

*Klonk's Assignment*

By Todd Allen

If Greg had known what momentous events the day would bring, he would have tried to get more sleep. But when the sisters hit the lights at Saint Bart's Mission for the Homeless, he and his forty-nine roommates rose and stretched in unison, greeting the day with the same underwhelming vigor as the one before. Greg pulled on an old army jacket he'd found three days ago, patted it down as he fastened the zipper, and ran his tongue around his parched mouth. God, he needed a drink.

He had just folded up his mat when a hand tapped his shoulder. "Excuse me, could I have a moment of your time?"

Greg turned. A man towered over him—a tall, pale man—wearing a black microfiber trench coat and a smile that sent a chill through his body. It wasn't the smile of a salesman, nor of anyone trying to impress. The man's teeth were a sickly yellow, narrowed by wear, and gleaming in the stark fluorescent light. They were the kind of teeth that would frighten small children, the kind that would jolt an awakening drunk into his morning moment of clarity.

The man cleared his throat with a deep, rumbling cough, then spoke with a voice as smooth as an English butler's. "My name is Klonk, and I'd like to offer you a job—that is, assuming you have no pressing engagements."

If there was one thing about Greg's current situation he didn't regret, it was that his life was now utterly free of pressing engagements. No bills stacked upon his desk, no mobile phone clamped to his waist, no meetings with the partners, no car to polish, no lawn to mow, no family member whose heart he had yet to break. He had cleared his schedule for the foreseeable future.

In fact, he could think of only one task commanding his attention. "You're in luck, mister," he said. "The liquor store doesn't open 'til noon."

The stranger gave a polite laugh, punctuated it with another heavy cough, then wiped away his grin. "I'll pay you twenty-four thousand dollars for twenty-four hours of your time."

Suddenly, the moisture returned to Greg's mouth. He licked his lips as if he had smelled an oven-baked pie. Twenty-four thousand—that was enough to provide a break from the daily routine he'd come to know so well. With that kind of money he could rent a hotel room by the month, order his favorite bourbon by the case, and drink until he'd forgotten what a disappointment his life had become.

He wondered what this stranger would ask him to do for such a price. He'd stolen from the best of them in his day: corporations, municipalities, volunteer fire departments. He'd done it in grand fashion, too, armed only with a briefcase and a sympathetic client at his side. One more theft wouldn't bring on Armageddon. But He *did* have his limits.

"We're not talking murder, are we?"

"It's nothing like that." The man leaned forward. "Have you ever wanted to play God?"

Greg looked at the rickety cot that had cradled his body the past two months, then back to the tall stranger. The tall, rich stranger. "Where do I sign?"

The man smiled. "Just close your eyes."

\* \* \*

When Greg opened his eyes he was standing in the middle of a field of cars, both old and new. Narrow-eyed men with clipboards roamed between rows, kicking tires, peering in windows,

jotting down the numbers that were painted across the windshields. Greg knew this somehow, though he couldn't actually see what they wrote.

A hand pressed against his shoulder. The stranger's stale breath spilled on Greg's neck. "Look around. See anything familiar?"

"I've never been here before."

"But something of yours is here waiting for you."

Greg gazed out across the lot, suddenly hopeful for what he might see. His eyes took over, acting on their own as they took snapshots of each vehicle then moved to the next as if by automation. Though he spent no more than a millisecond looking at any one car, he memorized each one in vivid detail—even the '69 Mustang parked a hundred yards away—right down to the date on their inspection stickers.

A moment later, he found what the thin man had wanted him to. Seven rows to his right, wedged between two Ford Explorers, its windshield shining in the mid-morning sun, sat a gunmetal gray Jaguar XJ-6—his baby, lost to the bank three months ago.

The auction started at noon, and as the bidders waved and nodded away the hour, Greg moped on a bench next to Klonk. "What kind of job is this, watching some wholesaler buy my dream car for pennies?"

"They won't take it. Not if you don't let them."

Greg shook his head. "How do you mean?"

"Remember what I said earlier, about playing God for a day?" Klonk pointed to the crowd and whispered: "*Guide* their actions. You can do it—you're God."

"Impossible."

Again, the smile. "Try it, and see."

The auctioneer stampeded through the bids in typical auctioneer fashion, although to Greg the pace seemed slower than it had just seconds before. As he looked across the crowd his attention shifted to specific individuals as if by instinct, moments before they raised their hand to bid.

*Seventeen hundred*, the auctioneer bellowed, then a man down front ran a finger over his ear. *Seventeen fifty*, and another man pointed to the sky. *Eighteen hundred, do I hear eighteen hundred?* A short, pudgy fellow near the back waved a French fry in the air. All of this Greg saw and heard a split second before it actually happened.

He noticed an old man sitting in the third row, saw him bid, then *willed* the man's hands to stay in his lap. They did. He tried it on another. Then another . . .

The auction moved quickly now, visibly frustrating the auctioneer and the bank representatives. When Greg's Jaguar came up for bid, he turned to Klonk, who was sporting that same repulsive grin. "Can I get a small advance?"

"I trust you won't need much."

"Nope," Greg said, and flashed his own wicked smile.

Minutes later he'd regained his prized possession with one well-timed bid.

Klonk nodded his approval. "You're coming along just fine."

"Thanks," Greg said. "But somehow, I thought there'd be more to it than this."

"I assure you there is." Klonk clasped his hands behind his back. "I brought you here to show you what can be done. Soon you won't be buying cars. You'll be changing lives." He drew his lips even higher than before, revealing not only his awful, rotting teeth but also the reddened, swollen gums that held them in place. Greg winced, but Klonk didn't seem to notice. "Playing

God requires a certain amount of preparation. If you expect to fill the role of Supreme Being, you've got some difficult work ahead of you." Klonk looked Greg up and down. "First, heal thyself, to borrow a phrase."

Greg flipped his keys around his middle finger, then held them in his fist. "You're saying that in order to play God, I have to clean up my life?"

"You wouldn't want God to direct world events while in the middle of a drunken haze, would you?"

"Wait a minute." He took a step back. "You didn't say anything about this before."

"You didn't ask."

Greg gazed at his tattered shoes, suddenly unable to look Klonk in the eye. Every night at the mission he'd whispered into his pillow, lamenting how he had tangled with the demons of this world and lost. While he lay there among his fellow lost souls, listening to the sound of his body's slow decay, he'd secretly wished for a chance like this. But now that it had arrived, He wanted to shy away from it. More than that, he wanted to run. Straight to the liquor store.

"I understand exactly what you're feeling," Klonk said. "You may not believe it, but there was a time when I thought I'd sunk too deep in my own misery to be of use in this world again. Many people see themselves that way." His eyes brightened as he spoke. "It takes a brave soul to rise above one's own circumstances and see people through the eyes of God. It's a scary thought, I know.

"Which is why I'll make you another offer." The keys vanished from Greg's hand and reappeared in Klonk's. He gave them a jingle, then held them out in his palm. "You can walk away right now, take your fancy car and drive toward the horizon—you'll lose it soon enough anyway, I promise. It's only a matter of time.

“Or you can take the next step, continue down the path you’ve started, and become a part of something big for once in your life.”

Greg reached for the keys, then froze. He knew Klonk was right. If he didn’t take this chance, another would never come. Sure, he’d have his car, but even with its speed it couldn’t distance him from his shame. His hand started to tremble, just like it did when he reached for his first drink. He stared at it, then at Klonk and his godawful smile.

“Come, Greg. Play God with me, and we’ll change the world one life at a time.”

Even more than his words, it was Klonk’s grin that settled Greg’s decision. He wondered why a man with such horrible teeth showed no reservation in revealing them to the world. Klonk appeared to be a walking contradiction, still bearing the marks of a downtrodden past yet wearing them with pride, as if he knew a secret that made it all seem insignificant. Greg craved to know that secret now, even more than he wanted a drink.

He let his arm fall to his side. “What do I have to do?”

Klonk slid the keys into his pocket and winked. “Just close your eyes.”

\* \* \*

When Greg opened his eyes he was standing beside Klonk in an elevator bound for the twenty-fifth floor. The reflection in the polished steel doors showed an image he barely recognized—his hair trimmed and combed, his face shaven, his gaunt frame wrapped in a slate colored suit. He wavered, but Klonk caught him by the arm, steadying him.

“We resume here, now, at Feldman, Hirsch, and Soren.”

He shook out of Klonk’s grasp. “No way. I can never show my face here.”

“Yes you can. You’re different today—invincible, all-knowing, all-powerful, remember?”

He looked down at his shoes again. If Klonk was telling the truth, he had no internal sense of it. His insides churned like a den of snakes at the thought of what awaited him here. His last visit was a catastrophe, from his opening curse-riddled soliloquy to his painfully brisk escort from the premises. And now he remembered every second of his downfall, even the parts he’d been too drunk to register.

“Don’t worry,” Klonk said, placing a hand on Greg’s shoulder. “You have the power to make things right. You have command over everything and everyone you see. Their fate—and yours—is in your hands.”

“So I could turn Soren into a pillar of salt?”

“I suppose.” Klonk sighed. “But that wouldn’t help get your job back.”

“Sure would make me feel better.”

“This isn’t about revenge.” Apparently to reinforce his point, Klonk showed off his yellowed teeth as if they were the finest porcelain.

The elevator doors opened. Klonk pushed Greg into the law office lobby. “Now’s your chance. *Guide* his thoughts.”

“I need a drink.”

Klonk leaned forward. “No, you don’t. You’re God.”

Greg sat in a visitor’s chair facing the solid mahogany desk that once held his own nameplate, waiting for his old nemesis to enter. Images of the transgressions he’d committed within these walls crowded his field of vision, reminding him of the part he played in his own

dismissal. He pressed his hands to his face, hoping to clear his mind. To his surprise, it did.

And when Soren strolled into the office and flung himself into a chair, his thoughts preceded him. Instantly Greg *sensed* the man's mood, his emotions, and his intentions without even looking at his face. It was as if he stood peering into the window of Soren's mind, gazing with perfect clarity at each thought as it took shape.

What he saw took him by surprise. Soren hid it well, quietly rocking in his oversized executive's chair and favoring Greg with a patronizing grin. His steady hands glided across his desk as he pretended to sort through a stack of files. His forehead remained unwrinkled and dry. Even when he spoke, there wasn't a hint of the terrible disease clawing at his insides. Had Greg not been playing God, he never would have noticed what Soren so desperately tried to conceal: that behind his outer wall of confidence lived the exact same demon that had torn Greg's life apart.

And it had lived there a long time. Long enough to rearrange the furniture, paint the walls, and make itself at home. Soon it would grow fat and restless, emerge for all to see, and introduce itself to Soren's every friend and foe, ensuring his eventual downfall.

Soren pondered this scenario as he sat regarding Greg with an outward expression of pity. At his core, he was actually studying Greg, attempting to gauge how far he'd fallen. But to everyone else they were just two former coworkers enjoying a casual chat. The audible conversation was as meaningless as it had always been. Words passed between them like cards in a game of gin. The real interaction took place inside Soren's head.

Greg started with a suggestion, that given his own fall from grace, he really didn't look that bad. *And hey, he's gathered enough courage to crawl back in here—into the office you claimed for yourself just minutes after his dismissal—to face the company that finally gave up on*

*him. You have to admit he was an excellent lawyer. He brought in more than his share for the firm year after year. It wasn't like he did anything illegal, either. He just had a bad couple of months. Everyone else liked the son of a bitch, at least before he came to work that last day. I bet if you gave him another chance, you know, offered to let him start again at the bottom, he'd get right down and kiss your shoes, just like you always wanted.*

*Besides, if he doesn't make it, you'll never have a chance once your time comes—and you know it will. Just as sure as he's sitting there, you know your time is coming.*

Soren's features softened, and with as much grace as he could manage, he extended his hand across the desk. "Tell you what. I just thought of a terrific idea."

Greg strode back to the elevator, and after he *willed* the doors to open, stepped inside. He wasn't surprised to find Klonk waiting there.

"Enlightening, isn't it?" Klonk said.

"More than I could have imagined."

"You realize this is a waste of time unless—"

"I know," Greg said. "Believe me, I see it now."

Klonk erupted in a short, phlegm-filled chortle, but said nothing.

When the elevator doors closed, Greg reached for the lobby button. He stopped himself.

"Sorry, old habits. Where next?"

"Search your thoughts. You already know."

And he did. Greg took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

Before him stood a large wooden door painted Georgia clay red. A pinewood deck creaked under his feet. Above, a ceiling fan wobbled, as if exhausted from years of battling Mother Nature. *The in-laws', of course.* Greg opened his eyes.

As early as yesterday the thought of coming here would have sent him into a binge of self-loathing. Because it was here, two months ago, when given the choice between his family and The Bottle, he'd hesitated a moment too long.

But now, bolstered with the confidence that came with his new powers, he stood ready—  
anxious, even—to knock on the door.

Klonk's hand found Greg's shoulder once again. "And now, the true test of a God-Becoming: *Sense* her deepest thoughts, *know* her actions, but allow her to act on her own."

"What?"

"*Love* her."

Greg turned, but Klonk had already vanished. The front door swung open, and little Katie stood before him, pure and glowing, just like every other five-year-old girl who had ever graced this world with a smile.

Through her eyes he saw himself as the father he'd always hoped to be—strong, compassionate, rising to least ten feet tall. But he recognized the image for what it was: the wishful vision of a child. Little Katie had been sheltered from the truth, he now realized. Knowing this only deepened his shame. As much as he wanted to grab her, hold her, and render all the kisses he'd failed to give in the past, he knew Klonk had delivered him here for a more pressing reason.

"Is Mommy here?"

She was, and the two of them sat outside, under the laboring ceiling fan, talking until the sun retired from the sky. He focused on each word she said while reliving each moment of their past through the eyes of his beloved.

Her memories painted a picture he never could have seen with his own eyes: long, quiet nights spent by the phone with the covers tucked under her chin; the inevitable laundry days, when each pocket she turned out revealed a matchbox from a different downtown bar; cocktail napkins strewn carelessly across the nightstand, the phone numbers scribbled in pink lipstick, and finally the arguments—the 3 a.m. arguments that sometimes brought the cops—where he combined his litigation skills with alcohol-induced logic in an effort to tear her heart to shreds.

All at once he thought about using his power to erase each hurtful memory. As God he could remove each wound, mask his terrible actions, make it like none of it had ever happened. She would look at him again like she did when they were dating, and he could enjoy the inherent trust that came with a relationship made new. But to do so would be the ultimate selfish act, one that only would guarantee more painful memories in the future. Instead he sat listening as she voiced her sorrows, seeing with her eyes, feeling with her heart, and guiding nothing but his own thoughts.

After she finished, he looked into her eyes and made a promise he finally knew he could keep: “I’ll never drink again.”

They held each other close, and when he sensed the perfect moment, he leaned in for a kiss. She turned away, but took his hand and held it to her cheek.

“Come visit next weekend,” she said, blushing, “and we’ll see how things are.”

As he walked down the driveway, toward the vanishing horizon, Greg smiled at his

shoes. "I can do this."

"Sure you can," Klonk said, suddenly at Greg's side. "What did I tell you?"

"Thanks." Greg slapped Klonk's shoulder. "You know, I don't think I'll collect my money after all."

"That's good, because you haven't earned it yet."

"What do you mean?"

Klonk crossed his hands behind his back, grinning as only he could. "I'm afraid you misunderstood my offer. Your assignment begins tomorrow. Today was all mine."

\* \* \*

Tuesday morning meant business as usual at the law offices of Feldman, Hirsch and Soren. Receptionists and assistants crowded the coffee stations, trading the latest rumors while waiting for a fresh cup. Paralegals checked messages and social media accounts from the relative privacy of their own desks. Feldman and Hirsch were busy planning lunch while lounging in their own overstuffed chairs. And at the end of the hall, behind his closed office door, Soren paced around his desk, contemplating its top drawer and the flask hidden inside. God, it was only nine. He'd never needed it this early before.

He wondered, would this be the day it all fell apart? Would his mouthwash fail him during a meeting with Hirsch, or would Feldman barge into his office unannounced, catching him mid-swig? Already his wife had grown tired of pretending, as proven by the note she'd left him this morning. As he completed another lap around his desk, Soren knew Judgment Day at the office was looming. He was slipping—no use in denying it anymore. There was only one thing he could think to do about it.

He'd just settled into his chair and was reaching for the drawer when a hand tapped his shoulder. A familiar voice sounded from just behind his chair. "Excuse me, old friend, could I have a moment of your time?"