



## THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

**SINCE WE MUST HAVE DIED AT** about the same time, and since we were now in the same place following our deaths, each of us must have experienced something similar on the trip. But like passengers at the end of a long bus ride, we were in no way similar except for a common sense of regret-filled release. Most of us had anticipated such a journey, but few of us had any indication as to the exact departure time, and so most of us were really not prepared when word came. It seemed sudden for such a predictable event. A few people rushed here and there trying to establish that they had really arrived, but most of us just sat around on the many benches, staring down at the floor, unable to accept that one part of our journey was over and we were about to begin the much longer portion of our adventure.

I had no idea about the rest of the folks around me, but I had never really thought much about what this trip was going to be like, and so far, it was living up to my lack of expectations. On the shuttle people chatted in low, anxious

voices about—well, nothing, really, and few seemed overjoyed to be there. In fact, most seemed a bit addled about just being on the shuttle, pretty much the same as I was. They talked about having to leave home with so much left to do, about not finishing a coat of paint on the tool shed, not getting a chance to win that bridge hand, about a dozen mundane projects that needed completion. Nearly all seemed unready for the trip, yet here we were, about as far from home as we could get and not likely to get back in the near future, if ever.

“If the following arrivals will kindly line up at the bench nearest the door marked ‘Exit,’ please.” The voice, like similar voices on the shuttle, came from nobody and nowhere and seemed to be directed at no one. But as the first name was spoken, that sense of anonymity disappeared because the first name was mine, Martin. I looked around, but since no one else seemed willing to respond, I guessed that I was the only Martin in the bunch. I stood up, found the door marked ‘Exit,’ and wandered in that direction. I tried to be casual but I was almost nauseous with anticipation. Ever since my job at The Club, I get a queasy feeling when I’m unsure of my immediate future.

I took my place by the door and waited as other names were called. I didn’t really pay much attention, partly from exhaustion and partly because I didn’t expect to spend much time with any of the people lining up behind me. The list wasn’t very long, and soon the exit door swung open silently and we walked into a long hallway. A long, long hallway: long enough we could not see the end of it—and it was perfectly straight. Just as I was beginning to be concerned about how far we would have to walk, the floor took over and whisked us along, much like a people mover in an airport.

## *The* STAINED GLASS DOOR

We accelerated rapidly and soon were slipping past dozens of doors that opened off the hallway, not one of them marked or identified in any way, except that none were the same and all were attractive. Beautiful, in fact. None of the doors were what you would call gaudy, but all were either ornately carved wood, intricately patterned metal, or softly glowing stained glass in pastel patterns as delicate as old, worn quilts hung on the line, backlit by a summer afternoon sun. There seemed to be no pattern to their decorative order, but they provided a reassuring tableau as we slipped past. Just as I was about to comment on them to a fellow passenger, we stopped in front of one of the doors. To my surprise, the other doors we had just passed were no longer visible, and therefore did not lend themselves to my comment.

Before I could really think about the disappearance of the other doors, our door opened and we filed through without question or hesitation.

My first impression was simplicity: floor, walls, ceiling, and furniture all were a pale, nondescript off-white. But as the rest of the group filed in behind me, our presence provoked a subtle but immediate change. The carpet shifted toward green, the walls took on the hue of honey in glass, and the ceiling began a series of physical transformations that would continue for the rest of our time in the room. The defining line between walls and ceiling dissolved, leaving a sense of being outside in the open, with no clear limits to the space. I was disoriented again, but just for a moment. The transformation was actually comforting, and as I watched, gray sky became blue. High, thin clouds swirled into low pillows of white. Pure blue returned and held its own until another wave of mist shifted across the sky above us. It occurred to me that the

architects might have been employed as special-effects artists before designing this place. I smelled jasmine, heard crows cawing in the distance, felt a breeze brush past.

As the room continued its transformations, eight ornate, wooden, upholstered chairs, each marked by a placard, seemed to materialize around a large, oval, polished granite table at the center of the room. I was becoming accustomed to things appearing and disappearing, so I stepped back to watch the changing scenery and bumped into a young woman behind me who was intent on finding her place at the table.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled, as she eased past. A placard read “Taglia” in front of her chair, which was being pulled out politely by a tall, weathered old dude.

“Why, thank you!” Taglia said. He nodded and helped her into her seat. While I stood there feeling impolite, the old guy nodded to me in a friendly way and, excusing himself, slipped behind me and walked to a place at the end of the table and sat down. His placard read “Leonard.”

Across the way, a young man in jeans, baseball cap, and an old cotton shirt helped a middle-aged woman in a pleated skirt and soft yellow sweater with her chair. Her placard read “Mary.” After making sure Mary was comfortable, Euell sat down next to her and seemed to withdraw into himself. His shoulders shrank, his head bowed, and his hands crawled under his legs as if he were freezing.

I looked at the placards near the two empty spaces left in front of me. My name was on neither. A boy who could not have been much more than twelve years old nodded to me and slipped into one of them. He was Timmy. At the same time, another fellow, Seth, wearing silk pajamas and a blue robe, took the other seat. That left a chair on the far side of Mary

## *The STAINED GLASS DOOR*

open and I headed for it. I'd barely sat down when a voice brought my attention to a chair at the head of the table—a chair that had not existed a moment before. An attractive woman stood behind it now.

“I would like to welcome you all to your first endeavor, and so, I will. Welcome! I'm Jesse Munford, and I will be your team leader.”

I had not seen her enter the room but there she stood, smiling in such a way that I felt threatened. She was well over six feet tall and dressed perfectly in a beige linen pantsuit, which topped a lavender silk blouse. My first impression was athlete, maybe thirty, total hotty. My second impression was athlete, maybe fifty, total hotty. My third impression didn't get a chance to leave the launching pad.

“Martin, why are we here?” Her gaze landed on me hard, and I felt like a third grader caught staring out the window. Determined not to be intimidated, I tried to appear decisive.

“I was hoping you would tell us, ma'am,” I said.

“Excellent! This is one place where a little honesty is always a good thing, especially if it is tempered, where necessary, with diplomacy and the unwillingness to beat each other up with how little we all really know,” she pronounced. She continued with no hesitation and little kindness, “Martin has no clue, yet verbalizes his ignorance with a suggestion that he is curious, expectant, willing to learn. What a guy. I like this group already.”

I was left with an absolute sense of uncertainty, unable to tell whether she meant to insult me, compliment me, or both. I had little time to consider her intentions, however, for she immediately began a short, incomprehensibly vague monologue.

## JOHN MARVIN

“The course work at High U is flexible and intended to both meet the needs of participants and reach the ongoing goals and objectives intended to fill the greater needs of the world at any particular time without de-stabilizing, to any great degree, the inherent constancy of each participant’s self-image. People arrive at this point in life with certain skills or talents, and they are assigned their first work based on our assessment of those skills. Each of you, we believe, should start with writing, or storytelling, or whatever you want to call what we’re going to do. Some of you haven’t really done much formal writing in your life, but we believe your strengths will come out fairly quickly, and we want *your* stories. So, we will be writing and discussing short allegories, parables, and legends of a personal nature. Your writing, your stories will be added to the inventory of the world’s ongoing story.”

She smiled around the room and let the last words of her little speech sink in. Fortunately, she didn’t wait long because what she said made little sense and had little chance of sinking in. We all sat—quiet, confused, apprehensive.

“What?” someone asked so timidly I could not determine which one of us spoke.

“We will work independently on short stories, writing until I call a halt. We will take the first story that an author feels is complete and read it silently. We will then discuss it in terms I shall propose based on the inherent values expressed in the writing. All of this will be low-key, casual, and intended to keep the anxiety level of each participant under control while expanding the storytelling abilities of all,” our leader said confidently. “You may begin.”

There was a longer, stunned silence. She looked at us and we looked at her, then we eyed each other. I glanced

## The STAINED GLASS DOOR

around the “room.” The non-existent walls shifted toward the glossy brown of late autumn acorns, and thunderclouds rolled overhead.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped, “I forgot you wouldn’t know! Reach under the table in front of you and pull out the drawer.”

Chairs shifted as we peered under the edge of the granite table and, fumbling, found the drawers and pulled them out. Inside each drawer lurked a laptop computer, normal looking, but oddly devoid of a brand or trademark or any identifiable markings except for the usual numbers, letters, and symbols on the keys.

“Well, go ahead, turn them on and get started on your first story.”

I found the power on/off button, tapped it, and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. The screen remained dark, gray, blank. “*What’s wrong with this thing?*” I typed. Immediately, the screen took on the appearance of parchment, and the words pulsed across the page, the initial “w” fully illuminated and so ornate and infused with color that I was immediately proud of myself. Maybe I could do this. Besides, what else was there to do but follow instructions? I thought back to my dream of Joanie and decided to try writing her story. Sure it was a dream, but what else was I to do?

I struggled with the start. I wrote one phrase, then deleted it, wrote another. Despite the pure beauty of the font and the visual dignity of the digital parchment on which I was writing, my story was not exactly leaping onto the page. I tried again and thought back to my Rambler and the alley dumpster. That helped. I fiddled with a description of the afternoon of the dream. Deleted it. Saw the dust under the pool tables in The Club and details of the bar. Tried for a long

time to describe them: failed.

I don't know how long I had worked, but I was about to slam the laptop shut in frustration when our leader announced happily, "I believe we have a first draft. It is often helpful if we share our work very early in the process, so let's take a look at Seth's first effort."

The words I had been struggling with faded from my screen and the first page of a simply typed, black-font-on-white-background manuscript appeared in its place. Across the table, the guy in his pajamas and robe, Seth, twisted his robe belt apprehensively. I thought, *He's done? I'm over here getting nowhere and he's done?*

Maybe we had been working longer, far longer, than I realized.

"Before we read, do you have any comments about your work, Seth?" asked Munford.

"Well, I don't know," Seth said hesitantly. He looked like he was on the verge of fainting. "I, uh, I once went to a new psychiatrist, and on my first visit it seemed to me that he was very strange. He seemed shifty, weird. So, I imagined a patient's first visit and imagined it as if the patient was really having a hard time keeping a firm grip on reality." He paused, slumped back in his chair, and looked like he desperately wished he were somewhere else.

After a few long moments of miserable silence, Ms. Munford assumed Seth had nothing further to say.

"Okay, let's begin reading Seth's first draft, *Dr. Pollard*." With no further hint at what was to come, I started reading.