see the sprawling hills of changing leaves or enjoy the golden glow of the setting sun. Frank would view all of it through the scope of his own despair, a mental image of decaying landscape and burning trees under a blackhole sun.

The trail thinned and flattened out, transitioning to a dirt path matted down with overgrown weeds rather than rocks. Frank slowed his pace, wiping sweat from his brow even as the late afternoon temperatures fell quickly with oncoming twilight. With an hour or so remaining before dusk he veered off onto a smaller, almost unseen trail that led away from the ridge's peak. This path led hikers around the base of the summit and off towards a hidden overlook next to a makeshift campsite.

By the time dusk settled on the campsite, Frank had already worked out his plan to perfection. His fire crackled and flickered, growing stronger and stronger as the last bits of sunlight leaked through the treetops. Frank went back and forth, unsure whether or not he wanted to bother unpacking.

In the end he didn't. His fear of descending the mount tomorrow morning was enough to dissuade him. Although hauling the backpack all the way up seemed in vain, Frank was happy to have three things in particular. One was a bottle of gin; the second was one of his packed meals. The last was his special guest for the evening; the most valuable player, if you will. His black blindfold.

His final meal had been simple, a strange mix of things he had developed a taste for over the past few years. The plastic container was filled with a few rolled pieces of roast beef, a few pieces of blocked swiss cheese, a hard-boiled egg, and a collection of nuts and seeds he compiled at home.

Frank ate slowly, milking his meal as he swallowed his first warm glass of gin. He stared into the dancing flames of the campfire, his thoughts floating to his wife, or ex-wife, Tabitha. The mother of his children, a companion he had loved (and still did); a partner who couldn't deal with him anymore. He wasn't hung up on their marriage's crash landing, he had reconciled that a few years prior; at least that is what he told himself. She was a good mother and that was as much as he could ask for.

One gin led to two, two glasses led to six. Frank drank with purpose, the purpose of a man knowing he would need the courage; even he considered suicide cowardly. His drunken vision was clouded with the image from his iPhone's wallpaper, the two half-smiling faces of his teenagers taken on the first day of school a few years back.

They would be devastated; Frank wasn't blinded to that. But the truth was, he knew they would be better off without him. They had never forgiven him for the behavior that divided their family and they had every right to be angry. Since the divorce, they almost always stuck to the visitation routine he and Tabitha had established; but more and more they were finding reasons to skip out on their time with him. He didn't blame them for that, either; not one bit.

Frank rose as his reality swirled along with the chilly night's breeze. He grabbed what little remained of the bottle of gin and the blindfold he had brought along with him. The world was blurry, the sway of his drunken walking only making his stomach lurch further. He pensively stepped to the ledge of the overlook; a vast landscape illuminated by the full moon lay below. Rolling hills speckled with clumps of trees that were nearly at their fall foliage peak.

It was beautiful; the perfect companion for his final moments. He sat down, reassuring himself it wouldn't hurt. Physics didn't lie. A fall from this height onto the bed of jagged rocks below translated into an impact so hard his body wouldn't have time to react. Feet first, he thought. Definitely feet first.

Frank sat down, legs dangling from the edge of the cliff while he struggled to draw the blindfold over his eyes. A few more swigs from the bottle and it would be empty. A few more swallows and this could all be over.

Frank hadn't known what to expect from death, his faith and relationship with God had left him long before even Tabitha had. A large part of him, the logical part, told him there would only be eternal darkness. With his consciousness gone from his body, his corpse would simply be an empty vessel destined to return to the ground and help further life on this doomed planet. Or, who knows? Maybe you just sit in the darkness for all of eternal damnation.

Even if Christianity or the other major religions of the world held weight, he would only end up in another place for judgement or reincarnation. Likely, and hopefully, that would

eliminate all memories of this life. He was ready to forget, even if he found himself burning in one of hell's lake of fire.

Frank opened his eyes to complete darkness. He sensed he was lying down on his back, looking upward towards the sky, but he found himself too anxious to move or look around. Thunder rumbled loudly in his head; his body ached. Frank found it ironic those symptoms had passed past the barrier of death. He laid there, mentally reaching out to different parts of his body, trying to get a sense for how he might move through this new world of darkness.

Once Frank calmed his breathing, he chided himself. It was clear to him the blindfold was still across his eyes. He wasn't dead. He hadn't leapt to his death, nor had he fallen off the edge in his drunken stupor. Of course, this was only a reaffirmation of what he already knew. He was completely unable to do anything right the first time.

He removed the blindfold in time to hear a loud, bellowing laugh. He sat up, squinting through the moonlight at a short man leaning on his walking stick, staring right back at him.

"Good morning, Princess." The bearded dwarf spoke in a low, baritone voice wearing a playful smile. "It looks like someone had a hell of a night. An empty bottle of booze?" He pointed with his walking stick at the empty bottle of gin that lay off to the side. "A blindfold fastened tightly across your eyes as you dangled yourself from the cliff's edge. If I had to guess there's a few dead hookers at the bottom of that drop."

Frank rubbed his eyes, desperately trying to push the fogginess from his head and clear this hallucination.

“Not much of a talker, are we?” The dwarf visibly relished the situation. He took a long pull from his old-style, kidney shaped wineskin.

Frank blinked and looked towards the campsite where his fire still clung to life with small, flickering flames. From what he could tell, the two were alone.

“Oh, I get it.” He limped closer to him, leaning on the walking stick as he went. “You hate dwarves, don’t you?”

The sarcasm was clear and Frank chuckled in an amused confusion.

“Oh, there he is!” The man exclaimed, raising his walking stick in the air. “It’s alive! Alive!” His booming laughter seemed to echo across the vast landscape. He leaned down and gave Frank a gentle slap on the cheek. “I’ll tell you, Frank, I have the worst of luck with things like this. Come on, get yourself up, your night isn’t over yet.”

So much of the sentence went over Frank’s drunken head. He stared dumbly, completely disoriented. Without hesitation the dwarf extended his hand, offering the waterskin. Frank drank from it eagerly.

The large gulp didn’t get far before he spat it out, choking on the burning alcohol as it ran down his already raw throat.

“What. The. Hell?” He coughed, chocking hard for several long moments.

The dwarf shrugged. “You looked thirsty.”

“Yeah, I’m thirsty. But not for a fifth of vodka.”

The squat man nodded, looking impressed. “You’ve got a good tongue for the drink. You’re right. Distilled vodka, but likely one you’ve never had. It’s local brand of vodka distilled

and sold only in that part of Europe. They're the best, you know. The Russians make the best vodka." He capitalized his statement by taking another long draw from the wineskin.

"What time is it?" Frank asked, oblivious to the fact that there were likely a hundred more pertinent questions.

The man looked up, examining the sky. "I'd say it's about half past who gives a fuck." He looked back down to Frank. "Come on, man. Get yourself together. You're a mess and I'm tired of this small talk. You people are all the same."

"What?"

"I said get up," He banged his walking stick on the ground as he spoke. "We've got a bit of walking ahead of us and I am already sick of you. Don't make me regret this." The dwarf turned, shook his head, and walked away without another word.

Frank gathered his thoughts for another minute, obeying the man simply out of confusion. He steadied himself on jelly-like legs and followed with a slow gait. He bent down to gather his pack as he reached the fire, immediately interrupted by the sound of the stranger's gruff voice.

"You don't need it, Frank," the man said with a touch of aggravation, reminding him of a mother in the middle of an endless loop of repeating herself. "Just bring some water, gods know you'll need it."

Frank obeyed again, his mind spinning with his lingering drunkenness and confusion. A million questions swirled through his head but the only coping mechanism he could activate was obedience. He grabbed a large plastic bottle of water and rose, walking off to follow the

dwarf. Oddly enough, he realized the man was standing at a dead end, a thicket of forest bordering a tall wall of the ridge.

The stranger nodded to Frank as he caught up, taking a few steps into the wild overgrowth that made up the forest in front of them. Frank didn't immediately follow.

"There's not a trail that way. We'd have to head back--"

"Frank, will you just shut up and follow me?" The dwarf had stopped and turned back, only his head visible above the tall overgrowth.

For the first time Frank examined the man's face. His eyes were piercingly sharp, alive with unbounded intelligence. Most of his face was covered in a thick beard, giving him a wild, almost feral look. Sections of his cheekbones were pockmarked with scars, his head topped with a mop of brown curly hair.

For the first time Frank found himself questioning the situation. *What in the hell was going on?* If he were honest with himself, the night was a blur. He had drunk, and drunk, and drunk; vaguely remembering his arrival at the cliffs; vaguely remembering the final moments before he attempted to end his suffering. *He had fallen asleep, hadn't he?* Or was this some sort of game played in the afterlife? Frank couldn't be sure. Either way, he had nothing else to lose, so he followed deeper into the forest.

A thought dawned on him, an oddity he should have realized sooner. "Hey," Frank called ahead, "how do you know my name?"

The stranger smiled and turned away, heading deeper into the forest. The overgrowth grew thicker, leaving Frank to question how the small man, with an apparent bad leg, navigated it so well. He, himself, stumbled on hidden rocks, nearly falling times. Yet, somehow, the dwarf

who needed a walking stick kept ahead of him. The man even needed to stop and wait for him several times.

“I’ve got a thing with names,” he said wearing a wide grin, “I’m good with them, you see. Do you know why I love them so?” Frank couldn’t guess so he stayed quiet and waited for the answer. “They always tell a lot about a person.”

Frank thought about it, not understanding how that could be possible.

“Then what’s your name?”

The man smirked again, enjoying Frank’s engagement. They stood staring, the dwarf’s eyes drilling into Frank’s, boring down deep into his soul. He could feel the man prodding, searching for something. Frank shuddered at the thought.

“The name’s Puck.”

“Puck?”

The dwarf nodded.

“Okay, Puck.” Frank felt himself grow assertive for the first time since waking. “What do you want with me? I came up here to be alone.”

Puck rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “If I tell you, will it make any difference?”

“Yes. Yes, it will. If you don’t give me some answers, I’m not taking another step.”

The dwarf shook his head with disapproval, crossing his arms across his chest. “Frank, last night you stumbled to the edge of a cliff with all intentions of leaping off to your death. You can either take a walk with me or go crawl back to your pack, get that ridiculous blindfold, and finish the job.” Puck let his words hang in the air. “What do you have to lose? After we get to

where we're going you can head back and do it for all I care. I'm only offering you an opportunity to live a little longer. You've waited this long, haven't you? One last adventure?"

"Am I dead?" Frank asked.

Puck laughed out loud, a bellowing laugh that echoed through the trees around them. Frank looked on with a face full of detached shock that did little to temper the dwarf's amusement. Without a word he turned and walked farther into the brush, showing no concern whether Frank followed or not.

Frank turned his brain off and followed. For ten minutes they navigated the thick forest, the intense silence only broken by the crunching sounds of his own footsteps. Without realizing, the overgrowth gave way to a pristine, moss-covered trail. He glanced back and could only see more of the mossy path behind them, no signs of the messy overgrowth from before.

Puck whistled as they walked, leading Frank farther and farther down the winding trail. The sound of the small man's voice broke the silence and startled Frank.

"So, what makes a fellow like you come up to the mountain to kill himself, anyway?"

Shocked by question, Frank stumbled for an answer, but settled on a lie. That would be easier. "I didn't come here to do that. My drinking got a little out of control and I ended up falling asleep near the cliff; I'm lucky I didn't fall off."

Puck nodded, stopping mid-stride. He about faced so quickly they nearly collided.

"Frank. Frank, Frank, Frank, Frank, Frank." Puck slowly shook his head. "I thought we were friends. Yet here you are, lying to me as if I were a stranger. You aren't even any good at it." He turned back and starting walking again. "Come on, out with it."

Frank averted his eyes and tried to calm his desire to turn and run. He hadn't shared these thoughts with anyone. Not his wife, not his friends, not anyone. Yet, this man wanted him to spill his guts? His darkest of secrets?

"I'm just tired." He finally replied, taking the safe way out and hoping it was enough to change the subject.

Puck watched him for a minute or so before moving forward without addressing Frank's answer. He ignored the silence as much as he could, but couldn't ignore the burning desire to say more, to defend himself.

"This world just isn't for me. I don't fit in. Truth is, I never have. I've stuck it out, gave it a go. I just," Frank paused, "I think I've seen enough."

The dwarf acknowledged with a grunt. The trail narrowed and began to climb, bending around the side of the ridge.

"Everyone has bullshit, Frank. Everyone has baggage. Everyone has trauma. This world is greedy, people can be selfish. But you get up in the morning and make the best of it." Puck raised his arms to indicate their surroundings. "You know, slow down, stop and smell the roses? Enjoy the little things?"

That pissed Frank off. His blood rose. Something in him broke.

"You know what? Fuck you." He shouted, freezing where he stood. "It isn't the things that have happened; there isn't any trauma. it's me. You don't know me; you don't know the destruction inside of me. All that baggage? The guilt? The self-hate? Its inside of me and I can't control it. I wrecked my marriage; I ruined my relationship with my kids. I'm the one who has to look myself in the mirror every day. Don't pretend to know how I live."

Puck studied him for long moments; it could have been seconds or minutes, or hours. This time the dwarf held his gaze, and Frank couldn't have broken it if he tried. Emotions rushed over Frank in powerful waves. The terror of expectations, the confusion of acting different in each of life's situation. Never allowed to fully be himself. Pain erupted inside of him, all of his pent-up hatred spewing out.

He was slammed with the injustices in the world. Anger at the state of politics and division in America. The hatred human felt towards others who might be the slight bit different. His resentments weighed him down; they had his entire life.

Puck stepped close, a frown on his face. When he was close enough, he gave Frank a friendly slap on the arm. "Chin up, Frank. Today is your lucky day."

Puck continued, leading them farther up the path. A few hundred yards from the ridge's summit they arrived at the mouth of a large cave. Frank, during his dozens of visits to Bear Neck had never noticed, or even heard of this cave. He should have, given how close it was to the summit. A set of ancient stone steps led up the last few feet of the trail, a sight that sent chills up his spine.

Without spending any time to admire the scenery, Puck climbed the stairs and disappeared further into the mouth of the cave. The main chamber was pitch dark; the bright moonlight obviously unable to follow. Frank walked with small, careful steps. A spark of light brought the chamber to life as Puck lit two handheld wooden torches. Frank couldn't imagine how.

The rough rock walls were covered in primitive drawings of all kinds; stick figures, strange shapes, and even stranger looking animals. He noticed several drawings of glowing shapes that reminded him of doors. Puck ignored surroundings, nodding off towards the dark abyss.

“Frank,” Puck words echoed through the cave, “we’re friends now. And because we’re friends, I’m going to give you a choice. You’ve followed me this far, but I need you to be open to anything if you continue. If you choose, you can follow the trail back to the camp and either leap off that cliff or go back to your life. Or, you can follow me.”

Frank frowned.

“But if you decide to follow me, understand one thing. You might live or you might die. You might find your salvation, the peace that you have been looking for. Or you might find yourself with an eternal fate far worse than death. Do you understand?”

Frank nodded, a clarity washing over him under Puck’s piercing stare. He had already sentenced himself to death, why pass on one last opportunity? Regardless, the result would be the same. Either way, by the end of this adventure, he was sure he would be dead.

Frank laughed, stepping forward to shake the dwarf’s strong hand. Without another word the two made their way farther into the mouth of the cave. It wasn’t long before the cave walls narrowed, bringing the travelers to a small opening in the far wall. Puck led them down a sweeping spiraled stone staircase that hugged against the outside of the walls of the round cavern. Frank peeked over the open side of the stairs and found himself staring into an endless darkness.

The two men walked a million years. Frank became sure he had died back up at the cliffs; positive he had met his demise at the bottom of his fall. Each look up and down the hollowed cavern was surreal, reminding him of vivid dreams. He never believed something like this could exist, far be it so close to his home. Maybe it was a dream, one of the dreams you simply couldn't wake from until your body was ready. He knew there was little he could do, so Frank continued following the man named Puck.

The stranger, or self-proclaimed friend, only stopped to allow Frank to catch up; the dwarf with the gimp still maintaining a pace that Frank couldn't match. As the base of the winding staircase approached an end, a strange, bluish-white mist hovered close to the bottom of the stairs. It was cool, refreshing; a sensation he'd imagine one would feel in the center of a big, white cloud.

The two men found themselves at the bottom, the mist centralized to the center of the cavern. Frank couldn't describe the room around him, his attention completely focused on the source of the blue-white mist.

He approached the short, round rock wall in the center of the room; the genesis of the mysterious mist. Puck stood quietly off to the side, watching Frank with a grin as he explored the oddity. Small, tentative steps led him close enough to touch the wall, preparing to peek over the edge. As his hand landed on the stone the mist disappeared completely. It didn't slowly melt away as Frank had always known mist to do. It vanished in the small space between seconds.

Frank jumped back at the sudden change, eliciting another booming laugh from the man behind. He spun around to face the man; a million questions sprawled across face.

“It’s something else, isn’t it?” Puck said, wearing his broad smile like a badge.

“Where in the hell are we?”

“Is that really your first question?” Puck’s eyebrows raised. “Does it really matter *where* we are?”

Frank blinked, taking a deep breath. Puck was right, *where* didn’t matter. “Okay. *What the hell is this place?*”

“That’s better.” Puck leaned on his walking stick as he closed the space between them, joining Frank at the small wall. “Have you looked down yet? Now that the mist is gone?”

Frank shook his head, earning a friendly nudge from the dwarf. Puck watched him eagerly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, mustering up the courage. Frank leaned over the wall and peered down, finding a pit of complete darkness interrupted only by a glowing blue orb.

Puck, who had leaned over to look as well reached his right hand out over the wall and raised it up, palm first. The globe rose from the pit, slowly rising until it stood eye level, hovering and spinning. Frank immediately knew what it was, it was an image he had seen a thousand times; It was a realistic replica of the earth.

Frank stared. He didn’t know what else to do; didn’t know what else to say.

“Look familiar?”

Frank nodded. "Earth. My world."

Puck nodded. "You're right, you know."

"Right about what?"

"Right about this world. The corruption, the greed, the hate. I've watched this for many, many years." Puck struggled and pulled himself up on the rock wall. He sat, back to the globe, allowing his eyes to remain on Frank.

"This is it, isn't it?"

"Yes." Puck nodded again, another smile on his face.

Frank reached his hand out towards the globe but it spun just outside of his reach.

Puck laughed and spun around, dangling his legs into the pit. He reached his own hand out and pulled on the air between, drawing the globe closer. As he pulled it, the spinning rotation stopped.

Frank looked at him with shock and worry, panic seizing him.

"Don't worry, when you draw it in it doesn't actually stop the earth's rotation. So, Frank. You seem to have the idea. Why don't you tell me where you want to go?"

He didn't need to think about it very long. "Tess. Let me see her."

Puck nodded. He reached out both hands, the globe just out of his own reach. He pulled on the air, making motions that reminded Frank of zooming in and out on a touch screen. The globe quickly changed from a perspective from space to the view passengers have from a plane. It continued its transition to the view from a 3D map. Google Earth had it right all along.

The dwarf continued manipulating the globe, zooming in with a swirl that made Frank nauseous. A house he knew quite well came into view from above, Puck tweaking the angle of it to make it seem as if Frank were approaching it on foot.

The first few steps into the foyer sent good and bad memories rushing back. Imagines of laughing, kissing, and making love. Good years that felt like they would never end. And the bad memories? Those were filled with yelling, screaming, crying, and fighting.

Frank's wife, or ex-wife, lay comfortably on their, her, living room couch reading a hard cover book. Her curvy shape was stretched out, head propped up on a pillow, her legs crossed at the ankle. She snacked on something small, indistinguishable from his perspective; but he already knew what it was. She always ate peanut M&Ms while she read.

He watched her for long moments, examining her facial expressions as her eyes scanned the pages. Frank's awe soured quickly, the negative memories bombarding him as he watched. And, just like that, as quickly as the interaction had started, it ended. The vivid scene around him waned, colors shimmering as the focus faded in a slow blur. One moment he was there watching Tess, the next he was back in the cave at the bottom of the long staircase.

Frank blinked his eyes while Puck chuckled, hopping down off the short rock wall. The dwarf circled him, appraising his ability to recover.

"Wild? Or what?"

He couldn't answer; couldn't fathom what might be going on. "What about my kids?"

Puck nodded eagerly. "Yes. We *could* go see them. But, I'm not the ghost of Christmas past, Frank. We aren't here to take a stroll down memory lane nor do I intend to give you a glimpse into the future."

Frank nodded, turning his head back towards the floating globe. It had returned back to a spinning representation of earth.

“You know,” Puck continued, “there is a way for *you* to take control, actually take over the globe. Do what I did; do far more.”

The dwarf’s words rang in his head. He reached out, expecting to grab the globe and start manipulating it. He couldn’t grab hold, he couldn’t do anything.

Puck laughed again. “You can’t expect it to be that easy. You can’t expect there not to be a cost to something like this.”

Frank looked back and forth from the spinning globe to the dwarf. He paid little mind to the growing smirk from underneath the thick stubble of the man next to him.

“Well, what is this thing?”

Puck moved closer. “It isn’t a thing, it’s everything.”

Frank crinkled his eyebrows.

“This is the earth as you know it, a representation of its greater form. If you hold full control, you can do with it as you wish. Move mountains, spin hurricanes, or wipe it clean and start over.” The dwarf shrugged. “I mean, the dinosaurs were fun, but you can only watch so much of that. Or take it easy, let time roll on. Take a passive role. Check in, poke around; you know, whatever you want. It would be your world.”

“But I just-“

“Frank, it isn’t a power I can just give. Nor can it be taken. If you want it, you need to buy it. The world can only be sold.”

“What?” Frank asked. “It what?”

“It needs to be sold by the holder, purchased by the next. It helps give the transaction transparency. You know, make sure there aren’t any tricks or inconsistencies. This isn’t a handshake sort of thing. You need an exchange.”

Frank nodded, thoughts of earlier in the day still swirling through his overwhelmed mind. The only thing he knew for sure was how completely bizarre the afterlife was. It couldn’t be possible he was still alive. It didn’t cross his mind to think about this, it didn’t cross his mind to realize the consequences.

“I mean... I don’t have anything of value to-“

Puck cut him off again, an almost diabolical greed scrawled across his face. “Frank, come now. It’s okay. You have exactly what you need in your wallet.”

Frank felt around, removing an old, beaten and worn brown leather wallet from his back pocket. He dug in and pulled out a moderate mix of \$50’s, \$20’s. Adding the small bills it might had added up to several hundred dollars.

Puck’s booming laugh struck again, the bearded dwarf shaking his head as his body shook in glee. Frank looked back down at the wallet, wondering what else the dwarf might have been interested in. He withdrew his driver’s license.

“Here.” He said. “It’s like a test drive at the car dealership? Leave your license, get to take the new car on a spin?”

“Ah, very funny; but no.”

Frank frowned and continued searching, finally running his fingers across a strange item he had forgotten about. It was a coin, one of those challenge coins, he had been given at a

Comic Convention he attended a few years back. He withdrew the golden coin and shrugged, offering up the meager gift as if he were ashamed.

Puck took it eagerly, rubbing his finger across the words *Worldhoppers' Guild* engraved across the top. Puck laughed his hearty laugh again, slipping his reward into his trouser pockets. Without another word he reached up and planted his hand on Frank's chest, a blue aura surrounding it.

The light pulsed, expanding and retracting several times. Time, as Frank knew it, became meaningless. They both stood in the moment, a moment that might have lasted lifetimes.

With a bright flash the glowing blue aura extinguished. The dwarf lowering his hand slowly, looking towards Frank with a strange curiosity.

"Do you feel it?" A mischievous grin settling on his face.

Frank flexed his hands, wrists, and arms, his eyes going wide in surprise at what he felt.

"Yes. Yes I think so." He closed his eyes and focused, enlightenment flashing inside. An energy, a power he could only begin to comprehend lay in his core. Puck smiled and jumped into a small, surprisingly dexterous heel-clap. When he landed, he spun a three-sixty and began whistling to a tune only he could hear. He was already moving away from the stone wall.

"Wait!" Frank called. "Wait! You can't just leave me here like this."

The dwarf hesitated to turn back as he walked away, nearly all the way to the other side of the circular room. Reluctantly he turned back, looking to Frank with amusement in his eyes.

"What the hell do I do now?"

The dwarf smiled and spoke clearly, punctuating his words clearly. “You do exactly the thing you came here to do. Stand at the edge and jump.” Without another word Puck arrived at the far wall and reached up.

He started at the top, drawing an arch with his fingers. From the center he drew two sweeping arches, completing an outline that reminded Frank of a door. In the center the dwarf drew a symbol that Frank couldn’t decipher.

Illumination pulsed from the lines Puck had drawn, glowing brighter and brighter as the rock shimmered and transformed into a door of bright light. Puck turned back once more, winked, and walked through the door. His dwarven figure vanished, the white-hot light of the door dimmed, graying out until only the stone wall remained.

Frank stood, transfixed, at the small wall where only moments earlier the strange man had disappeared through a magical doorway. He remembered the man’s last words, finding it difficult to understand the events that led him to the bottom of the deep cave.

He debated. Frank stood, staring at the spinning globe as it hovered in the air where Puck had left it. He didn’t touch it, didn’t reach out for it. His instincts told him he could. He could fumble through the basics; but he didn’t want to, it didn’t feel right. The power was there, but his knowledge wasn’t.

Too much of this was foreign, too much of it reeked of a dream come to life, fantasy turned real. The truth of the situation sat plainly in front of him. If Frank was already dead, this was all a huge, strange, afterlife hallucination. He began thinking he knew what the stranger’s last words meant.

He knew, instinctively that Puck was right; all the answers he desired laid at the bottom of that pit. Without another thought Frank climbed on top of the small rock wall, toed himself to the edge, and without the need of a blindfold leaned forward and allowed himself to fall, far into the dark abyss below. The first piece of knowledge imparted to Frank after his fall rang with eerie familiarity: this eternal fate was to be his eternal salvation, but would come at a cost far worse than death.