

St. Peter Investigates

By Nicholas Avery

At his death he had been an active, if creaking, sixty-something Galilean, born at the very turn of the First Century. The years since had been as kind to St Peter as to anyone in middle management. Two millennia had not him withered nor condemned, just added a brown paper patina and a layer of dust. It was this dust, released now in motes from hair and beard, that caught the warm bright beams seeping from the edges of the heavy crimson curtain before which St Peter stood, at a counter made of hopes and dreams. A thousand points of light, rising into the boundless, midnight blue above, adding to the general air of his mystery.

“I really shouldn’t be here,” St Peter muttered to himself, running a long fingernail down the edge of his clipboard. “Too much to do elsewhere, right now.”

“But, needs must,” he continued more brightly, to no one in particular. Then, to Jane Doe and the young man beside her, “Show me your cards, please.”

They did as they were asked, painfully. Jane Doe’s left arm was shattered in five places where she had raised it to try and cushion her fall. Her head was the shape of a pear and the colour of a pomegranate; clear evidence that she had failed. John Doe’s arms worked fine but his back had jack-knifed on impact. He, too, favoured a head like a piece of ripe fruit. One of his eyes had popped from its socket and lay limply on his cheek.

“Well, that’s very irregular,” muttered St Peter into his beard. He pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead, releasing yet more motes that rose, beguiling, off and away into the

beyond. Squinting, first once more at the cards and then at the faces in front of him, he said softly, “No, no. That won’t do at all.”

St Peter put the cards on the counter and, casting over his shoulder something that sounded like “won’t be long”, slipped behind the curtain and was gone, leaving behind a suggestion of glitter.

“Jeeee Zus,” exhaled John Doe. “I can’t believe there is admin when you die. Surely, you are just dead. Finito. Kaput. That’s it.”

“You can shut up,” snapped Jane Doe. “It’s your bloody fault we are here at all. What on earth were you thinking?”

John Doe cocked one eye, ruefully, “I was just taking a piss. It was you that got carried away. Coming over all hot and heavy, not willing to listen to reason.”

Jane Doe glared. If looks could kill, John Doe would be dead where he slouched. But he was already dead, so it was rather wasted.

“Like I said, you can shut up. You can go to Hell,” she spat.

“OK, whatever. Keep your hair on. Don’t give yourself a heart attack.” John Doe raised his hands in mock surrender and shuffled towards a plastic chair of the type seen in waiting areas the universe over. He sighed deeply as he sat down, resigned.

Jane Doe turned back towards the counter and found that St Peter had returned, unheard, flecks of light dancing.

“As I said, most irregular. Haven’t had one of these for a while. The old Romeo and Juliette Conundrum,” St Peter said, waiving a sheaf of papers. “It’s going to be a manual one, I think. The system is not going to like this. Not one bit.”

St Peter gestured to Jane Doe to take a seat and, once she too had lowered herself stiffly down beside her companion, he addressed them both.

“I’m going to need a few details,” St Peter opened. “Have you got any forms of identification on you?” Then, looking directly at John Doe, he said, “Since you have your pants round your ankles, I think it would be better if you took this,” and he passed John Doe a clipboard.

“What kind of ID do we need here,” Jane Doe asked, scratchily. “Surely once you are dead, ID is pretty pointless?”

“Not at all, young lady” said St Peter as patiently as he could. “We need to ascertain who you are and why and how you came to have bought the same ticket. I can’t process your applications further without some basic KYC. Surely, you must realise that?” he went on, trying to hide his disquiet at their lack of understanding of basic protocol. “It’s nothing too tricky. A driving licence will do and a utility bill from the last three months showing your home address. Failing that, I can probably work with your date of birth and your mother’s maiden name. But it will just take longer.”

“I am not sure photo ID is going to make you any the wiser,” Jane Doe replied, flicking her head in the direction of John Doe. “Have you seen our faces?”

“Well yes, quite so,” conceded St Peter. “Perhaps then you would be so kind as to just fill in the forms as best you can, and I will see what can be done.”

“The problem is this,” St Peter explained a little while later, once they had completed the paperwork in triplicate and done it all again because they had not used black ink and then once more because they had failed to adhere to the requirement to use upper case only. “You arrived here at exactly the same moment with exactly the same time stamp and it is not

possible, therefore, to determine which one of you died first and, accordingly, must be processed first. Do you see?"

Jane Doe and John Doe looked up at St Peter skeptically and, as one, asked, "Does it matter?"

"Well, of course it matters," St Peter retorted incredulously, his patience already wearing thin. "We have very strict rules for this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?" John Doe and Jane Doe chimed back, together.

"Homicide!" exclaimed St Peter. "Murder, suicide, manslaughter, suspicious deaths of all varieties and flavours," he went on. "Just look at yourselves. You have both clearly fallen from a great height on to something hard and unyielding and one of you has his pants round his ankles. It's not difficult to see that something has gone on. Is one of you responsible for the other one's death, was there provocation or an element of self-defence, perhaps, or is it all entirely innocent? Who can say at this juncture? The only way to know is to follow procedure and procedure says we take the oral accounts in the order of death. If, for the sake of argument, Cain kills Abel, then Abel gets to tell us all about it and we can have the details on file for when Cain turns up. But if Cain and Abel arrive at the same time, who are we to believe?"

"First off," said Jane Doe, jumping up as best she could, eager to seize the initiative. "First, you must believe the woman. You can't trust the patriarchy. You boys will always stick together. Let *me* tell you what happened and then *you* will know. Easy."

Jane Doe drew breath, then continued, "But I can't see why it matters - we are both dead now anyway."

"It matters, dear lady," St Peter smiled in what he sincerely believed was a winning way but actually betrayed the fact that he had not recently refreshed his HR training on subconscious sexism in the workplace. "It matters, because although, when all is said, we are

all just atoms bound by electricity, killers cannot go to Heaven, they must go to Hell. Obviously, the odd one slips through – if, for example, they are unknown to their victim - but it's usually sorted out eventually. We have a few old cases on the books but I am hopeful that we will clear them all up in due course. We are quite near to closing the Jack The Ripper file, I believe, and between you and me Lord Lucan is very much on borrowed time. So, we need to know. That's all. I can't be seen to add to the burden of the cold cases team, at this time. The technological advances being made down there are all well and good but they are playing havoc with our resource management. It's not as if we haven't got enough to do already. There has been a massive surge in the last year in genocide and war crimes that, frankly, we all could have done without right now.”

Jane Doe resumed her seat; she knew when she was beaten by the remorseless logic and intricate workings of a bureaucracy she would never understand or value. She might as well be down the council trying to get permission to put her own lightbulb in the communal stairwell.

John Doe sighed, ran his fingers through what was left of the hair that was on what was left of his head, exhaled once more and with feeling. “Jeeee Zus.”

“Good,” said St Peter. “I am glad that's settled. Perhaps we could get on?” He looked at them both inquisitively, but not so as to encourage a response. “I am going to ask a few questions designed to build-up a background picture. Not about the moment of death, just the events leading up, if that's OK?” Again, his tone made clear that no answer was required, just yet.

“I have a question,” John Doe ventured.

St Peter raised an eyebrow, “Is it a quick one? We really must get on.”

“Well yes, actually, it is. It could speed things up,” John Doe offered, more in hope than expectation.

St Peter did not reply but the slight incline of his head indicated that John Doe had permission to proceed.

“Why don’t you just ask God what happened? Isn’t He all seeing? Isn’t He everywhere, all of the time?”

St Peter exhaled slowly, rubbed an ear lobe and ran his hand up the back of his head. It was hard for him to mask his irritation at this unwanted drift in proceedings. Another thousand points of light rose from his scalp, shimmering in the stillness.

“God is not Everywhere All Of The Time” St Peter said patiently, as if to a child. “But He can be Within, all of the time. He can’t see much from Within, except the workings of your soul. In one sense, He is All Seeing but He is not Always Looking. He is really quite busy.” St Peter paused, deploying his eyebrows. “Now can we get on? I will take your further silence as an affirmative.”

John Doe and Jane Doe looked at each other. “Jeeee Zus” they said in unified defeat.

“Now, young lady,” St Peter began, returning to his Avuncular Uncle persona. “You appear to be Christina Stone and you, young man, are Cliff Stone. You are a very unusual pair. We have had to run you through the paper records as our computer system is down at present. We await an upgrade. Mr Jobs gave us a great deal on a new platform when he passed through here a few years back but it’s not synching anymore for reasons that escape me now and we are rather stuck with it. But, enough of my problems. According to our records, and please correct me if I am wrong, not only did you each pass on the same day, but you were born on the same day.”

It was a statement, not a question. Nonetheless, St Peter waited to allow the Stone twins to nod dumbly in agreement, which they did.

“So, now we need to determine who is Romulus and who is Remus,” St Peter smiled to himself, amused by his own simile. Or was it a metaphor? Or an analogy? He would have to look it up later.

“It seems that the hill you chose to die on,” St Peter continued, dragging the metaphorical simile analogy thing out further than was strictly necessary but continuing to be pleased with it nonetheless, “was a multi-storey car park in Dagenham. Am I correct? And if so, might I ask what were you doing there?”

Christina and Cliff exchanged glances.

“I was taking a piss,” shrugged Cliff.

“From the top of the car park?” enquired St Peter, with just more than a hint of incredulity.

“Yeah. From the top. It’s what I do.” Cliff responded, matter of factly. Then, when he could see that St Peter was looking for a little more colour, he said, “I go there to look out on my patch. My manor, if you like. If I have had a rough week, or something has happened. If I need to show my authority. I go to the top of the South Street Car Park and take a piss over the balustrade.”

“And people know you do this?” St Peter looked suitably aghast.

“Yeah,” chipped in Christina. “Everybody knows. Its where King Cliff goes to mark his territory, by pissing on his subjects. It’s not nice. But it seems to work.”

“How very Bob Maxwell,” St Peter muttered into his beard. “And then, just like Bob Maxwell, you fell to your death mid, um, how shall we say it? mid ... ”

“Mid piss,” interrupted Cliff. “I was mid piss and this one, Chrissie here, comes out of nowhere, grabs me hard and we both go over the edge. BLAM!”

St Peter inclined his head, inviting Christina to comment, and sending up yet more motes into the darkness above.

“I bloody tripped!” she exclaimed, outraged by the accusation. “He’d left his stupid manbag, with all the week’s takings, on the floor and I fell over it, stumbled, grabbed out at what I could and, well, there we go. It was not my fault. It was an accident. I was only going to scare him a bit. Teach him a lesson. Like I said earlier, it was all his doing really.”

“I see” said St Peter, not entirely convinced, “and can anyone corroborate this account or otherwise add some useful background?”

“Apart from God?” asked Cliff, sarcastically.

“Yes. Apart from God. Who was busy elsewhere and, for some unaccountable reason, not watching a man urinate off a carpark.”

“I can,” said James Doe. “I was there.”

They all looked round at the newcomer.

“Alright, Squealer?” said Cliff, affably.

“Yeah. Great, thanks. Apart from the fact that I am dead, obviously,” replied Squealer James Doe.

“Now that this little happy reunion is over,” St Peter began again, trying to get back on course. “Perhaps we can return to the matter in hand? Shall I tell you where I am at and then, if it helps, maybe we can hear from Mr Squealer?”

The Stone Twins resumed their seats, keen for the update. Micky “Squealer” McGraw lowered himself in gingerly beside them. They could see now that he was more than usually dazed. Blood was leaking from his left ear.

St Peter took his cue. “So far, I have nothing proven on Cliff Stone beyond a confession to repeated acts of public indecency and an inkling that he has not generally lived a life of

simple pleasures and pastimes. With Christina, we are looking at possible gross negligence manslaughter, but some of the evidence points to contributory factors for which the victim, that is to say Cliff, should take some responsibility.”

“Well, that sounds grand” Cliff said “You can let us in then.”

“Not quite, I am afraid,” St Peter held up his hand to slow the horses. “I have a residual concern that there may be an element of suicide in this. I am not sure I buy Cliff’s “I was only having a wee” explanation and, as twins, you came into the world together and may well have decided to depart the same way. It can happen.”

“Suicide is no longer a crime,” asserted Christina. “You can’t do us for that, even if it was true.”

“I am afraid that views here remain a little Old Testament,” St Peter informed them with a shrug. “Suicide is frowned upon still. I don’t make the rules.”

“No chance I topped myself” Cliff said, confidently. “There is no way a man like me is going to die with his pants down.”

“It’s a fair point,” conceded St Peter. “And, yet, here we are.” He gestured and sent a plume of motes in the direction of Cliff’s crotch. “Perhaps now we could see what Mr Squealer has to contribute?”

Micky “Squealer” McGraw got to his feet. “I ain’t done nothing,” he said. “It was these two. They killed me.”

“Go on,” said St Peter. “We are all ears.”

“I was just sitting in my car. Minding my own business. Got the girl in the boot, like I was asked. Listening to Capital Gold. Then there is a sprinkling of rain on the windscreen and, WHALLOP, the roof caves in on me. Knocked me out cold. When I come round, I can see the medics taking Chrissie and Cliff away so I put two and two together. Makes sense,

don't it? I passed out again just as I heard someone say "subdural hematoma", and then here I am."

"Well, that's interesting," said St Peter, checking his notes. "Could we just back up a bit to where you said that you "got the girl in the boot". What did you mean by that?"

Squealer glanced at Cliff and dropped his eyes to the floor. "Khloe. That's who I mean. Cliff asked me to cuff and bag her for a bit. Give her a scare, like."

"I knew it, Cliff!" exploded Christina. "I knew you had something to do with Khloe going missing. That's why I came looking for you. She's our sister, Cliff, and she's only sixteen."

Cliff shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "The girl's a menace" he said "Bad for business. She needed a little jolt to get her back in line."

Christina took her brother by the lapels with her one good arm "And, so, what? What did you do? Did you get Micky OneCell here to truss her up and drive around town for a bit? And then what? What was the plan, Cliff? What were you going to do next, do please tell?"

"Yes, do," said St Peter, licking the tip of his pencil. "What was the plan?"

Cliff blew out his cheeks, throwing up his hands in frustration. "I was going to have Squealer bring her up. After I had had my piss. We were going to have a little talk and then Khloe was going to stop messing with the Shark Crew and we could all get back to normal. That's all. Nothing heavy."

"Nothing heavy?" repeated Christina, incredulously. "Nothing heavy! So what did you do Squealer? The old sack and gag number, was it? Bound her head and foot?"

"Well yes, obviously," Squealer conceded. "Its traditional. It has meaning."

"Brilliant. Bloody brilliant," Christina exasperated. "And did Einstein here tell you that, A, Khloe has panic attacks and, B, Khloe has asthma? And, thirdly, you are a twonk, Squealer. Where is she now?"

“Yes,” said St Peter, “Where *is* she now?”

Squealer arranged his face in what he thought might pass for innocence. “I don’t know. She’d only been in the boot for five minutes. I was about to bring her up when Chrissie arrived, and it all kicked off. Then it went black.”

“Oh, great. So her possible death is on me, is it?” screamed Christina. “How do we know that she didn’t asphyxiate in the boot whilst the medics were looking at the bump on your useless fat head? Fantastic.”

St Peter could feel matters running away from him again. “We don’t know that this “Khloe” is dead,” he reasoned. “She could be perfectly fine. Just making plans for a couple of funerals.” He paused, then said, working through the scenarios and relevant case law in his mind, “Although, if we do have irrefutable evidence that she did come to harm then I am afraid we are going to have to review your rap sheet again, Mr Stone. At the very least, you and Squealer here are looking down the barrel of some kind of conspiracy leading to an unlawful act manslaughter. That’s homicide and, as I have said” He let his words hang in the still air for a moment. “I will be required to leave a note on your file, at the very least.”

“No need” said a red-faced Jenny Doe, stepping up to the counter, card in hand. “I’m here now.”

“Jeeee Zus,” said Cliff.

“Bugger,” said Squealer.

“Deary me,” St Peter, sighed, pulling out a mobile phone into which he punched 6, three times. “Two more for The Downstairs, if you’d be so kind Lucy,” he said, with an air of finality. “Soon as you like.” And, taking his “Case Closed” stamp, St Peter marked all their cards with a flourish, despatching yet more sunbeams on their way.

THE END