

HEAVEN'S DOOR

By Jackie L. Young

BACK STORY

This is one of my first screenplays. I wrote it initially for television's Twilight Zone and therefore it was written in teleplay format. This story addresses two of the biggest questions that I'll ever address; Is there a God? and What would happen if we could REALLY communicate with the other side? Here's my spin for the Twilight Zone . . .

CHAPTER I **Talking to the Dead**

It is a dreary November afternoon on the Duke University campus and it seems like any normal day with students moving at their normal pace from building to building, carrying their books, talking, and laughing. Except that Howard Crabbe, a young slender man on top of the science building, struggles with a strangely modified satellite dish while a white-haired older man, Doctor Benjamin Jacobs, hangs out of the third story window giving Howard azimuth directions.

The campus is quieter than nine months earlier when Dr. Jacobs and Howard had received a lot of attention from the local paper because of their unorthodox methods of collecting data on the afterlife experience. They had been called everything from “ghost chasers” to “deathwatch squad.” This was attributed to the fact that they uncannily showed up at the hospital at a patient’s moment of death with strange looking equipment to record events that nobody else could see. In some articles, quotes from Dr. Jacobs included odd terms such as “Pathway”, “Gateway to Heaven” and “Earthbound Exit Point.”

Local citizens became very concerned that a couple of nuts were on the loose visiting terminally ill patients in their town. Just as suddenly as Dr. Jacobs and his protégé’s appearance at deathbeds with their strange equipment had started, their visits had stopped.

On that day in November everything we knew about the hereafter changed for everyone on the planet, maybe for all time. Of course there will be stories and hearsay about what transpired in Dr. Jacobs’ lab that afternoon, but one thing that isn’t disputed is that these two successfully found a way to talk to the other side. They didn’t use

a crystal ball and a medium; they had found an actual channel of communication, measurably electronic and scientific and proven. In their experiment, a plumber from Canton, Ohio, dead since 1940, recites his name, street address, and other information that precisely collaborates with public records. As things normally go in academia, corporations are always standing in the wings waiting to cash in on the breakthroughs, patents, or inventions that succeed. Isn't that the American way? On that day, it was Comtech Industries, a leader in the communications field.

At Comtech Industries headquarters, a marketing meeting is underway. John McMartin, CEO, a well-dressed man in his forties, sits at the head of the executive conference room table intently reading from a folder. Ben Styles, sales manager, seated to his right, wearing a bad suit, fidgets with his thick glasses. Other constrained executives sit around the table curiously waiting for John to finish. He closes the folder and addresses the other executives. "Gentlemen, we are on the verge of providing the ultimate service to the American people, communications with the other side." He stands, paces around the room, and stops behind Steve Dallas, the head of marketing.

John puts his hands on Steve's shoulders. "The initial marketing report only targeted major cities with a five hundred thousand population. Bring those numbers down, lets say—greater than fifty thousand. Farm communities surround many of those small cities. I'm sure they'll come to the city to talk to a loved one who has passed away. Don't you agree?" Everyone in the room nods their agreement. "And Ben, make sure when we secure the rights from Duke that we don't leave any loopholes for paying out any secondary rights stuff. Get with legal on that." Ben takes notes and nods his agreement. "Larry, make sure engineering is on schedule with the first prototypes and we have an August delivery date for installing the first three hundred units. I want this thing to be rolling for promos this fall. Any questions?" The conference room is silent. "Good, lets make some money."

That fall, across town from Comtech, a quiet night reigns in the Chicago suburbs. At the Wilson house, the windows of the living room are lit with the familiar blue hue of the television as its sound echoes through the open windows. The deep voice of an announcer tries to reach his target audience. "Things you never got to say. Things you

wish you didn't say. If only you had a second chance to speak to that loved one."

In the living room of the humble, middle-income home, the Wilson family is engrossed by the commercial. Ed, mid-forties with thinning hair, skeptically squints. Ed's wife Jan, matronly and in her late thirties looks befuddled. Seventeen-year-old Melanie bites her lip thoughtfully as her aged grandmother, Betty, clenches her hands. The announcer steps inside an office thriving with activity. "Your second chance is here. Afterlife Com Centers now provides you with that chance. Stop by the nearest ACC and speak to that loved one you miss so much. It's easy and fun, and the right thing to do." The announcer stops by a sign on the wall with silver letters that read, *Afterlife Comm Center*. Behind him, several smiling customers seated in overstuffed chairs, talk to full-body holograms of their deceased loved ones, whose translucent bodies are projected on circular platforms. The announcer motions toward them. "At ACC, you'll find a comfortable atmosphere for you and your family to visit the loved ones you miss so much."

The ACC logo and contact information fill the screen, *Open 24 hours a day. Call or stop in at your nearest ACC location*. At the bottom, a telephone number and address are displayed. The commercial fades to black as the Wilson family, stunned by what they've just seen, look at each other in amazement and minor discomfort.

Later that night at the dinner table, as Mr. Wilson and his family eat, extra plates sit in front of grandfather and grandmother's empty chairs, reminding them that grandfather is no longer among the living and grandmother hasn't gotten over it.

Melanie stabs at her food. "Mom, you set his place again."

Her mother quickly slides the offending plate under hers.

"Sorry."

Melanie slumps, mindlessly picking at her food.

Her father tries to comfort her. "Melanie, you have to eat. Your grandmother will eat when she gets hungry."

Jan reaches over and puts her hand on her daughter's hand. "Honey, your father's right. We all miss your grandfather, but we have to go on. She's a strong woman. She'll come around."

Melanie drops her fork in frustration. "It's been two months. There must be something—"

Just then, the television in the living room telecasts another Afterlife Com Center commercial. Melanie looks toward the commercial then back to her parents.

Her mother instantly recognizes her pleading look. “No.”

“Everyone else is doing it. Beverly at school talked to her dad. She said it was fun and helped her to—”

Her father joins the argument. “Your mother said no. We’ve already talked about this and you know how we feel.”

“But—”

“No buts!”

Melanie wipes her mouth and throws her napkin on the table. “Great—just great.” She abruptly stands and stomps from the dining room.

Walking down the hallway toward her room, she stops at her grandmother’s room and quietly opens the door. She sees her grandmother in her rocker, silently rocking and staring at the wall. Melanie drops her head and closes the door.

Back in her bedroom, a frustrated Melanie falls onto the bed. She reaches to the nightstand and opens the drawer. Lifting out a small tin box, she unlocks it and removes a newspaper clipping about the Afterlife Com Center. Her jaw tightens with determination as she flips the tin box upside down on the bed. Dollar bills and coins fall out onto her flowered comforter. Almost feverish, she counts the money, then shoves the money and newspaper clipping into her purse.

Purse in hand, she emerges from the bedroom and cautiously approaches the living room. She steps forward to peek around the corner. Her father reads the newspaper. Squaring her shoulders, Melanie steps around the corner.

“Okay if I take Grandma for a ride? Maybe some fresh air would make her feel better.”

“That’s a good idea, dear.” Her father then lowers the paper. “No mailboxes this time, please, dear.” He lifts the paper to its previous position.

Melanie enters the kitchen and takes the car keys from a hook on a small pegboard.

Passing the living room, she snaps, “You don’t have to bring that up every time, Dad.”

A moment later, she taps lightly on her grandmother's door. Not waiting for a response, Melanie enters. She bends down on one knee beside the rocker, and brushes back her grandmother's hair. "Would you like to take a ride, Grandma?" Her silent grandmother continues to stare straight ahead, trapped in memories of her departed husband.

Realizing that she's not breaking through the cloud of depression, Melanie ups the ante. "To see Grandpa?"

Her grandmother slowly turns to face her. "To see Tony?" the old woman asks in a wispy voice.

Melanie nods and helps her up from her rocker.

The watery old eyes lock on Melanie as she mouths the words, "Tony."

Melanie puts her fingers to grandmother's lips to hush her. "Shhhhhhh. We can't let mom and dad know, Okay?" She nods and continues nodding as she is lead from the room.

Outside the Afterlife Comm Center building, Melanie maneuvers her small car into a space in the parking lot. Excited, she gets out and runs around to help her grandmother from the car.

As the two enter the Afterlife Comm Center, they observe customers waiting in chairs in the lobby.

The young bleach-blond receptionist at the customer counter watches them as they approach. When they stop before her, the receptionist slides a clipboard forward. "You'll need to print the name of the departed. Include middle initial, date of departure, and city of departure. That will be twenty-five dollars a minute, five-minute minimum, in advance. Will that be cash or charge?"

Nervously fumbling with her purse, Melanie pulls out her cash. She counts it and then lays the money down on the counter. Embarrassed, she stutters, "I only have thirty dollars."

The receptionist picks it up, then breaks into a friendly smile. "I'll give you a minute and a half, sweetie."

Melanie smiles in relief. While Betty continues to look at the other customers, her granddaughter fills out the sheet on the clipboard.

The receptionist takes back the clipboard to examine the entry. "Okay, Ms. Wilson, have a seat and we'll call you when a booth is open."

While guiding her grandmother to a seat, Melanie too studies the other patrons waiting to talk to the other side. Two punk rockers decked out in their rock attire sit across from them. Melanie figures that they are probably trying to contact Jimmy Hendrix or Jim Morrison of *The Doors*. Next to them sits a criminal type, his face unshaven, his expression hard. She wonders if he is trying to work some angle from the other side. Next to him, is an older man and woman in their seventies. The woman clutches the picture of a young girl, probably her daughter and her whole life. Melanie glances up at the clock. It shows 7:35 PM. She leans back and works at relaxing.

Later, Melanie opens her eyes from a quick nap. The clock shows 8:45 PM. She looks around. The others who had been waiting are gone but replaced by new customers: a slouchy detective type in a cheap suit, an Elvis impersonator, and a book-wormish little man, his arms wrapped tightly around a briefcase.

Melanie spots a priest in his thirties entering. Father Frost nervously steps to the counter, lays down his credit card, and fills out the log. He takes a seat near Melanie, looks at her and forces a smile. She tentatively returns the smile.

The priest watches the receptionist check his entry. She blinks, obviously stunned by what she reads. Their eyes meet when she glances up. He looks down, ashamed of his request. She hurries away with the log.

At a door marked *Manager's Office*, she knocks once, then again more impatiently. Inside, the manager, a balding executive type in his thirties, works on his computer calculating the earnings of the day. He answers the distraction without stopping his work or missing a key. "Enter." The receptionist marches purposefully to his desk. She waits for him to finish.

"Yeah, what is it?"

She presents the clipboard to him. He examines it. "So, what's the problem?" He scans the clipboard, sees the entry, shakes his head, and then hands it back. He turns back to his computer screen.

She waits for an answer then impatiently asks, "What do I do, Lou?"

"Tell him that requests must have two names and a middle initial. Company policy. It's that simple."

“I know we ask for that, but is it our official policy?”

He finally stops, irritated. “I just made it our official policy.”

The receptionist retreats to the outer office.

Lou mumbles to himself as he returns to his work, “Some people.”

In the outer office, the receptionist approaches Father Frost. She lays the clipboard on his lap, resolute. “I’m sorry sir, but official policy says that the departed must have two names.”

Father Frost looks aghast, then angry.

As she walks away, he bounds from his chair, clipboard in hand, to follow. “Now wait, I’ve never heard of that policy.”

The receptionist returns to the counter and tries to ignore him. “I’m sorry sir.”

He leans over the counter, irritated. “This is a legitimate request. I insist, no, I demand that you do your job and connect me!”

“Really sir, I don’t make those decisions. Maybe there’s someone else you’d like to contact.”

Father Frost’s anger changes to desperation. “No there isn’t. You don’t understand. I must contact him. I need to.”

The frustrated receptionist has had enough. She takes the clipboard back, draws a line through the name, and slams the clipboard down on the counter.

“The FCC will hear about this. You’ll see,” the Father shouts as he storms out of the center.

The sneering Elvis impersonator looks from the departing priest toward Melanie. He draws little circles by his head suggesting that the priest is slightly off. “Crazy Man,” he says in his best Elvis voice.

Melanie giggles. Then he glances at her preoccupied grandmother who missed it all. When the receptionist steps away from the counter, the Elvis impersonator nonchalantly sneaks to the counter. Casually, he reads the priest’s form. His eyes widen. Solemnly, he returns to his seat. He looks out the wall of windows to see Father Frost mumbling to himself as he walks down the sidewalk.

The receptionist finally returns from the back with an older couple. Their faces glow with joy as they continually thank the receptionist for the experience. She picks up the next clipboard. “Ms. Wilson?” she calls out.

Excited, Melanie helps her grandmother to her feet. As they pass the counter and the receptionist, she tries for a glimpse of the clipboard that had stunned the Elvis impersonator. She fakes a sneeze, throws her purse onto the counter next to the item of interest and pretends to look for a Kleenex. All the while she scans the priest's form. "*GOD*" has a line drawn through it. Grabbing her purse, Melanie takes her grandmother's arm. She glances back at the Elvis impersonator. He intently watches then winks at her.

Melanie and her grandmother enter a booth. Comfortable chairs surround a centered chair that has a round plate above it attached to the ceiling. Controls on the arms of the chairs are marked *COM ON/OFF*. A digital clock displays the time in red. Numbers underneath the clock display a set timer. Melanie and her grandmother settle into the chairs.

The receptionist writes on their form, then smiles warmly. "Your grandfather is waiting on the other side. We've done a pre-contact check. Just press the button marked *COM* to start. The timer will signal you thirty seconds until end of contact. Enjoy." She leaves them alone.

Melanie bites her lip, then pushes the *Com* button. A hologram of her grandfather appears. Her grandmother's mouth drops open. A joyous smile then forms on her face.

The hologram speaks. "Hello, Melanie, and my beloved Betty."

"Grandpa?" Melanie wipes at her tears.

"Yes, it's me. How's your father and mother doing, my dear?"

Choking back more tears, Melanie continues, "Fine—fine. Are you okay there, Grandpa?"

"Oh, yes, my dear. It's very nice. We're not allowed to discuss too much—rules and things."

Startled and a bit shocked, Betty stares at her husband's hologram. She forces the words out, "Tony, is that you?"

"Yes, Betty, it's really me. How are you doing?"

Between sobs, she answers, "I miss you, Tony. I'm so alone."

"Now, now, Betty. I miss you, too. But you're not alone. You have the family there with you."

"But I want to be with you," Betty complains.

The hologram shimmers, the image alternating between what he looked like in his very young days to his older image.

“In time. Soon you’ll be with me, Betty. Just be patient, okay?” Betty nods as the thirty-second timer sounds.

“We have to go. I just wanted to tell you that I love you and we miss you, Grandpa,” Melanie adds as his image alternates to his older grandpa image.

“I miss you, too. Please take care of everyone.”

Melanie stands as his image begins to fade. “Grandpa, I love you.”

His voice echoes as his image fades away. “And I love you.”

The *COM* light on the console extinguishes. An upset Betty stands. “Tony, don’t go.”

Melanie pulls her grandmother close to her.

CHAPTER II
The Problem with God

Back at Comtech Headquarters, chaos prevails. A glowering John McMartin, the CEO, sits at the head of the executive conference table with Ben and the other executives who noisily talk to one another about their latest problem. John raises his hand to silence them. He points to Ben.

Ben earnestly briefs his boss, “This priest is causing a lot of problems. We’ve got the FCC breathing down our necks and threatening to yank our license.”

John taps the coffee cup in his hand, as his mind races with options. “And all because he wants to connect with God. So we let him.”

Ben and the other executives sit straight, shocked by the comment. Ben clears his throat, gazing nervously at his peers, “I think that would be extremely dangerous, sir.”

John puts his coffee cup down and raises an eyebrow. “And why is that Ben? You don’t actually believe he can do it—talk with God? Come on.” He laughs, waiting for the others to join in. They don’t.

“Truthfully sir—yes I do.”

John’s eyes narrow. “Come on, Ben. We’re all adults here.”

Ben waits for the other executives in the room to help. They sit silent, so he forges on alone. “Sir, we started with a little over three hundred centers. Now, we have over three thousand worldwide. This year alone we can expect a gross of over eight hundred million dollars. Who do you think all of these people are talking to?”

John shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know. Who do you think they’re talking to, Ben?”

“Sir, we’ve opened a gateway to the other world. These people are not talking to ghosts. It’s the real thing. We have to be careful.”

John shakes his head and laughs again. “Christ Ben, relax. This is entertainment that’s all, nothing more and nothing less.”

Ben considers John’s remark then shakes his head. “I talked to my mother, not a ghost—it wasn’t an illusion—it was really my mother.”

“Okay, Okay. So what do you propose we do?”

“We do whatever we have to—to stop it. We can’t let this priest connect with God. I believe that would be very bad, disastrous.” He hesitates then forges ahead, “We take the loss, no matter what. We can’t let it happen.”

John examines the other executives to gauge their position. Each man nervously looks away, avoiding involvement in the debate.

“I don’t think so, Ben. Take a loss? You want me to tell the stockholders that we’re gonna give away our license and close up shop because you’re scared that some goofy priest might talk to God?”

Ben tries to hold ground. “Yes.”

John slams the table with his fist. “No way in hell! Settle this quietly with this priest. Pay him off. Let him talk to God! Whatever! Just get it settled.”

“He can’t be bought, sir. That was the first thing you suggested. Remember? He wants to make this contact and he won’t negotiate.”

John closes his eyes, the subject wearing thin. “Then let him do it. Let’s put this behind us and move on.” He stands. The other executives hurry to vacate the room. Still bothered by John’s directive, Ben weaves his way through the departing executives to his boss. Irritated but resigned, Ben lingers to debate it further with his boss. John immediately gets in Ben’s face. “The meeting’s over.”

Ben starts to leave then turns back for one final attempt. “I know, sir, but I think we really need to reconsider.”

John puts his hand on Ben’s shoulder interrupting him. “You used to be a team player, Ben. You’ve become too much of a rebel lately. Perhaps you should work on your résumé. Take a week or two to consider your options.” Walking around Ben, John heads to the door.

“There’s one more thing,” Ben adds.

John stops but doesn’t turn. “And what’s that, Ben?”

“If we provide contact and there is no God. That will mean there is no otherworld. People will conclude that the whole thing is a hoax. End of business.”

John cocks his head, considering Ben’s statement. Then he whirls around and looks at Ben in amazement. “Very good. I knew there was a reason I hired you. Forget the résumé business. Don’t let them try and contact God. Tell them that if we contact God, that we’d

have to contact Buddha and every other God of every other religion. Tell them we're not in the religion business. If they want to talk to God, they can go to church." He smiles in triumph over his own genius then exits.

Ben takes a deep breath. He stands alone in the empty conference room, relieved that he has won for the moment.

Inside the Wilson home, the family watches television. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson share the couch with Melanie. Contented, Grandma sits in the recliner knitting and humming. Mr. Wilson studies his mother, pleased but curious by her demeanor change. His wife notices, patting his arm. He grins and pulls her to him.

The Nightly News logo appears on the TV. The local anchor begins. "I'm Ted Scott. Now to the local news," The anchor begins as a picture-in-a-picture behind him shows the Afterworld Com Center facility. Protestors picket in front of the building protesting the fact that the ACC facility will not let the priest talk to God. "Father Daniel Frost has gained national attention and followers. A growing crowd has gathered downtown in front of the ACC building to protest the forbidden contact with God. Mary Conti is on the scene. Mary?"

Mary's face takes over the screen. Father Frost, in the background, looks on. "That's right Ted. Standing next to me is Father Frost." Mary turns to him. "Father, tell our viewers what the problem here is." She positions the microphone for him.

"It's very simple, Mary. These people claim to have made contact with people in heaven. If that's true, then I should be able to talk to God. That is, of course, if it's not a hoax."

Mary moves back to face the camera. "As you know Ted, the ACC has taken the world by storm. I'm sure if someone hasn't contacted a loved one, they know someone that has. But this fact remains; if these people are in heaven, then God should be close by. Then again, maybe God's not taking calls." The Father gives Mary an odd look. She ends the segment. "This is Mary Conti at the ACC building downtown."

Back in the Wilson home, Betty looks up from her knitting and points her needle at the television. "That's where I saw Tony." A startled Melanie quickly stands and fakes a yawn. "Well, I think I'll turn in."

“Hold it. What did she say?”

“That God wasn’t taking phone calls.”

Her father gives her the evil eye. “Don’t get smart. I mean your grandmother. You took her there when I told you not to.”

A deflated Melanie plops on the edge of grandmother’s recliner arm. “But dad, they had a good time. So did I. Besides, she’s been a lot better since—”

Her father interrupts, “That’s not the point.” Undraping his arm from around his wife, Ed stands.

Melanie crosses her arms. “Then what is the point? What YOU believe in?”

“That’s enough! Go to your room!”

Melanie angrily runs out of the room. Her mother compassionately stares at her husband, knowing exactly what nerve her daughter had hit. Grandma gives him a non-approving glance.

Even without a spoken word, he knows that he’s being attacked. “What?”

His wife raises her eyebrows and crosses her arms. “You were kind of hard on her, Ed. She’s just trying to help. Maybe you’d feel better if you visited your father. You two weren’t on the best of terms when he—”

He interrupts, “Now the whole damn family’s believing this garbage. It’s not him. Don’t you see? I can’t believe it. Now they have you believing this damn crap.”

His wife drops her arms in shock. “Ed! Your mother.” Betty shrugs her shoulders like it was nothing. “I’ve heard worse on TV.”

Ed shoots her a look of disbelief then heads for the door. “I’ve got to get some air.”

His wife stands as if to go after him. Grandmother raises her hand without looking at her. “Ah, let him cool off.”

Ed climbs into his midsize car and backs out of the drive.

As he drives through traffic, his expression changes as his mind grapples with the subject of his father. He almost runs a red light and stops the car with a jerk. He looks around, baffled that he is downtown. His eyes look up at the Afterlife Com Center building in front of him.

Ed enters the Afterlife Com Center just as the receptionist leads a couple of satisfied customers from the waiting area. Ed reluctantly

approaches the counter and eyes the sign-in log. The entries consist of; *Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, GOD, GOD, GOD, GOD, GOD . . .* All the God entries have lines through them. He flips the page and sees another long list of requests to contact God. But they too are lined through. He flips back to the first page and nervously puts the pen to the column. His hand doesn't move. He closes his eyes for a second, then quickly writes his father's name in the contact space, *Anthony J. Wilson*. With a shaking hand, he fills in the rest of the form and puts the pen down.

Later, Ed enters a booth and sits. He reaches for the *COM* button, pushes it, and closes his eyes. The familiar voice of his father washes over him. "Son?" Ed opens his eyes to find himself looking at his father's hologram. Anthony Wilson sits in front of him in the chair, his body almost real, but holographic and shimmering.

"Dad?" he asks.

Softly and serenely, his father answers, "Yes it's me, son."

A tear rolls down Ed's cheek. "But it can't be, can it?"

His father smiles. "Yes, it can. It is. You were always skeptical of anything you couldn't take apart or explain. Remember when you took the speakers out of my stereo to see how they worked and when I went to play my George Jones album, I couldn't figure out what was wrong with the darn thing."

Ed laughs through his tears. "Until you moved the stereo away from the wall and saw the speakers gone." Ed adds, then wipes his tears, "It really is you, isn't it, Dad?"

His father chuckles. "That's what I've been trying to tell you, son." Ed's hand passes through his father's image as he reaches out to touch him. "This place that you're at—what is it? Where is it?"

His father laughs. He shimmers and alternates between different ages.

"Oh, it's a world not that much different than yours, except here there's no hate, no crime, no death, no sickness, no aches and pains. Other than that, it's not much different."

Ed laughs. "Not much different! Dad, that sounds like heaven."

His father nods. "Some call it that."

The light on the console flashes. Ed realizes he needs to hurry to say what he came to say. “Dad, I just wanted to say that—I’m sorry for everything. The way that I acted and—”

His father interrupts, “Son, all is forgiven. I love you and always will.” Another tear rolls down Ed’s cheek. “Will I see you again, Dad?”

“Oh, yes. But before I go, I must tell you two things. First, you must believe that you will come here. Believing is the only way here. Second, do not come back here and do not watch television. Something is going to happen very soon. Promise me.”

Ed is put off by his father’s strange request. “I, ah, promise, Dad. I love you.” As his father’s image begins to fade, Ed hurries with his final question. “What’s going to happen?”

“Contact,” his father’s voice echoes with his last word of warning. Only the empty platform remains.

Ed drives through the heavy traffic on his way home from work. He gets caught in a traffic jam in the middle of downtown in front of the ACC building. Horns blow as protesters block the street and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway of the building’s entrance.

Inside the Afterlife Com Center main office, the onslaught of customers fills the office area. The frustrated receptionist shuffles form after form piled on the counter. Every single person is requesting a contact with God. She frantically draws a large ‘X’ across the pages. Dissatisfied customers pound the counter only to be pushed aside for new customers demanding their turn.

A frazzled Ed returns home. At the kitchen table, Melanie divides her attention between the living room television and her homework. Betty avidly watches the news, as an unconcerned Jan makes supper. Ed sets his briefcase in the closet then glances from the news to his mother. Rubbing his forehead, he starts toward the kitchen but stops. The news anchor expounds on the frenzy of people gathered at the ACC building. Ed dashes to the TV, clicks it off then stands in front of it visibly shaking. His mother looks surprised.

Melanie protests from the kitchen, “Dad, why’d you do that?”

Ed, realizing that he cannot mention that he visited his father, fumbles for an answer, “Because . . . something is going to happen.”

Everyone stares at him, waiting for an explanation. He loosens his tie and heads for the kitchen.

Jan looks up from dinner preparations as he enters. “What is going to happen, dear?”

Melanie watches him like he is a lunatic and waits for some logical answer. He runs both hands through his hair. “I don’t know. But I can tell you one thing; everybody is going crazy. The streets are jammed with traffic. We had to call in half of the second shift this morning because of all the absent workers.”

Jan takes dishes out of the cupboard. “They were all sick?” she asks.

Ed unbuttons the top button of his shirt, trying to get more air. “They called in sick—but it’s this God thing. Everybody knows it.” Still unconcerned, Jan sets the dining room table. “God thing?” she asks.

Exhausted, fearful, Ed leans against the counter. “Everyone wants to talk to God.”

His wife reappears in the doorway, a plate in each hand. Finally aware, she doesn’t say a word, just stares at him.

CHAPTER III
An Infomercial Named God

Subdued company executives and a somewhat weathered-looking John McMartin sit at the Comtech Industry conference table. Ben dramatically rushes in, pushing a cart stacked high with boxes. He parks the cart at the end of the table. The worried executives watch in bewilderment as Ben lifts one box up, flips it on the table, and dumps the contents. Thousands of log sheets from the ACC offices spill across the table. The men surrounding the table scramble to stop the deluge of paperwork. John scans the mountain of papers. “What is this?”

Ben slides a stapled collection of sheets to the end of the table to John. John thumbs through the pages. Every page has *God* as the entry. He tosses them back onto the table. “What is this some sort of joke?”

Ben motions toward the remaining stack of boxes. “They all want to talk to God.”

The executives cringe then look to John, waiting for his response.

John blinks in disbelief then waves his hands. “All of them?”

Ben reaches into his jacket, pulls out a folded slip of paper and reads, “Since yesterday at noon—that’s when we officially began counting— there’s been . . . ah, let’s see, 989,054 requests to speak with God. Many locations have already run out of forms. We’re shipping more.”

John reads the form again, then tosses it in the air. He leans back, clasps his hands together, almost as if in prayer, but actually collecting his thoughts and strategizing. “And sales?”

Ben makes a zero with his finger. “We’re losing over two hundred thousand dollars a day.” After a low groan, the room becomes silent. The intercom buzzer startles the men.

John holds down the button. “Not now Marge, we’re in a—”

“It’s the mayor, sir. He’s in the outer office. He wants to see you—and he’s not exactly in a patient mood.”

“See him in, Marge.”

The angry mayor bursts in through the door and stops at the far end of the table. “Someone tell me what in the hell is going on!”

John stands. “I’m John McMartin. What can I do for you, Mayor?”

Looking over the other executives, the mayor steps around the table and stops in front of John. “You can start by telling me why I shouldn’t call the governor and have you shut down right now.”

Turning on his executive charm, John puts his arm around the mayor and leads him toward the tall windows of the conference room away from the others. “I know there are problems, Mayor. That’s what we’re trying to iron out at this meeting.”

Not to be patronized, the mayor brushes John’s arm from his shoulder. “Iron out! We have a disaster on our hands and not just here. I’m getting phone calls about your company from mayors all across the country. They want to know what the hell this is all about.” He leans toward John. “Is this some kind of promo or something? Because if it is—”

John interrupts, “No it’s not a promo. We have a little problem. A problem we are trying to solve.” He steps back to the conference table, picks up one of the stacks of sheets, and hands it to the mayor. The mayor thumbs through them. “What is this? I don’t get it.”

John leans back and sits on the edge of the conference table. “Are you familiar with our service?”

The mayor tosses the papers on the table. “Sure. You do some kind of amusement thing—like mystic stuff. Entertainment is one thing but this—”

Ben in a chair at the end of the table interrupts. “It’s not entertainment, sir. This is a bonafide connection to the other side. It’s real. That’s why we have to be careful . . . very careful” He then runs his hands through his hair, and laughs.

The mayor frowns at him wondering what is so funny, then looks at John. John shakes his head. The mayor continues, “Yeah right. As long as you don’t break laws and people don’t get hurt, that’s fine. But this has gotten out of hand.” He strolls toward the door, stops at the end of the conference table, and adjusts his tie. “Just get this cleaned up. Do whatever—let them talk to God, so they’ll get off the streets.”

Ben jerks up in horror. “We can’t do that . . . we can’t!”

The mayor turns around and looks at Ben like he is crazy, then glares at John. "I don't want to hear CAN'T. You have all that fancy equipment that created the problem. Now use it to solve it. Half the city is in the streets. Show them God. Charge them a couple of bucks. Then everyone can go home and get a decent night's sleep, including me." He storms out.

John sits slowly, deep in thought, then spins around in his chair, clasping his hands together. A smile creeps across his face. The others glance hopefully at one another as John contemplates a strategy.

His back to them, John calmly states the solution. "Why didn't I think of this sooner? We give them what they want. We give them God, one showing, one price, a steep price. We get a channel with some money."

Ben cannot believe what he is hearing. "But sir, we talked about this—"

John spins around. "I've had enough, Ben. Go back to work on your résumé." John points at Charley, one of the executives. "Charley, put the word out that we're going to let the priest talk to God. Once. Tell them we're looking for the highest bidder to get exclusive rights." Charley scribbles notes. John grows impatient. "Well, what are you waiting for? Move it."

Charley jumps from his chair and races out of the room as Ben stands and approaches John's side.

John glances out of the corner of his eye but doesn't turn. "You still here?"

"You have to listen to me."

John lunges to his feet, irritated, and pokes Ben in the chest with his index finger. "No, you listen to me. We're losing a quarter of a million dollars a day. I can turn this around. It's a win-win situation. We broadcast this thing, and gross between fifty to a hundred million for a few minutes of airtime. If God shows, they get what they paid for and I turn religious. If he doesn't, we still collect. I dump the company the next day. Stockholders make a profit. I retire to the Bahamas. Everyone's happy."

Ben shakes his head in disgust. "You're crazy."

John calmly steps to the window and looks down at the crowds on the streets below. “I’m crazy? I’m crazy? I’m not one of those nuts on the street believing that I can talk to God.”

Ben joins him, looking down at the riotous crowd that surrounds the building.

Later that day, in the Comtech Industries headquarters’ outer office, newspaper reporters, TV reporters, cameramen, and others from the media stand behind Father Frost waiting for John to enter the room. As Ben and John enter, members of the media jockey for position for the announcement.

Stepping up to the collection of microphones at the podium, John raises his hands. He waits for the noise to cease. “As you all know, Comtech Industries has been in the communication business for decades and has always prided itself on delivering customer satisfaction. Just over a year ago, we started a new venture, Afterlife Comm Centers. This created the ultimate in communications to customers worldwide.”

John motions Father Frost to join him. The father makes his way to the podium and waits in silence.

John continues, “Recently, a local ACC received an unusual request that we felt irregular and we refused to honor. That request came from Father Frost and it was a request to contact God at an ACC facility.” John motions toward the Father. “We realize that denying the request was wrong. We’d like to correct it by allowing the connection at 10:00 AM tomorrow.”

The cameras flash and the media crowd erupts with a flurry of questions. John holds up his hands again to stop the chatter. “And Comtech is even going to pick up the tab for the five minute period.” John puts out his hand to the amazed Father Frost. In the crowd, Ben watches. He shakes his head and makes his way out of the crowd.

As John shakes the Father’s hand, he continues, “Comtech would like to apologize for any inconvenience and hopes that together we can make this the most momentous event in man’s history.” Father Frost smiles. They pose for the camera and TV crews.

John exits the outer office, ignoring the flurry of questions from the media’s rear guard.

Exhausted and deflated, Ben enters his office and considers where to begin. He dumps a plant into the garbage and takes down several awards from the wall. As John passes Ben's open office door, Ben calls out, "Putting it on a little thick weren't you?"

John backs up to the doorway and leans in to watch Ben packing the awards into the box on his desk.

Ben continues while filling the box, "Momentous event in man's history? A monumental mistake in man's history would've been more appropriate." Ben then lifts a notebook and shoves it into the crowded box of personal belongings.

John approaches and looks at the box's contents. "You know what your problem is, Ben? You think too small. You're afraid to take any chances—break any rules."

Ben stops packing, glares at John. "There's one rule that always applies."

John picks up a glass paperweight and blows the dust off it. "Yeah, what's that?"

Ben takes the paperweight from him and drops it in the box. "Everything has a price."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Ben closes the box. "You've been taking for so long without paying—when it comes—it's gonna be the full price."

John rubs his hands together to shake the dust from them. "You're such a dreamer. Where have you been? I never pay full price for anything." He steps back to the doorway. "I hope there's a market out there for dreamers, for your sake. But I seriously doubt it." He exits.

Ben puts the box under his arm.

CHAPTER IV *A Conversation With God*

The next morning in his apartment, Ben enters the living room tucking in his shirttail, a sports jacket draped over his arm. He lays the sports jacket on the arm of a wing chair. Unlocking the drawer of the curio cabinet, he removes a .38 short-barrel revolver. Removing a box of shells, he loads them into the chamber. He casually glances up at the clock. 8:15 AM. Putting the gun into the back of his trousers, he puts on his jacket and heads out the door.

Later that morning, outside the Comtech Industries headquarters' building, Ben casually strides down the sidewalk toward the crowd of spectators gathered in front of the building with their picket signs. The signs read: *Leave God Alone, The End is Coming,* and *God is God, Man is Man*. Ben gently pushes through the crowd to the main doors. A security guard recognizes him and unlocks the door. He slides in. Several of the protesters try to follow, but the guard shoulders the door closed and locks it.

Ben enters the main office area, and walks down the hall toward John's office. Alarmed, the secretary stands when she sees him. Ben does not even notice her as she puts her hand up to stop him and starts to speak. She frantically punches a button on the telephone and picks the handset up.

Ben enters John's office just as John hangs up the telephone. Stopping in front of the desk, he pulls out the gun and nervously points it at John.

Unimpressed, John slowly lifts his coffee cup and takes a sip. Just as carefully, he holds out the cup and studies its contents. "I'd offer you some coffee, but it appears you're already too stressed out. Put the gun away, Ben. Oh yeah, remind me to fire the guard who let you in before you leave."

Ben tries to steady his shaking hand. "Call it off!"

John takes another sip of his coffee and makes a disgusted face. "You know I can't do that. I have too much riding on this. Also, remind me to change our coffee brand. This coffee is horrible."

Ben's hand shakes even more, his finger tightening on the trigger. "Don't make me do it. I will."

John sighs heavily as he puts his coffee cup down. He arrogantly stares at Ben's shaking hand. "You're not a killer. Christ, Ben, how's this going to look on your résumé? Let's see. Oh, by the way, I spent twenty years at San Quentin for murdering my boss. No, I don't think they'll be beating down your door to hire you."

Ben glances at the clock on the wall. It's now 9:25 AM. "I'm serious, John. I'll kill you." Ben swings the gun from John and points it at the window. He fires. The glass explodes. John doesn't flinch. Instead he slowly turns to look at the broken glass on the floor behind him and frowns at the mess. Ben slowly points the gun back at John.

John raises his eyebrows. "So if I don't stop, you're gonna shoot out all of my windows?"

Ben puts both hands on the gun to steady it. "Damn it! This is not a game. You don't know what you're doing. Someone has to stop you."

Standing, John carefully steps over the glass to get to the coffeepot.

Ben follows his movements with the gun barrel.

"Wrong Ben, I know exactly what I'm doing. We're making a hundred million dollars for five minutes. And nobody on earth is about to stop me," he pauses as he pours another cup of coffee, "and certainly not you."

John's door bursts open. Two guards rush in, guns pointed. Startled, Ben turns toward them then looks over his shoulder at John. After calmly taking a sip of coffee, John smiles.

One of the guards cautiously approaches Ben. "Drop the gun, sir!"

Ben accepts the futility of the situation and lets the gun hang loose then stoops to place it on the floor. John swaggers forward as the guards rush Ben, each grabbing an arm. He shakes his head in disappointment. "Ben, Ben, Ben. If there's anything you should have learned from me, it's if you're gonna do something, you should be prepared to go all the way."

The two guards roughly turn Ben around toward the door. One of them states, "The police are on the way, sir."

Bending over, John picks up the gun by the barrel with two fingers. He walks to the guard and holds it out. "Take this with you." The guard shoves Ben's gun into his waistband. They exit the office.

Two uniformed policemen dash into the outer office to meet the guards and take Ben into custody. The secretary, alarmed by the sight of Ben being arrested, stands. Ben desperately tries to look at the office clock over his shoulder as the officers escort him away. The office clock reads 9:45 AM.

Ben resists and struggles, screaming. "You have to stop him! He's crazy!"

One of the officers pulls Ben's arms behind his back and handcuffs him. The guard hands the gun to the other officer. As Ben is led out of the office, he spots a huge television monitor on the wall televising the contact with God. He fights to keep the monitor in sight as he's led out of the building. He screams for everyone to hear, "You have to listen to me!"

Outside the Comtech building, Ben is dragged kicking and screaming toward the police cruiser. Protesters and believers on the street watch as Ben is manhandled into the police car. The policemen then climb into the car.

"They're getting ready to show that God thing on TV," the driver informs his partner.

"Yeah, so?" His partner replies while taking a bite of a donut.

The driver looks at him like he's stupid. "So don't you want to see it? They're gonna talk to God."

His partner takes another bite of his donut and nods back toward Ben. "What about him?" The driver shrugs.

"Lock the car. He's not going anywhere."

His partner stuffs the rest of the donut in his mouth with a glance at Ben. They climb back out of the car and lock the doors. Ben watches them walk toward the building. He leans forward, looking for a clock. The digital readout on the car radio displays 9:50 AM.

Back at the Wilson house, Ed enters the house, with a bag of bagels in hand. He stops in the hallway alarmed by the sound of Saturday morning cartoons on the television. He rushes into the living room in a panic to find Betty flipping through the channels.

She stops on the broadcast of the contact with God.

Melanie sits on the couch with her legs crossed, eating a bowl of cereal.

Ed quickly pulls the TV cord from the outlet. Betty stares at her son, puzzled by his actions. Ed then yanks the cord, tearing it from the television. He holds the cord up for her to see. She flinches.

Melanie stops mid-chew of her cereal and stares at him like he has finally lost his mind.

Tossing the cord on top the television, Ed walks into the kitchen with his bag of bagels. The kitchen clock shows 9:55 AM.

At the Comtech ACC Center, a huge crowd has gathered inside for the media event. Father Frost makes his way to the counter, where Lou, manager of the ACC, waits. Father Frost signs in and fills in the contact column. He meticulously writes *GOD*, then lays the pen down as the reporters' cameras click and several camera crews follow the event. Lou leads the father toward a booth.

John enters the Comtech headquarters' conference room with a coffee cup in hand. The board members nervously await him around the table. A large screen plasma television faces the table for the event.

John steps to the television and puts a tape into its VCR. He pushes record then takes his seat at the head of the table. "Gentlemen prepare to watch Comtech make a hundred million dollars."

Outside of the Comtech building, the police cruiser sits on the city's deserted street. Inside, Ben leans forward breathing hard. His eyes widen as the time is displayed. The digital display of the radio shows 10:00 AM. He desperately struggles with the handcuffs and shoulders the car door, trying to get out.

At the Wilson house, in the living room, Betty rises from her chair and walks toward the stairs. She slowly mounts the stairs as Ed enters the room. He bites into a bagel.

Back at the media event at the ACC, Father Frost is now positioned in the chair. He looks at the COM button, then over his shoulder at the intent crowd. They applaud as the great event unfolds. He smiles and pushes the button. The room glows. Everyone's face is illuminated. Father Frost's mouth opens and his lips part in awe at the heavenly sight they are beholding.

In the Comtech headquarters' conference room, John and the executives are also enthralled. The conference room is aglow, as are the

faces of everyone in the room. It is even humbling to the all-powerful CEO of Comtech, John McMartin himself. He leans forward entranced by the image they are all seeing. "Oh, my God."

At the ACC, silence falls over the room as everyone is in awe of the presence of God. The father queries God. "Father, is that you?"

In a voice possessing both male depth and female softness, God speaks, "Yes, my son. I have come."

The father is so moved, he gasps and breaks down. Tears trickle down his cheeks. Behind him, the other observers are totally engrossed by the event, silent, their mouths agape in the presence of the Almighty.

"I have questions, Father," Father Frost continues.

God's voice reverberates throughout the room, "I know, my son. In time, they will be answered, for thou hast broken my law."

Father Frost is confused by the message. "Law? What law?"

God's stern voice rumbles even louder, "Man shall not look upon the face of thy Father lest thee come home."

Father Frost blinks wildly, searching for meaning from his God. "Home?"

In the Wilson home, Ed cocks his head and hears the faint sound coming from upstairs. He quickly turns to Melanie and his wife. "What's that noise?" They all look upstairs toward grandmother's room.

Melanie realizes what they are hearing. "Sounds like Grandma's watching television."

Ed frantically races up the stairs.

John, in the Comtech headquarters' conference room, realizes the implication of God's comment. He stands, his breathing becoming heavy. "No! I'm not ready!" Stricken with terror, he watches as the other executives disappear one by one, their clothes remaining on their chairs.

He looks toward the door and then the broken window for a way out. He leaps toward the window, trying to escape from his impending fate. At the window he screams, "Noooooo." His scream fades along with his body. His clothes drop to the floor as well as his gold watch. His expensive ring drops on the window sill. It spins, then topples over the edge falling through the air toward the sidewalk below, next to the police car.

In the police car, a resigned Ben watches as the panicked receptionist runs from the building and past the police car. She screams, “They’re all gone! They’re gone!”

Straining against the window, he watches her run from sight. As he turns the ring drops from above. He watches it bounce on the sidewalk, spin and spin, and finally stop.

Ben looks up at the ACC doorway murmuring, “Paid in full.”

The party is over in the Afterlife Comm Center lobby. The room is quiet and empty. Piles of clothes lay where the crowd once stood. Father Frost’s black clothes and white collar lay where he once sat.

Ed races into his mother’s bedroom in a panic. The television is still on, but the screen is blank and snowy. The shhhhhhhh of the TV fills the room. Betty’s clothes lay on her rocking chair that is slowly coming to rest. Melanie and her mother rush into the room. Not understanding what happened, Ed lifts the clothes and looks at Melanie and his wife.

On the deserted streets of Chicago, papers and debris skip around in the wind. In a trance-like state, Ben sits in the police car, nodding then sadly shaking his head. What he had feared had happened.

A housekeeping lady cleans the Comtech conference room. She looks at the executives’ clothes on the chairs where the men once sat as she dumps the trash basket. A gold watch on the floor catches her eye. She picks it up and rubs it on her dress. She admires it then puts it in her pocket. She pushes the cleaning cart from the room, not noticing the tape ejected, waiting to be taken from the VCR. The TV softly glows, beckoning us to know the truth.



EPILOGUE



Man’s quest for knowledge takes him on a journey in search of his beginnings, and his end. When man travels down this road, he learns that with every new piece of knowledge there is also a price to be paid. For some knowledge, man must inevitably pay the ultimate price . . . the full price.

The End