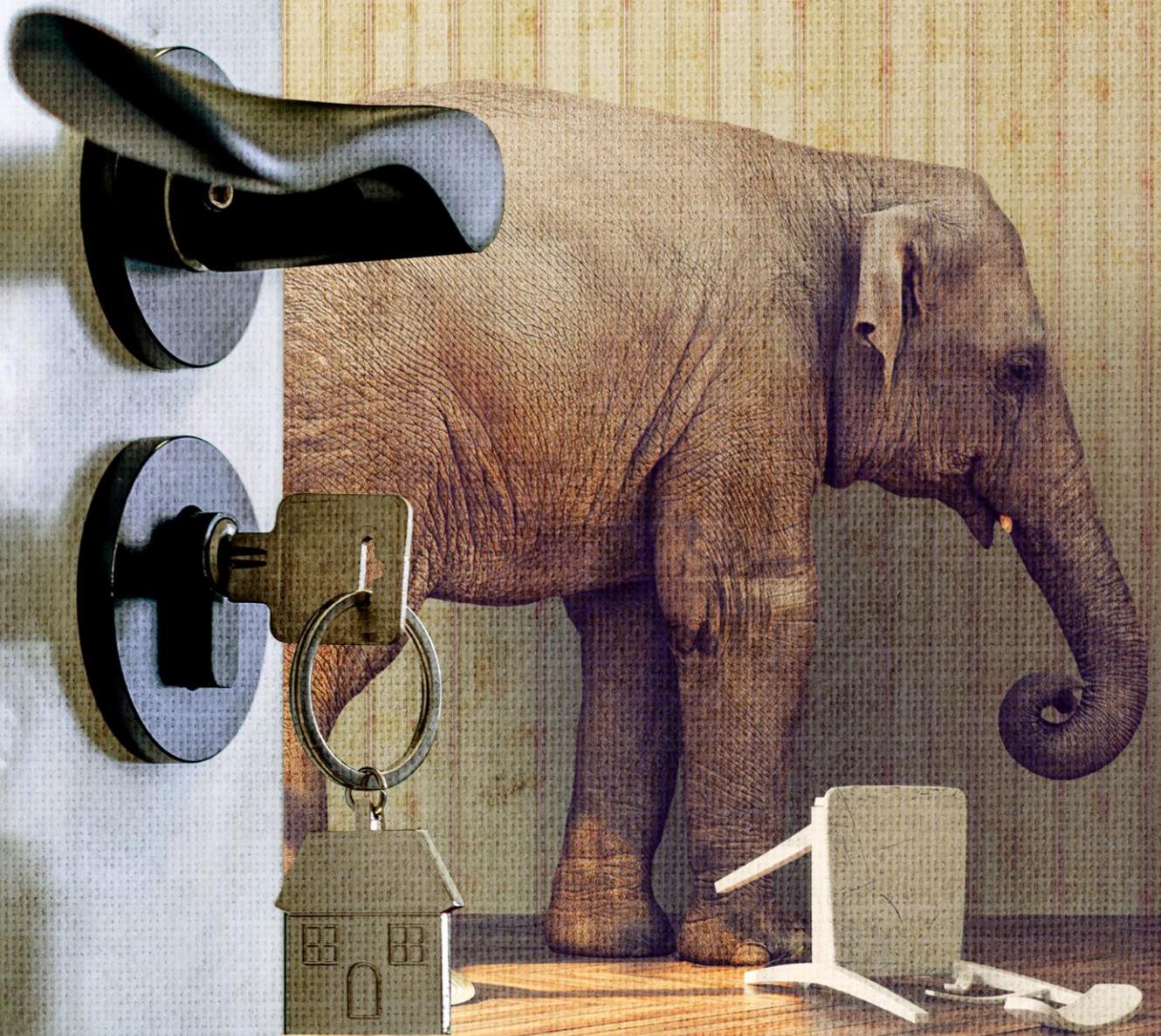


THE EXIT GUIDE



CHRIS WHYLAND

CHRIS WHYLAND

The Exit Guide

The pending decision was always one of life or death. No matter how you frame the question, it's just that simple.

My new client was in his early 40s, at least that's what was written on the intake form. It's hard to tell sometimes. Alcohol, disease, and apathy have a way of adding years to a person's appearance. The intake specialists at the office do their best, but rarely do we get much in the way of helpful information beyond name, address, and date of birth. The remainder would be left to our researchers who work diligently to piece together the rest of the puzzle. Truth be told, I had only glanced at the client binder as I walked up Central Park West because, after so many years on the job, there wasn't much I hadn't already seen.

The address was 14 West 83rd Street – a five-story, pre-war walk-up. Apartment 5B was, of course, located on the top floor. I would have no problem with the five flights of narrow stairs, but the long climb would be a struggle for most city residents.

Given my occupation, I had long since dispensed with the formality of knocking or announcing my presence to maintain the illusion of normalcy. This was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a normal job, so I simply let myself in. I find that if I stick to the standard attire – white shirt, black tie, khakis, and plain black shoes – the client knows who I am. Our unofficial uniform screams *Mormon missionary*, which also helps keep the passersby at arms-length.

My client, a Mr. James Abrams, had his back to me when I entered the apartment. It was a large one bedroom, at least large for the upper West Side. The décor was *bachelor chic* – sweat socks, old take-out containers, and an inappropriate amount of Yankee paraphernalia littering the walls and unkempt shelves. The only item adorning the room that looked out of place was the large helium tank which stood upright in the far corner

outside the bedroom – the kind of tank you might see at a kid’s birthday party used to fill up balloons.

I rustled some papers to attract his attention. I’ve always feared that my appearance alone would send someone into cardiac arrest...although; I’ve had clients where a simple heart attack would have made my job a lot easier. You can only help those who want to be helped.

The man spun around and acknowledged me with a half-frightened, “who are you... how did you get in my apartment,” as his still-functioning brain processed my sudden intrusion into his sacred space.

“I’m Gabe...the Exit Companion.”

After a brief pause, it was clear that my presence wasn’t registering, I continued, “You were expecting me, no? Your doctor, let’s see,” my voice trailing off as I shuffled through the client binder. “Ah, here it is, Doctor Raphael. He contacted our office and said you were in need of our services.”

Still no response.

“You are James Abrams, 14 West 83rd, Apartment 5B, yes?” I said, looking down at the binder for effect.

The man exhaled and relaxed his shoulders. “You’re the, um, the...yeah. Sorry. It’s only one o’clock. I wasn’t expecting you until later. I told them four o’clock. What did you say your name was?”

“It’s Gabe. I’m here to assist you with your end-of-life decision.” James stared out the window with a blank look on his face and mumbled, “You’re the Exit Guide.”

“Well, we’ve had some issues with that name, a trademark dispute, or something like that. People always getting the services mixed up and all. Plus, well, let’s just say the government isn’t a big fan of our work so the names are always changing. Doesn’t matter, we’re all playing the same game, you know, like that Dale Jeter over there,” I said, gesturing to the picture of a baseball player hanging slightly askew on the wall. “We’re all just trying to finish up the fourth quarter, so to speak.”

“Ninth inning,” he replied.

“What’s that?”

“No quarters in baseball...innings. And it’s DEREK Jeter, not Dale,” he said with a look of utter disgust on his face.

I drew my lips in and slowly nodded as I took in the full nature of James Abrams. He was still relatively young, a little soft around the middle, but he didn’t appear sick, at least not physically. He had that look some older men get when they’ve been beaten down by life a few too many times. It’s a look I’ve seen before. But he had kind eyes, and you can tell a lot about a person by their eyes.

“So, Jim, can I call you Jim? I like to keep things informal if that’s alright with you. A couple weeks ago, I had another James, only he went by Jimmy. Really nice guy that Jimmy. I think you would like him. Although come to think of it, he was a Red Sox fan, maybe not so much.”

He just looked at me kind of sideways as he relaxed into the large window overlooking the street. “It’s James. Just James.” He bowed his head when he said this and there was a hint of sadness in his voice.

“Okay, James, why don’t I spare us the awkwardness and tell you a little about what we do. After that, we can chat for a bit before we get on with the rest of it.”

His response was little more than a blank stare, although I could tell he was sizing me up.

“Here’s the good news, committing suicide...you’re ok if I use that word?” He acknowledged with a nod of his head. “Right, the good news is that committing suicide is not against the law in the great state of New York.”

His face contorted, trying to make sense of my statement. “And why is that good news?”

“Because that way, you don’t go out with a felony on your record.” I have used this line many times as a kind of ice breaker. Most people just smile at the absurdity and it relaxes them, but not James.

He paused and stared at me like I had just told him the world was flat. “Why in the hell would I care if I died with a felony on my record?”

“Well, some people believe that felons get judged more harshly in the...” I said, gesturing with my hand in a twirling motion towards the

sky.

“In the what?”

“In the wherever you go after this is all I’m sayin’.”

His stare intensified. “Look, I told the girl on the phone I didn’t want any of that religious nonsense. I don’t need your proselytizing.”

“My apologies James. Didn’t mean to offend. Our services are non-denominational. Between you and me, people who are unburdened by the belief in an afterlife make my job a whole lot easier.”

This seemed to disarm him for the moment and he muttered a simple “yeah, whatever.”

“Good enough. Let me get through the rest of this stuff so we’re both on the same page, and then we can chat for a bit. Where was I? Oh yeah, like I was saying, while committing suicide is not against the law in New York, assisting someone in ending their own life IS against the law. But the thing is, no one has ever really defined what it means to *assist*, legally, it’s still a bit of a grey area. Here’s my policy, James. I don’t touch anything, not you, the machine, or anything that might be left behind.” He nodded and I continued, “Also, I don’t bring anything, take anything, or do anything.” I paused for a moment to let the ground rules sink in.

“Well, then what is it that you do - do?” asked James.

“Fair question. I will answer any questions about ending your life with one hundred percent honesty to the best of my ability, anything from how to do it to what you can expect from beginning to end. I can help you get your affairs in order if needed – legal documents, insurance policies, letters, stuff like that. If you would like, I can help you reach out to loved ones to say goodbye, or can even make some calls after you have passed on. It’s really up to you – I can take care of whatever you need.” I noticed James nodding ever so slightly as I spoke, so I continued.

“I like to tell my clients that you didn’t come into this world alone. There’s no reason you should leave it alone. I’ll be right here the whole time. Trust me. I’m here because you need me, even though I can tell by the look in your eyes that you haven’t quite yet figured out why.”

This seemed to put him more at ease and he motioned for me to take

a seat on the hard wooden bench against the far wall. I sat and began thumbing through the pages in my binder. I needed to get him to open up, so I asked him to tell me the details of his illness, although I already knew the broad strokes.

“I have what’s known as an astrocytoma. It’s a form of brain cancer. Right now, it’s mostly headaches, nausea, vomiting, and the occasional loss of bodily functions, which is just lovely.”

James began a detailed recitation about his diagnosis supplying enough epidemiological data, treatment options, and survival rates to fill an encyclopedia. He had clearly done his research, and experience has led me to conclude that people like this fall into two categories – those fighting to save their life and those looking to rationalize their death. It was clear that James was no longer fighting to live, so I tuned out the lecture. His voice gradually reduced in my ear until it was little more than the sound of a muted trombone.

I continued to leaf through the binder while he droned on until I came across a copy of an old newspaper article. “This article here,” I said, interrupting him in mid-sentence. “*Two Die in Fiery Crash on the Palisades Parkway* – your mom and dad?”

James broke from his lecture taking the paper from my hand. “Where did you get that? I haven’t seen that since...yeah.” His voice trailed off as he studied the article.

“It says here you were only nine years old. That must have been hard?”

“Yeah, nine...” he remarked as he finished reading. “My father’s youngest sister Joanna took me in, Aunt Jo. She was an incredible person – really young at the time, 24 or 5, I think. I mean to take on that kind of responsibility at that age for someone who is basically a stranger, you know? She was a saint.” His eyes wandered around the room as if searching for her voice.

I already knew why he spoke of her in the past tense and chose not to press him on the subject. Joanna had been diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer at the age of 42 – by the time she noticed any symptoms, it had already spread to her lymph nodes. She hung on for another eighteen

months thanks to some experimental chemo and radiation, experiencing all of the indignities that come with that journey. A tragic case – the kind that makes you realize what a precious commodity time is. I think a lot of people get caught up in worrying about their tomorrows without realizing what a day may bring.

“And your uncle?”

“I guess he wasn’t crazy about the idea of raising someone else’s kid, so he split. Can’t really blame him. He didn’t sign up for that.”

James and I chatted for the next hour about frivolous things, baseball being his preferred topic of conversation. I now know enough about those lying in state at Monument Park in Yankee Stadium to teach a college-level course. In turn, James asked me only one question – *are you married?* Apparently, he learned all he needed to know about me when I told him I was not.

By this time, it was already two o’clock, and he had slowly warmed to my presence. But lurking in the background like an albatross around his neck was the real reason for my visit, and it was time to dispense with the pleasantries. I glanced slowly across the room at the helium tank and then fixed my stare at James who lowered his head. “I see you’ve done your homework.”

James responded with a slow but steady nod.

Human beings, for one reason or another, have been ending their own lives since the dawn of time. In some cultures, suicide is glorified, while in others, it’s criminalized. Here in the United States, people have been hanging, shooting, poisoning, and overdosing for as long as I’ve been around. But people didn’t start talking about it openly until Kevorkian came along in the 90s and built his own death machine. All you had to do was push a button, and a cocktail of drugs would enter your bloodstream through an IV which would immediately stop your heart from beating. Primitive, but effective. This contraption was later replaced by the far simpler Deliverance Machine developed by Philip Nitschke, not to be confused with German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Although Nietzsche is best known for declaring *God is Dead*, perhaps they

are distant relatives?

Nitschke's method made ending your own life more accessible – stop down to your local Party City and pick up a canister of helium. Hook that up to a tube connected to a plastic hood, and you're in business. We've all seen someone inhale helium from a balloon to make their voice sound something like Donald Duck. But what most people fail to realize when they watch someone do this is the lack of any adverse reaction - no choking, gagging, or coughing. That's because the human body doesn't recognize the difference between oxygen and helium. So there is no time for panic or fear to set in. The person is rendered unconscious in 5 to 10 seconds due to the absence of oxygen, and the brain shuts down roughly 10 minutes later. No messy cleanup, and it's one hundred percent effective.

“James?” I let his name hang in the air until he was ready to acknowledge the changing tone of our conversation. “I've seen the medical reports, and it's not my place to question your decision. I firmly believe in free will. The only decision we aren't a part of is whether to be born. After that, everything else is up to you.”

He looked up, contemplating what was left unsaid, and I could tell that the implication struck a nerve. “What if I got hit by a car? Or while minding my business, some crackpot pulls out a gun and starts shooting, or or or what if I'm sitting at my desk and a plane flies into my building? How is that MY decision?”

I gave him a second to catch his breath. “That's different. That's fate. Fate represents the potential possibilities of your life. But make no mistake, fate is not necessarily your destiny. You always have more than one option. Fate represents possibilities. Free will is what you choose to do with those possibilities. At least that's what I believe.”

“Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure my parents didn't decide to die in a car accident, and I certainly didn't *decide* to get brain cancer. Life is one giant shit sandwich and every morning I have to wake up and take another bite. It's all...it's all too much. I'm just tired.”

We let those words hang in the air for a bit. I noticed that the sun was

starting its slow descent towards the horizon. “Can we talk a bit more about your family and friends?”

He cut me off like he was expecting the question. “We can, but it will be an awfully short conversation.”

“What I’m getting at is, who do you want me to notify afterward? I assume we will have to get word to your son, but is there anyone else? Also, any letters or personal belongings you want distributed?”

His head turned abruptly. “Son? No son. Never married.”

I pulled out the form with the word FAMILY in large bold type in the header and slid it across the coffee table. The paper was left blank except for the answers to one question:

Children: 1 (name unknown)

DOB: unknown (age 12)

City: New York, NY

James glanced at the form and quickly slid it back. “You got the wrong guy – not possible.”

“No wife, I get that, but not at all possible? An old girlfriend? A one-night stand? Lady of the evening?”

James fixed his stare out the window, hoping the question would go away. But I needed him to be absolutely sure, so I waited.

“My parents were both orthodox Jews, which means I was raised with a certain set of beliefs, for better or worse. By the time I started noticing girls, I was just, awkward, I guess. A therapist I went to way back when said he thought I was trying to replace my mother, sick fuck. I don’t know, maybe he was partially right, maybe I just overthink things. So yeah, unless we’re talking about an immaculate conception, you can check that one off your list.”

As he contemplated his younger days, James suddenly closed his eyes sharply and winced in pain. He dropped his head to his lap and rubbed his temples while the pain slowly subsided. After a good ten seconds had passed, he began breathing again, and the color returned to his face.

“Sorry about that. Every once in a while, the walnut in my head likes to remind me it’s still up there.”

This was the first time he showed any outward sign of the intruder that had taken up residence in his brain, and it was tough to watch. I felt my throat getting heavy. “You okay?” I placed my hand on his shoulder as I could sense he needed to feel my presence. Physical contact of any kind was actively discouraged by the higher-ups. Still, there are times when I feel like I have to be more than just a compassionate presence, so on occasion, I’ll allow myself these minor transgressions.

“Yeah. I’m good. What else?”

“In cases like yours, where there isn’t a significant other, I’ll stay with you the whole time. I’ll leave the door unlocked and call 9-11 on my way out. Typically, I try to give them enough information that they don’t create a big scene. After that, I spend the next couple of days tying up any loose ends, calling your friends, and making sure everything gets to the right people. Did you prepare a will or some distribution instructions so I can get everything where it needs to go?”

He thought about this for a second, squirming in the discomfort of the question. “I don’t really have anyone I would call a friend. I know people from work and whatnot, but I wouldn’t call any of them friends. They’re just people you know, people you see around and acknowledge from time to time. Honestly, I don’t care what happens to all this stuff. Donate it, I guess.” He paused and thought about this for a few seconds before continuing. “The silverware set. There’s a set of sterling silverware on the bottom shelf of that cupboard over there. It was my mom’s. Man, she loved that set. Polished it every month like clockwork. Funny thing is we hardly ever used it. Once or twice, that’s it, and only on really special occasions. I thought about getting rid of it years ago, but could never pull the trigger. Guess it just reminded me of her, and I could never let go.”

“Of the silverware, or the memory?” I said, but I’m not even sure he heard the question as he seemed lost in the moment.

“Maybe you can give it to that nice woman who lives across the hall. Her name is Maria. She seems like someone who would appreciate it, I think. I don’t really know her. Isn’t that crazy? We’ve lived across the hall from each other for almost six years, and we’ve never officially met. I

don't know anyone in the building – except the doorman Ramon, Raymond, or something like that. But yeah, give the silverware to her if she wants it. I think she'll appreciate it and take care of it. She just seems like that kind of person. I did talk to her one time a couple of months ago when they were going to raise everyone's rent. Man, was she pissed. Can't miss her – she's got big blue-green eyes."

He was almost out of breath – and for the first time since we met, he seemed alive.

"Got it. Silverware to the girl with big eyes living across the hall. What else?"

"That's it. Everything else you can just leave or whatever. Wait, you can have this," he said, taking the picture of Derek Jeter off the wall. "Something to remember me by."

When you think you're about to die, time slows down. It's a scientific fact. The brain goes into overdrive, processing every little detail at the speed of light. Time blurs as the mind pauses for the rest of the world to catch up. But seeing things from the other side has the opposite effect. Time accelerates, like a train hurtling towards a stalled car at the intersection. It was now a quarter past three, and the New York Limited was getting ready to leave the West 83rd Street station for the last time.

I gathered my thoughts while having a private moment with Mr. Jeter. I don't typically concern myself with trivial aspects of society like baseball, but I have to say it was a truly remarkable picture. In the photo Derek Jeter is suspended in mid-air a good two feet off the ground hurtling to his right while throwing back to his left with a look in his eyes that says 'not today – not on my watch.' I gestured at James with the picture, afraid I was letting him off too easy. "So no friends...smart."

He looked offended at this thought. "Why is that - *smart*?"

"Well, remaining obscure lets you off the hook. Doesn't it? No fuss, no commotion. Tomorrow, there'll be no real mourning the passing of James Abrams. No candlelight vigils, no wristbands, no protests, nothing. It's just easier."

"Easier for who, you?"

“Oh god, no. Cases like this are much harder for me. These are the ones that stay with you.”

“I’m not afraid of dying, Gabe. I’m just not.” He said this with a look of resolve, and his stare showed not the slightest hint of hesitation.

“I didn’t think you were. Fear is a choice. Life is all about choices.”

He nodded in agreement but then thought better of it and gave me a sideways look.

“You know, James, when I was a kid, I used to think about killing myself. I never told anyone that before.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“In a word, fear.”

“Yeah, but fear is a choice.”

“So is apathy, but I chose fear.”

He pondered this for several long seconds while the room fell silent. Outside, an ominous-looking cloud made its way down Columbus Avenue, and a light rain began tapping at the window. He finally turned to me and said, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you choose fear over apathy?”

“That’s a great question. I find myself thinking about it quite a bit lately. There comes a time in everyone’s life when it’s time to say goodbye, whether we realize it or not. It all just boils down to one thing – is this that time? I suppose I was too afraid to believe it was my time. Too afraid of missing out, too afraid of the nothingness.”

“Is that why you do this now? Is this your penance?”

“Penance? God no. Doing this is a privilege. I mean to be that presence for someone in their final moments? It’s just an awesome, awesome responsibility.”

“I couldn’t do it. I’d have nightmares,” he said. “I couldn’t sit there and hold someone’s hand while they died.”

“I’m not here to hold your hand, James. The other people, they’re the hand-holders. People like you and me, we’re the truth seekers.”

I got up and paced slowly about the room as the tempo of the droplets

pecking at the glass picked up speed. A weathered look had replaced the kind face that greeted me only hours before. It was as if our paths had merged into one, and I slowed my cadence so he could digest every word. “We live in a culture that hides from dying, James. We all die at some point, every single one of us. But our common enemy is not death. The enemy is intolerable suffering.” He started rocking in his chair, lost in deep thought, as my words hung heavy in the air. “And when I use the word suffering, I’m not just talking about physical pain. The truth is that most people who choose to end their life don’t do it because they can’t control their pain. They do it because they’ve lost the capacity to experience joy.”

As if on cue, the skies opened up, and the rains enveloped the street below. His head slowly swayed back and forth like a pendulum. He squared up and looked me dead in the eyes. “Who are you?”

I paused for a moment to give him time to ponder his own question. “You’re asking the wrong question, James. The real question is - who are you? Me? I’m nobody. I’m one of the dozens of nobodies you pass in the street every week. I am...I am who I am. Do you understand?”

Free will. I told James I was a firm believer in free will, but the truth is that there is nothing free about it. It’s an illusion, a fantasy. Our thoughts and actions emerge from a series of events totally outside our control, most of which we are never aware of. We just start down one path or another until we are so far gone that we simply are unable to find our way back. Worse yet, most of us simply stop looking.

He was now completely lost in his thoughts.

“I need you to know something, James. I’ve been with a countless number of people at the end of their life. Some really, really horrific cases. Young fathers with ALS, terminal cancer patients, renal failure, blood disease, dementia, you name it. I was right there with them by their side as they said their final goodbyes. I like to think that I brought them some peace when they closed their eyes and continued on their journey. They all had one regret or another – I spent too much time at the office...I was unfaithful to my wife...I never saw the Grand Canyon. That’s just

life. It's human nature. But they also had one other thing in common. They had all lived. Every single one of them had lived." I handed him back the picture of Derek Jeter. "They tried."

A sole tear made its way down his right cheek like one of the raindrops traversing the window pane. It was a tear of regret born of a life that had not yet been lived. I took a knee behind the chair he was sitting in and lowered my voice to little more than a whisper. "A long time ago, my Father shared with me this story. It's a story that goes back thousands of years." James just stared blankly at the rain cleansing the city below.

"Many, many years ago, six brothers lived in a small village in India. The brothers were very close and relied on each other for everything because each was born blind. The brothers never married and never ventured beyond the walls of their tiny village. Their view of the outside world was shaped by the stories they heard from the other villagers. In India, the elephant is a sacred animal, and many Hindus believe that they are the living incarnation of the god Lord Ganesha. In the Hindu religion, Ganesha is the god of wisdom and remover of obstacles. As the brothers got older, they heard more and more stories about the sacred elephant, and they became fascinated by the thought of this magnificent creature. Eventually, the other villagers arranged to have an elephant brought to their town for the brothers to experience. When that day finally arrived, each of the brothers reached out and touched a part of the elephant to confirm the many stories they had been told. One brother touched the massive side of the elephant. Another held on to the trunk. The third brother felt the smooth tusk while the fourth put his arms around a massive leg. The fifth brother grabbed onto one of the giant ears waving back and forth while the sixth held the tail. Startled by all the attention, the great creature quietly walked back into the jungle, and the brothers were left to themselves to talk about their encounter. The first brother insisted that the elephant was like a wall and wondered if someone had played a cruel joke on them. The second brother who held the trunk agreed that the elephant probably did not exist, and he surmised that what he felt was probably just a large snake. The third brother, who had

grasped the tusk, corrected him and said it was not a snake; rather, it was a well-made spear. The fourth brother remarked that when he wrapped his arms around the base of the creature, all he felt was a rather large tree. The fifth who grabbed the ear argued that he felt only a rug hanging on the line to dry. Finally, the sixth brother who held the tail said they had all been fooled as what he grabbed onto was nothing more than an old wiry rope. The only thing the brothers agreed upon was that elephants do not exist, and they returned to their home never to speak of them again.”

James sat motionless.

“Now, to some people, James, this story represents the need for collective wisdom, the need to work together to find a common good. Other people see this as a cautionary tale about absolute truth and being blind to one's surroundings. But I don't see it that way. In fact, I don't think the brothers were blind at all. And that makes it a very sad story. A sad story about six brothers who lived a meaningless existence without ever experiencing the true beauty this world has to offer.”

I moved closer so he could feel my presence and lowered my voice almost to a whisper. “Open your eyes, James. It's not too late.”

James turned away. As the bells from the church down the street distantly chimed four times, the silence that had overtaken the room was suddenly interrupted by a loud knock on the door. When James turned around, the room was empty. He opened the door feeling a cool breeze caress his shoulders. On the other side of the door stood a portly middle-aged man drenched from head to toe and struggling to catch his breath.

With one arm holding on to the door frame for dear life, the man sputtered, “Are...you...James Abrams? I'm...I'm here from...the Exit Network. Good Lord, these walk-ups are Hell!”

James quietly thanked the man for his visit but told him that he needed some time to get his affairs in order. As he closed the door, he paused when he saw Maria step aside to let the man pass through the narrow hall. She lifted her head to meet his gaze, and she smiled.



One day, many years later, my boss stopped me in the hall and handed me a copy of the Daily News. “Gabriel, take a look at this. This one, wasn’t he one of yours?” he said, pointing to a small picture in the upper right-hand corner of the paper.

It was a simple obituary with a picture of a smiling older gentleman. I immediately recognized those eyes. It read: James M. Abrams, age 62. Survived by his wife Maria of 17 years and a son Michael, age 12. They were the light of his life. James would like his friends and family to know that he leaves this world with eyes wide open, having touched the elephant.

Chris Whyland is a self-employed attorney who was born and raised in Syracuse, New York. He did his undergraduate studies in Criminal Justice at the University at Albany and his post graduate work at Syracuse University (JD/MBA). He is also an Associate Producer of the upcoming new musical *Because of Winn Dixie*. This is his first attempt at fiction and his writing interest centers on exploring complex contemporary characters. Contact: whylandc@gmail.com