‘Slow down!’ The immediate imperative coursed through David’s mind momentarily shocking him to a higher level of consciousness. Speeding past dimly lit farm houses on a Vermont rural road the dark green sports car barely negotiated one perilously sharp corner after another. Johnathan had entrusted his brother David with the care and maintenance of the two-seater automobile for another tour of duty in Afghanistan.

The two brothers were going to enlist together. Ultimately, it was not to be. David was offered a lucrative position in an engineering firm in Burlington that he couldn’t pass up. The shared enlistment, disrupted by an unplanned opportunity had the obvious effect on their close knit relationship. Not a word was shared between the brothers for the first eighteen-month tour. Johnathan still trusted David with the sports car politely asking David for the keys at the start of his two-month furlough and handing them back once more on the day of redeployment.

By Johnathan’s third deploy their strained relationship took on an air of functional civility - answering obligatory questions about their lives for the previous tour of duty. It was not sharing – merely reporting. “At least they had that,” said their mother once at a family dinner.

The road straightened, his headlights captured a double yellow line disappearing into broken yellow striping in the darkness. David laughed out loud. “Who am I going to pass at two in the morning?” He depressed the accelerator and seized the advantage of the break from switchback hairpin turns.
‘Slow down!’ came the directive again to his mind. His memory of the road ahead was as sharp as the U-turns that cascaded down evergreen tree studded embankments to one more creek bottom after another. He knew the curve ahead and powered down the sleek vehicle just enough to maneuver through it safely.

The words ‘slow down’ manifested sharp and clear in his brain. ‘Where?’ thought David. He knew to be cautious but these ideas were not his. He felt no need to slow down.

‘Concentration is all that I need, concentration and knowledge of the road ahead,’ he thought shunting aside the warning.

His brother expected that the vehicle be driven. A high performance car garnered no longevity sitting in a garage for months at a time. David knew exactly the velocity he could maintain going into a curve through it and efficiently out through the other end. ‘How many times had he and Johnathan stopped at the little tavern at the end of the state route?’ It was one of those inexplicable reduced speed zones for only a dimly lit watering hole nestled in a hamlet of three tiny homes. Years ago it showed up on old maps with the strange name of Heaven. The boys laughed at the audacity of the label. Their mom, being a staunch Christian assured them that there would be no taverns in Heaven – the real Heaven. The boys would smile. It was better to not argue about it. Neither wanted their heaven to be degraded in any way.

‘Why did he go back there?’ The breakup was never really talked about in Heaven. Sam the owner and Wendy the barmaid served the beers to David and listened to his stories with
polite smiles, never bringing up Johnathan. Sam knew somehow that things were not the same between the boys. He knew where Johnathan was but never discussed it with David.

Tonight was different. Wendy posed the question. “Have you heard from Johnathan?” The inquiry was so startling he choked on his beer. Regaining his composure – throat muscles relaxed, David replied with a simple “no”. He tried to avoid the piercing gaze from deep dark eyes. It was time to escape the scrutiny.

Sam came through to establish some normalcy pronouncing the familiar salutation for the evening. “Thanks for visiting us here in Heaven.”

“It was nice to be in Heaven again,” announced David, mustering a smile for Sam.

“Heaven – after a fashion,” said Sam expectedly. David left the tavern with only half of the usual goodbye.

He downshifted into second for the next curve. ‘What was she after? That witch knows nothing about me,’ confirmed David. Finally, his high beam headlights caught the cautionary signs of the last curve of the country road. Wendy’s disquieting eyes were behind him. David knew he had this one.

‘Slow down!’ The words were booming in his head. He approached the curve in third gear fully confident that no barmaid was going to get to him and no curve was going to slow him down. As David forced the car into the turn a startled white tailed deer and aghast David briefly met eye to eye. David had this. He squeezed the ball of the short stick shift back
towards the slot for second and swerved to miss the deer. The deer clopped his hooves up on the hood of the green monster to escape. The shift to second was never made.

The car accelerated and flipped sideways over the low guardrail and careened down the embankment. It plummeted sixty feet side-over-side knocking David unconscious. The battered car lay wedged between two trees just above the creek bed. The injured driver slumped over the leather covered steering wheel – unconscious.

Colors bloomed so vibrant that the form of the flowers was submissive to hue. A path of unknown surface led past flora of nameless species. With outstretched arms, the traveler attempted to embrace all that he observed. The foliage responded with teeming blossoms straining to be encompassed in his arms. The joy of being filled his heart. Plants and flowers stretching their delicate branches and opening their blossoms? David was in a dream. In this dream, he had conscious recognition that this was a dream. He collapsed his arms and bowed in appreciation for the intensely personal communion. ‘

‘How fortunate am I to be in this world,’ he thought.

He raised his eyes. A vine covered farm house fashioned of the whitest quartz stone appeared up ahead on the path. ‘Not far,’ he thought. He was in an immense valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains, reaching higher than possible in his world. Other structures came into view, not so far away. The little white farm house drew his attention. Nothing else mattered.
He approached the glistening structure. The home was covered with a tile roof of a deep maroon color. Windows framed in soft pewter encased glass with no reflection. The door opened and a man smiled at the approaching traveler. It was Johnathan.

David arrested his forward movement. Everything about this moment burst through his dreaming mind – questions, answers and feelings. All pretenses fell away. David hugged his brother and Johnathan hugged him back. Everything was true in this dreamland. The brothers sat down at a small table and chairs set out on a red brick covered patio.

“Welcome David,” said Johnathan.

“I’m in a dream but I can hear you!” exclaimed David.

“This is more than a dream dear brother. There is much that you must know.”

“I remember, your car, the deer,” said David in growing apprehension.

Johnathan placed his hand atop his brother’s hand. David’s eyes focused on the touch of the two hands. The skin, the nails and the fingers shimmered. He gently extricated his hand out from under his brother’s soft touch. He held it up to his face as his brother continued unabated by David’s preoccupation. “You will wake up soon in a hospital. Your injuries are minor.”

“What is this place?” David slowly dropped his hand to the table again.

“This is my home.”

“But your home is ...”
“Yes, David my injuries in a recent firefight were much more severe. I brought you here to see my home, my new home. I have been building it for years off and on. I am not coming back to Vermont.”

“The firefight ... it took your life?” yelped David in horror.

“Yes David it did. I know this place well. Sam and Wendy taught me how to prepare my own place, make it ready for when I needed it. My body is lying in a fortified bunker in Afghanistan. Soon after you regain consciousness two officers will be arriving at mom’s house. Her sister is on her way from Albany. She should arrive fifteen minutes before they do. Sam and Wendy are coordinating this in your absence.”

“Sam and Wendy?” probed David. David’s incredulous response tinged with anger started the separation.

“David, hold on please. You have been given a gift. You have survived the crash of my car to help others. You will see their lives with complete understanding. Take it slow. Work with Wendy and Sam. Open your heart to the ‘witch’ as you called her. She is one year older than you. She has much to give you. Sam and Wendy will teach you how to come back to me. This is very important David. Do not squander the power within you. The car means nothing. You are destined to do great things, albeit very quietly.”

“Is this Heaven Johnathan?” asked David feeling the vision of his brother begin to cloud over.
Johnathan smiled and laughed. “After a fashion!” The words reverberated in David’s head.

David wanted to laugh with him but the booming voice in his head migrated into overwhelming pain on the left side of his head. He opened his eyes to discover he was screaming. Two women in white outfits with pained looks on their young faces appeared on either side of his bed. One grabbed his hand which was tapped to a red button. She depressed the button intravenously releasing a slug of chemicals to mask the pain coursing through his head. David’s screams of “my brother is dead!” rapidly dissipated into a dreamless drug infused sleep.

“Did you tell him?” asked the one nurse checking his pulse.

“No I did not,” answered the other nurse. “You didn’t and I didn’t ... how?”

“Beats me. A lot of strange things happen in hospitals. You’ll see.” The nurse placed David’s hand on his lap and gave it a gentle squeeze. The level of affection written in the face of the nurse, the tender way she held his hand and the fond look in her eyes bespoke a level of caring that captivated the new nurse.

[TWO DAYS LATER]

Through the large undraped window David’s eyes were transfixed by the slow procession of headlights silently maneuvering down the ramp to the hospital rotunda and out of his view. It was frustrating and unfulfilling to observe the arrival and not the embarkation.
“My brother ... in a dream,” said David, his voice changing as if expressing a fond memory. The two nurses stared at each other. “Brenda, Jack is going to ask you for forgiveness. He really wants children but he was afraid that he wouldn’t be a good father. Talk to him and accept his forgiveness for he loves you deeply.” David raised his eyes to meet Brenda’s shocked expression.

“Who are you?” shouted Brenda. “When did you talk to Jack?”

“I never met your husband. I just know these things. Trust me.” Brenda turned and quickly left the room.

“Well Mr. Smarty Pants that was a little over the top,” said Wendy entering the room.

“Who are you?” asked the older nurse. “Are you a family member?”

“Yes I am,” said Wendy looking deeply into the nurse’s eyes.

“Well, only a little while please. He needs to rest.” The nurse quietly left the room.

“Family member?” asked David with raised eyebrows.

“Not yet but that’s to be determined. You, my friend, you need to take it slow with your “helpful words” that you so quickly delivered. You need some context with the recipient. I’ll teach you.”

“You’ll teach me?”

“Yeah, just as Sam and I taught your brother,” she answered. “Didn’t your brother tell you about your training with us?”
“Yes, but this is all so weird. I have a dream with my dead brother and he tells me I have to do all this stuff and you and Sam are to teach me. Am I still in a dream?” David’s eyes started to lose their focus.

“You are going to fall back asleep David. Be prepared to see me in your dream. There is a need for you to be ready. In two days you will leave the hospital. Your mother will pick you up. She is very distraught about your brother and angry at you. Be considerate of her feelings. She only has you now.”

“Oh great,” mumbled David as he fell into a drug laced sleep.

Why weren’t you there with Johnathan? You could have saved him!” cried Jennifer.

David slid off the hospital bed and into the wheelchair for the ride out of the hospital.

“Mom, I wish I was now. I didn’t want harm to come to him,” said David. Brenda pushed David in the wheelchair down the hall to the elevator.

“He needed you but you had to take that stupid job of yours and you wrecked the car. Were you drunk?”

“Mom, no, I was not drunk. Johnathan ...”

“What, you’re going to give me that crap again about how happy he is now. How can you even think that?”

“I know you deeply loved him. He was such a good son, a good man. I can’t bring him back mom.”
“Oh, David!” exclaimed a male hospital staff member running up to meet him at the elevator. “Take care David and thanks so much for your help with my son. I don’t know how you knew we had an issue but it’s on the mend now.”

“That’s excellent Harry. I’ll stop in to see you at my one-month checkup.”

“I’ll look forward to it David,” gushed Harry gently shaking his hand. Brenda pushed the wheelchair silently into the elevator. The elevator doors closed.

“Did you talk to Jack?” asked David in a soft voice.

“Yes ... I did. You were right somehow. It’s all better now. We’re going to our family cabin on the lake - just the two of us.”

“That’s great Brenda, I’m very happy it all worked out for the two of you.” Jennifer stared at her son.

Brenda pushed the wheelchair out of the elevator and through the entrance doors. She helped David into the passenger seat and affixed the seatbelt for him. “Please take time to rest David. Jennifer, he will not need much attention. He should do things on his own but no strenuous work for a week. He should be back to normal and back to work by the end of the month. He is a good man Jennifer. He’s your son.”

“My only son now,” said Jennifer sadly over the top of the car. Jennifer steered the car out from under the Hospital rotunda and into Burlington’s midday traffic. “So that was more than smoke you were blowing about helping people.”

“It sort of just happened. I didn’t ask to do this.”
“But your brother asked you to take care of his car.”

“Yeah and I wrecked it!” he said angrily. “Johnathan doesn’t care mom. It’s not important to him.”

“How can you be so damn sure of that? Don’t give me that crap about some dreams you had. You don’t know. You don’t! All I know is that if you would have enlisted with him you could have taken care of him and we wouldn’t be going to a funeral tomorrow. Your only brother’s funeral – that we know – nothing else!”

David was silent. There was nothing he could say to ameliorate the rift between he and his mother. She was hurting and so was he despite knowing how happy his brother was. He stared as the evergreen trees flapped by as so many dark green bound books in the library where his mother worked. He wondered why he was destined to help others now but not his own mother.

The image of his brother appeared in his mind. ‘Bring her,’ he said with a smile on his face.

The funeral made its appearance on the family schedule with long lost relatives making an obligatory appearance. Determined to respectfully meet the requirements of the day, Jennifer and David set aside their continuing quarrels. David and his mom easily agreed to a ‘no open casket’. No weeping over a made-up physical body – neither wanted any of that.
At the end of the day Johnathan was interred in the family plot next to his dad, a veteran of Viet Nam war. David drove the family car back to the house and pulled it into the garage. “I’m going back to my place in the morning,” said David staring at the dashboard giving up its lights to a single bulb lighting the garage from the garage door opener in the ceiling.

“I’ll take you over,” said Jennifer with no emotion.

“Wendy is picking me up at nine.”

“That girl at the funeral today,” confirmed Jennifer. “That barmaid capitalized practically every minute of your time.”

“Oh, let’s not get started at it. It was a respectful funeral with a lot of emotion riding on it. Do we really need to end this in an argument?”

“What is she to you anyway? Is she your girlfriend now?” responded Jennifer ignoring his plea.

“Johnathan wants to see you.”

“What?”

“You heard me mom. Tonight, we are going to see him again and you are invited.”

“Just like that huh? I’m invited over for tea or something. How do I get there? Do I take the train? I certainly can’t take your brother’s car.”
“Enough with the car mom!” shouted David. “Tonight, in a dream you’ll meet me by a stream and we will walk to Johnathan’s home. You’re not really ready for this but the dream will soften the experience. Johnathan really wants to see you.”

“Yeah, yeah, my son has a pipeline to his brother in Heaven,” scoffed Jennifer getting out of the car. It was late. They were tired and both were done talking.

She knelt by the little stream that ambled over smoothly polished rocks. ‘The water sparkled like diamonds’, she thought. The radiance of the liquid jewels was too much for her eyes. She had to turn away. The ground itself pulsated, vibrated to an unknown tempo. “What is this place?” asked Jennifer rising to her feet.

“A heaven for some,” answered her son.

“You said…”

“I know. This is too much for you. You must believe me I don’t understand it much more than you do,” said David taking her hand. “Let’s discover this together mom.”

She grasped his hand tightly. “This is a dream but I know it is. How is that possible? How do I know what I’m saying?”

“It is an awareness achieved by some of the saints you read about in your class at church. Such an understanding is shared by so few.”

“Why is the stream so bright?”

“Like diamonds?” suggested David as they walked along the path.
“Yes, yes, like diamonds!” exclaimed Jennifer clutching his arm now.

“Sam says they are unrealized souls rolling though this region in the dream state.”

“Sam, the bartender in that little tavern you go to?”

“Yes mom, he is here. We will see him later.” David noticed the perplexed look on her face. “He is an accomplished traveler here. He can come and go as he wishes. He helps many.”

“Like you do?”

David laughed. “No mom, he helps bring people here and he teaches too. The bartender gig is a window for him to connect with people that are ready to visit this place and learn about themselves. We are almost there. Are you ready to see Johnathan?”

“Am I ready? I don’t even know where I am. Can I hug him? Will I be able to cry when I see him?”

“You are in a part of what most see as heaven.”

“Is there more?”

“There is much more. Some of the saints that came here in the past declared that there were tens of thousands of continents here. Tens of thousands mom – isn’t that amazing?”

“Amazing, yes this is all so amazing. I can hug him?” she asked again.

“Yes and we are here. Johnathan is coming now to greet you.” Johnathan opened the door to his bright stone walled home and gazed at his mother. In front of her was indeed her
son, whole and missing nothing – smiling, beckoning his mother to come closer. She caught herself hesitating then bursting forward throwing her arms around him and crying tears of joy.

“I am overjoyed that David brought you to me.”

“I had very little to do about it,” confessed David.

“No, David, you know not how powerful you are. Sam and I assisted in bringing mom here but you did most of the heavy lifting, as it were.”

Jennifer released her son from the hug and looked at David and then back to Johnathan.

“Don’t get me wrong Johnathan but how am I able to see you again? Why am I here?”

“That’s wonderful mom! You get right to the point as always even in heaven,” chuckled Johnathan. “You are here to understand and work in your own way to realize what life is all about. It is a gift from all of us. I wanted to communicate directly and tell you not to be angry or upset at so many. We are all on separate paths in a way.”

“But you’re gone Johnathan my beautiful boy – robbed of a full life.”

“I’m here now mom. I am happy.”

“I miss you terribly. You must know that.”

“That is why I pulled you to me to show you that my life goes on. I died a terrible death however I am here now in this beautiful place. David will teach you to come back if you would want to do so. I would love to see you again. But most of all I want you to have peace in your heart about me.”
“I get what you are saying. I think.”

“There is a man, Sam is his name. He is giving a talk down the path in the valley. I want to go to hear him speak. Will you come with me?”

“Yes,” was all that his mother said. Her next recollection was sliding onto a wooden bench in the back row of a small open-air amphitheater. ‘The air was balmy’ thought Jennifer as she sat on the bench between her two sons. She looked at each in turn. Her focus was drawn to the speaker the tall dark haired man with a robust mustache and dark set eyes. Sam Giovani was his name but that did not seem to matter here. Jennifer listened. Sam was speaking to her she thought.

“Thank you for being here. Most of you were personally invited. Some have come on their own accord. Sitting among us are travelers who know this path very well. They may have invited you here. It is their love for you that you can experience this land directly. Some of you are in the dream state. I encourage you to write down what you remember of this world as soon as you awake. The censor will quickly pull down the curtain to prevent the full knowledge of what you are experiencing now – such is the hardships of living in the physical world.”

“The physical world is subject to strong emotions, and battles physical and mental. You have struggled to comprehend the pain of life, losing a loved one, striving to be fair and just to your fellow men and women and expressing love for your family members. Life in the physical world is not easy. Life here, in this world, is a bit easier. Many believe it is Heaven. Be not deceived for this is the world of illusion. All is not what it seems.”
“It is a waystation on the path to finer worlds above this one. I have been charged to lead many here and beyond. When I was a younger man I hiked the Appalachian Trail. It is a trail through the mountainous region of one of the major continents on earth. It holds many breathtaking sights along the way. One could easily be content to stay forever at such a place — at a rest stop with a beautiful lake surrounded by wildflowers nestled at the base of craggy mountains.”

“But you are the traveler destined to soar above this world and discover your true nature, your true self.” Jennifer’s attention fell away from Sam’s words and focused on the beam of light from somewhere illuminating the semicircle of souls listening to his talk. The beam was strongest on Sam. ‘Didn’t he notice that bright light on him?’ Soft applause signaled the end of the master’s words. ‘Had she missed a lot?’ She started to reproach her lack of attention when Sam and Wendy stood in a small circle with her and her two sons.

“No Jennifer, don not reprimand your perceived lack of attention on you first voyage here. There is much to distract and sometimes an indirect approach works better than listening to me drone on and on about truth. The human mind needs to take this stuff in in dribs and drabs.”

“I know this. It’s like I’ve been here before,” exclaimed Jennifer. “You were definitely not droning on.”

“You are too kind,” said Sam. “Do you understand a little bit better now that you have visited this region?”
“I can let go now. Johnathan will still be sorely missed in my home. The crying is still not finished but I cannot take it out on my son who is still with me. I have been very hard on him. I know that he has a mission in life, one that he has to grow into I believe.”

“Your mother is a quick study,” said Wendy standing with David, their fingers interlocked in a loving embrace.

“And something tells me that I get to plan a wedding,” said Jennifer beaming at her son and Wendy.

“Oh mom!” exclaimed David with some red-faced embarrassment.

Sam leaned into whisper into Jennifer’s ear. “Come by the tavern and I’ll help you plan it.”

“The tavern in Heaven, Vermont,” declared Jennifer.

“Heaven, after a fashion,” announced Sam to laughter from the family of travelers – neophyte, acolyte and master. All were on a journey to discover their true selves, their evolving purpose.

Jennifer flew out of bed and ran for the corner of the kitchen that served as the home office. Stealing a pad from the drawer she frantically began to write. Her facial expressions migrated from delight to sorrow and finally to sheer joy. She was so entranced that David’s presence by the kitchen door was lost to her. On an on she scribbled as the censor of the
physical world slowly drew down the curtain. She had been there; she saw her son Johnathan. She understood so much but what did it all mean?

“I’m still working on that too,” whispered David.

“Oh! I didn’t hear you come in,” exclaimed his mother.

“I saw you fly past my room. I had to see if you had remembered to write it all down.”

“I remembered and then it started to fade. It’s frustrating!”

“With repetition it gets easier to remember. You get a longer and longer look at those other worlds that are so close to us but sometimes so far.”

“I don’t understand, but you did what you said you would even when I was so mean to you – blamed you for Johnathan’s ...”

“It’s better now mom. You were able to go with me last night. It was a group effort getting you there. You know you can go again.”

Jennifer got up and walked the few steps to her son and hugged him kissing his cheek.

“You’ll teach me?” she said looking into his eyes.

“We will all teach you. Anyone can go but few put in the effort. It takes practice to hone the skill. In a way you have to earn the privilege of travelling like we did last night.”

“I suspect that not everyone comes back with the ability to read people like you do and help them along this path in life. It is a gift that you must not waste. I want you to take it seriously.”
“I do now mom. I was irresponsible before. Driving that car at speeds too fast for the conditions was wrong. I have been given so much. I love you, I love my job, I’ve fallen for Wendy mom. She’s just perfect, well none of us is but she’s perfect for me. Johnathan and Sam are the masters in this travelling stuff. Once again, my older brother is leading the way. I just didn’t know he had been working with Sam. Every day is a revelation to me. I’m so glad that I didn’t lose my life in that car. I would have missed all that has happened.”

“Does the tavern in Heaven serve any food?”

David flashed a broad smile at his mother. “They have the best burgers and fries around!”

“Are you going to your place in town today?” probed Jennifer drawing circles on his shirt with her index finger.

“No, I’m not feeling the need right now.”

“Good, can you help me clean up the house today? I’m feeling I need to get a fresh start of things. I’ll buy you dinner tonight as a reward.” Her leading tone was cajoling him to comply.

“Of course mom. Let’s make a day of it.”

“Good, then I’ll take you to Heaven tonight ... Heaven, after a fashion.” A wink and a disarming smile squashed any reaming hesitancies David had harbored about their new relationship. Her heart knew.
Mother and son shared a laugh and shared a Saturday working together for the first time in a long time. They still knew very little of where they were during the previous night. It didn’t matter as much now. The very first steps were taken on the path of discovery of their true selves. They were no longer afraid. Their eyes were open.