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Lazarus! Come! Forth!

Tristen Nichols

I had never been to a gameshow before, but the room clamored with excitement. Folk in the rows were acting out private dramas in their own little pockets; children giddy with excitement, couples arguing, even a few in what seemed like a panic attack. I didn't know what the big deal was, but I didn't really know which show I was on, either. One minute I was cruising on the I-90, the next I'm here. I was going to consult my plus-one beside me when I suddenly realized I was surrounded by complete strangers, entirely alone. I just assumed I wouldn't come to a place like this by myself. I began working up the courage to talk to one of the strangers when the space started to darken. The crowd dwindled to a muted hush.

“Places, everyone! Quiet on set!” a disembodied voice announced. A stillness washed over the audience. For a moment, there was only profound silence, broken first by an old man's phlegm-loaded hack, then by the swelling chorus of a brass section. The instruments came from everywhere and nowhere, an indistinct surround-sound that reverberated in my skull. The brass section continued while an electric keyboard began to solo, signaling an equally-mysterious narrator to begin introductions:

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our program: the world's absolute *favorite* circumstantial gameshow. This is...” his voice slowed in anticipation. The adjacent strangers jumped out of their seats.

“LAZARUS! COME! FORTH!” they chanted in perfect unison, clapping and whooping all the while. I had a feeling some of these audience members had been faithful repeats for God knows how many seasons.

“And now, your benevolent host: the Triple Threat, the New Kid, and our favorite little lamb: Julian Cardamom!” The audience's crescendo rumbled the room, the rapidly-flashing

“CLAP!” signage adding to the chaos of it all. A slender, inviting man walked out from behind the stage’s billowing curtains, donning a spotless Seersucker suit and well-kempt facial hair. He clapped slowly and pretended to point to a few audience members while the commotion died down.

“Thank you, you’re all too kind! And thank *you* for the lovely introduction, Johnny. Well, thanks so much for being here today with us, folks, as if you really had a say in the matter!”

The audience belted out a violent chuckle as signage now blinked “LAUGH!” I sat dumbfounded, unable to remember which exit I took to get here.

“Now, if you’re new to the show, or just want a quick refresher, the game works like this: The Producer, in spite of His infinite wisdom, ends up with some loose ends, a few remainders that He isn’t quite sure what to do with. I’m talking about you beautiful people!” Julian shouts, flapping his arms as to elicit applause. “The winner will get to spin the fabulous Wheel of Reincarnation! Now, I’m gonna randomly pick three players from the audience and we can get started!”

Julian shuffled through his cue cards while murmurs flooded the room. I felt my pockets frantically for my keys, my phone, my wallet... anything? Just a little lint. Why did Julian call us loose ends? A deep-seated unease took hold of me while Julian began to read out the names.

The first name sounded ancient, fraught with fricatives and consonants. A man who looked similarly ancient, clad in simplistic robes and scarves, each crudely patched together, jumped up. The man, several rows away from me, fell to his knees in tears before scurrying to meet Julian and man his respective podium. He got on his knees once again to kiss Julian’s feet, clearly embarrassing him. The second name was old, but contemporary. Something one of my grandparents would recognize, an “Ethel” or a “Miriam.” I expected flab and wrinkles, a geriatric creature. Instead, a spritely young girl skipped through the audience, hair curled and buoyant. She gave Julian a firm handshake and attended her podium, met by an assistant equipped with a stepstool.

Lastly, Julian peered at his third cue card. “And finally, all the way from Cleveland, Ohio, come on down Mr. Phillip Stein!” It was the first time I’d heard my name all day, and it

terrified me. I sat frozen in my seat, unwilling to move. After some time, I felt my body involuntarily rise.

I was under the impression that I was being crowdsurfed before I saw the audience's lack of participation. I was inexplicably placed in front of Julian, shook his hand, and I attended my podium. I looked over to the old little girl.

"You're going down," she said with a smirk. So be it.

"Now, this isn't so much a physical competition as it is mental and spiritual." Julian explained. "It depends entirely on the life you've led and lived thus far. For your first challenge, here's what we need you to do: tell us about a time when you worshipped."

That was it? It seemed so simple! Just one occasion? Thank God I didn't need more than that. Most of my worship felt obligatory, like I only prayed when I needed it. Luckily, leave it to good old Grammy to instill a few cherished church memories in me. I would need to really sell it if I was going to make it to round two.

The ancient man spoke first. His language was unfamiliar to me, but a decoded dub played in my ears, relaying his story. He regaled us with tales of ornate worship, filled with sacrifice and ziggurats and purpose. The people cried and danced for God. They had holidays and feasts and children all in His name. They lived by Him, for Him, and with Him.

The audience doused him with applause before Julian asked me to answer. I told him about days when Grammy would sit me on her lap and we would listen to the word of God for hours on end. She'd take me to Sunday school and pick out her favorite scriptures for me to read. I told them that she showed me the most important part about God: His infinite, unconditional love. They totally bought it.

Finally, it was the old little girl's turn. She frowned and let out an exasperated sigh until she finally said, "I'm only six years old. I've never gone to church before."

Suddenly, the grating sound of a buzzer filled the room as the ground opened up beneath the girl. The crowd let out an exasperated "AWW!" She grasped and lurched for the podium, only to slip and fall into the infinite, fiery abyss.

“Ooooh, tough break.” Julian quipped. “Automatic disqualification. Thanks for playing! Onto round two!” Applause roared from the audience while the ancient man and I shot knowing looks at each other. There was only going to be one winner. “For your second challenge, we have a simple question for you: How many deadly sins have you committed? Tally ‘em up and see how it goes!”

I went through a mental checklist in my head. Wrath? Yup. Pride? Double yup. No doubt about sloth, but I’ve never been much of an envious guy, at least by my standards...

“Excuse me, Mr. Julian?” I spoke. “Are we *really* counting Gluttony?”

“Think of it as the free space in bingo!” Julian responded with a wink. He walked closer to me and whispered behind his cue card: “Don’t forget the grand panty larceny of ‘02!”

Shit. Greed and Lust. That’s six. I had six out of seven deadly sins.

“All right, let’s count up those sins and see who gets to spin the Wheel of Reincarnation! That’s a whopping six sins for Phillip and...” an incorporeal drumroll stirred tension. “Wow! All seven for our primordial guest! That’s quite impressive. So long, and thanks for playing!”

The ancient man gave me a pained smile, accepting his fate, before being engulfed by the all-consuming void beneath us. The crowd’s applause drowned out his cries of agony. Julian took me by the arm and motioned me to the colossal wheel, each colored sliver adorned with a living creature. Animals, plants, a human, and a few things I didn’t recognize.

“Go ahead and give the wheel a big spin for us, Phillip!” Julian encouraged me.

With all the strength I could muster, and one final prayer in my mind, I spun the wheel with voracity. The audience clapped and cheered while it spun, its rhythmic clacking a swan song to my last life. It was time for something new, something better. The wheel slowed to a halt. The audience gasped and Julian let out a light chuckle, patting me on the shoulder.

“Uh oh... tough break, pal. It ain’t easy being a mollusk, but its honest work! Now you can be as spineless as you please. Let’s just hope you’re one of the smarter ones! Thanks for playing *Lazarus! Come! Forth!* I’ll see you all next time, buh bye!”

The band played their theme and the sign flashed “**CLAP!**” as I braced for the inevitable.