Ray rolled out of bed early — did morning chores and ate a good breakfast. Call it gut instinct, but he had a way of knowing he needed to go all day, so he poured a second bowl of cereal into the remaining milk. Nellie the cat seemed surprised when Ray served her an extra day’s worth of food. “You never know where you’ll end up.”

He picked up his brown tweed hat, popped it on his bald head and gave it an extra tap. “Where’s my overcoat?” He ransacked the front closet, then checked each dining room chair. “Wherever is my coat?”

“Matilda? Matty? Where’s my coat?” He laughed and shook his head. “Right. You can’t answer from heaven, now, can you?” He looked up. “Wish you could, little woman.”

Sunlight reflected off Matty’s old, chipped coffee mug in its permanent spot beside the kitchen sink. Light beams radiated from it, causing everything else in the room to become indistinguishable.

Blinded, Ray wiped his eyes. “I didn’t know how much I’d miss you until you went home to heaven.” Sigh. “I hope I treated you right when you were here.” He shook his head again. “You are my Juliet …”

“I’d love to hear your part again. Here Hon, I’ll help you with it.” Deep breath. “You are my Rom —”

His overcoat waved from the hall coatrack.

“There it is. I knew you’d find it, Love.”

He slipped it on, one arm in and began a smooth waltz. “One, two, three.” He switched direction. “One, two, three.” He laid his head against her and hummed along. “You fit perfectly in my arms. I know God measured us — you first, then me — to make sure we were just right for each other.”

The music slowed and he pulled on the other sleeve. “You comin’ with me today, Matty? It might be a long day.” He nodded. “I know. We need to spend as much time as we can together. Time is short. We never know.”

He dug under mail on the old table that was covered in a floral oil cloth. The table groaned when he put his weight on it, searching amidst the clutter. “Now, why don’t I put them in the same place each time?” His car keys dropped onto the table right in front of him. “Aww, thanks. You always know where they are.” He chuckled. “And you always know I don’t know where they are.”

A plastic shopping bag fluttered off the kitchen counter. “Oh, yes. I’ll need that too. I always seem to find treasures here and there, that need a home.” He grinned. “We already gave away the stuff I brought home last week. Remember the little girl’s eyes as she hugged the doll? She just sparkled. So cute.”

He closed the door behind him and held his arm out. “My arm, Matty?” He cocked his head and laughed. “Oh, stubborn, I see. You can do it by yourself, can you? Well, good girl.”

He opened the car’s passenger door and waited, then hit the lock before he closed it.

“I love this car.” Ray whistled. “Remember when it first came out? I knew I had to have this Ford Thunderbird. Rides like a dream.”

He turned up the radio and rolled down the window. “Too much air? Okay. We don’t want your hair all mussed up, do we.” He rolled up his window and looked to the passenger side. “I meant to tell you; you look stunning today. You do every day, but today, there is just something different about you. Did you do your hair different?”

He laughed. “You can always do something with yours, but what can I do about this?” He removed his hat, showing off a shiny bald head.

He waved at people as he drove into town. “We have to stop at the Post Office. That’s always on our list.” He shook his head. “Nope. Nothing to mail.”

He pulled in front of the old building and parked. “I love this sweet, old building.” He leaned forward and looked up at the flag. “Remember when Elmer and I had to shimmy up the flagpole because the flag was stuck? We weren’t kids then either.” He laughed. “We couldn’t do it today. Look, there’s Elmer now.” He waved.

He stepped out and caught the shopping bag in the door. “Oh … whoops.” He whisked the bag free and shut the door again. Small flakes drifted to the ground. “Be right back.”

Inside the post office, several people milled around; they checked mailboxes, compared rain gauge amounts, laughed about how many credit card applications they found in the mailbox. Where was that social security check or letter from the kids?

“Hello Ray.”

Ray turned. “G’morning, Elmer. Whatcha up to today?”

Elmer flipped through a magazine and threw it in the trash. “No good. You? How you been, buddy?” He shifted his weight with the help of a cane.

A hideous, gnarly demon spirit sneered at Ray from behind Elmer, rising slowly to its full height of … four feet.

“What are you doing here, Fear? What gives you the right?” Ray spoke directly to it, eye to eye.

“What Ray?” Elmer leaned in, cupping his ear.

Ray shook Elmer’s hand. “I said, what are you doing here?”

“Oh.” Elmer chuckled. “Same as every other day.” He held up a handful of mail.

The demon glowered at Ray.

Ray laughed. “Me too, Elmer. God is good, ole man. He is truly good. Even when times are hard, he is always faithful.”

The demon began to sweat. And where the sweat ran, it burned into its flesh, making steam rise.

Elmer patted Ray’s shoulder. “He sure is, Ray.” He shuddered. “I don’t know what I’d do without Him … how I’d make it.”

The look on the demon’s face was of rage, fear, and pain. The stench was staggering—a mix of sour milk, rotten eggs, and putrid meat.

Ray glanced at it, still standing behind Elmer. “You don’t intimidate me, Fear. I told you to go in Jesus’ name, many years ago. And I can do it again. In Jesus’ name, go!”

“What’s that, Ray?” Elmer tapped at his hearing aide. “Must need new batteries.”

Ray leaned into Elmer’s ear, checking behind Elmer’s back for the dissipating vapor trail. “Yup. Gone.” He looked into Elmer’s face. “Yup, we can’t do any day without Jesus. Well, try to be good, ole man. Peace unto you, in Jesus’ name.” He shivered and several little flakes floated to the floor.

“Same to you, Ray. You always lift my spirits.”

“You too.”

Ray shuffled to his post office box. He kind of missed the old job. Missed the community greeting him as he walked the mail route each day. Even in winter, walking in the snow or ice, getting out and breathing fresh air kept him healthy and hardy. Matty always used to say it kept him healthy and horny. He grinned. Why they never had any kids was beyond him.

He inserted the key and unlocked the little door. Stuffed. Vacation offers. The church bulletin from last Sunday—they knew they didn’t have to do that. A magazine he never signed up for. And bills. “Hope I have the money to pay these.” Right away he added, “Oh Lord, you are my keeper. You are my Good Shepherd; I shall not want.”

He locked the door and turned to go. Pieces, flecks fluttered behind him.

Back in the car, he glanced at the mail, slipped it into the shopping bag, and handed it onto the passenger seat. “It’ll keep ’til tonight.” He chuckled. “Things have changed a little since you went to heaven, Matty.” He ducked his chin to his chest, face scrunched. “You always paid them so early. I … don’t.”

Starting up his car, he put it into reverse, looked behind him, next to him and in his rear-view mirror. He carefully backed out. “Where to next?”

Bam!

“What the …” He looked behind him and saw Mrs. Dornsby in her old jalopy. “How on earth? Grrr … great!” Ray clinched his teeth. He mumbled under his breath, glanced over at Matty, then behind him. Straight ahead. Behind him. Finally. “Okay, God. What do You want to do in her and in me?”

He pulled back into the parking space again, giving his car gas to detach from hers. He shifted into park and got out to inspect the damage. As he turned to walk to the back of the car, chunks fell from him, from under his coat, drifting from under his hat. He kicked through some on the concrete.

Mrs. Dornsby got out in a huff and pointed to the front end of her car. “What do you think you are doing old man? You hit me. You hit my car. How careless. You weren’t looking, you \*%(\*&#$%\*%!”

“Where on earth did you come from? I looked both ways, behind me, up and down and I didn’t see you.”

Elmer pointed in the opposite direction and nodded.

Ray just shook his head, as he caught a glimpse of Elmer shaking his, grinning. He pinched his lips between his fingers. He took his hat off and fanned his face, until he found someone to call the police.

The siren jarred them all.

Mrs. Dornsby declared she was okay and started backing toward her car, when the squad car pulled in. Living in a small town had its merits, with the sheriff’s department right next to the post office.

An hour later, after Elmer gave his eye-witness account, the deputy let him go. He grinned and waved as he limped to his car.

Mrs. Dornsby sheepishly drove off.

They had each given their version of what happened. Mrs. Dornsby finally gave up trying to blame it on Ray. And Ray graciously told the police he didn’t want to press charges; he would take care of his own body work. The word about town being, she was in a tough state, financially.

He opened his car door and stepped over a fallen lump of flesh.

“Whew.” He glanced over at Matty. He patted her shoulder. “Help me pray.” He removed his hat. “Lord, thanks for being here. Thanks for allowing me to bless her with favor. When the cop … what Matty? Oh, uh, the deputy, when the deputy said he couldn’t believe I let her go, I had to chuckle. Because You let me go, when You died on the cross long ago. I thank you Lord. Thanks for bringing her across my path … or across my bumper.”

A pile of flesh gathered at his feet and beside him on the seat.

He started the engine and shifted it into reverse, taking more time than ever, checking this way and that, making sure no one was behind him and that no one drove into a parking place from the wrong direction.

“Matty, let’s check out the park today. It’s a nice sunny day — not too windy. You be warm enough in your coat?” He reached over and patted her. “Maybe we can just sit in the car.”

As he drove into the park, he noticed a woman and a little girl, playing with a red ball. He parked his car beside theirs, noticing the out-of-town license plate and her car had some dents and scratches in it. “Not as bad as Mrs. Dornsby’s, huh Matty. I don’t know what that woman has been running into, other than us, but hers takes the prize.” He nodded. “I know. She probably has a lot on her mind these days, since her husband passed. I shouldn’t be too critical.”

He looked over to the passenger seat. “You care if I get out? Okay, but let me know when you want to go.”

He pushed off of the car seat. “Wow. I’d better be getting something to eat soon. Must have taken more time than I thought at the post office.” He looked back in the car. “You getting hungry, too? Okay. I won’t be long. So sweet spending the day with my Beloved.”

He sat on a park bench and took off his hat, laying it beside him. “Ahh. The sun feels so good on my face, Lord.”

He could feel the woman and girl watching him, trying not to be too obvious. “Lord, what do you want to do here? For them?”

It wasn’t long before the inevitable happened. The girl kicked the ball and it bumped against Ray’s shoe. He leaned down to retrieve it and looked up into her uncertain face. What a precious little girl — so tiny. Was she about four years old? Hard to tell these days. The old ladies look younger, and the young ones look older. Pretty easy to get into trouble if a guy wasn’t careful.

He gave the ball a gentle toss into her arms. She smiled and thanked him. Running back to the woman, she called out, “Mommy, he’s nice.”

The woman looked at him and glanced away.

“Oh, Lord, there’s pain in those eyes. Help.”

He was so soothed by the warm sun, that he drifted off to sleep, when pop!

He raised up — awake. He looked up in time to see the girl, eyes wide, her hand covered her mouth. She bent to pick up her ball, staring at a hole in it.

Ray could just barely make out older boys and a red pick-up behind a line of trees bordering the park. A beer can flew overhead, and another shot was fired, piercing the can. Ping-pop! A bullet zinged through the trees. Another whizzed into the tree trunk next to Ray.

He hollered to the woman to run to her car, but she stared in shock. He turned to his car. “Matty. Get down. Keep your head down!” He stood and lumbered over to the woman, grabbing the girl on the way, and pushed them down. He turned a picnic table over on its side and pushed them and himself behind it.

More shots pelted the ground and the tabletop, driving up dirt and debris around them. The little girl screamed. Ray reached out to the woman, and she rolled into his arms, the girl between them. He laid his cheek against the woman’s head and prayed aloud. “Lord Jesus, please shield us. Please stop this madness and keep us safe. Lord, bring help.”

In the midst of the racket, sirens pierced their ears. Sprays of bullets stirred up more dirt.

Three squad cars rounded the bend in the road and one skidded to a stop beside Ray’s car. Two officers ran to them. “Are you folks okay?”

Ray tried to get up but couldn’t. A deputy helped him, while the other one looked after the woman and her daughter. Her face was streaked with dirt and tears.

Ray pumped the deputy’s arm. “How’d you get here so fast? It only just started.”

The man pointed to a dilapidated house behind them. “Mrs. Dornsby called us. She reported a window broken and heard shots.”

“I’ll be. Goes to show, Lord works in mysterious ways, huh Matty.”

When the police had been assured they were all right and statements were filed, they went on their way, taking the boys to the sheriff’s department.

Ray dusted off his coat. “Where are you from?”

“Just passing through.” She picked up their blanket and toys.

Ray glanced at their car then back at them. Then at Matty. “What say we go over to that gas station a block down and see how full your tank can get.” Ray winked at the girl then and said, “and I seem to remember there’s a fast food restaurant that has kid’s meals, right next door.” He patted his chest. “My treat.”

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Ray smiled as Mindy licked chocolate sauce from her fingers.

“We better get going.” Isabella gathered their trash. She looked up at Ray and sighed. “Thanks Ray, for reminding me that life can be good, that people can be good.” Her chin quivered.

“Isabella, it’s like you’ve been lost and now you’re found. Things can still be tough, but without Jesus, we are lost. Could I pray with you?”

She patted Mindy’s shoulder. Her eyes met Ray’s and welled up. “Ray, I want more than anything to raise Mindy to love God, I just didn’t think God would want me back because of the way I’ve been — what I’ve done. Please pray.”

Ray tucked his hat under his arm and as their hands touched, wings of angels covered them. There was sweet communion with the Father as two of His lambs came back to Him. Beams of heaven shone down on the three as they sat.

As they walked to their cars in the parking lot, Isabella’s was tank was full and their tummies were full, too. Even a bag of road treats found its way onto the back seat beside Mindy.

Ray gave Isabella a hug and opened the car door for her.

She looked down at the keys in her hand, as he shut the door. “Ray, do you think God set that up back there in the park so we could meet? I mean, so I could get right with Him?”

He leaned into the window. “I sure do, missy. He does that, you know. This morning when I left home, I told Matty I knew God was up to something. I knew he had this day all planned. He let me know that. That’s how much He loves you both.”

“Ray?” Isabella started. “Could I call you sometime? I mean, could we come back sometime to see you?”

“I’d love that missy. Gotta take Mindy back to get another kids meal, right little one/“

Mindy grinned from her car seat.

Ray walked back to his car kicking chunks of flesh.

“Matty, what a great morning!” He looked at his watch. “Ummm … afternoon. It’s already middle afternoon and I just ate lunch. I’ve spent the better part of this day with cops!” He cleared his throat. “With deputies. Sorry.” He started his car. “Purrs like a kitten. Lord, thank you for those good co … policemen. Please protect them.” Ray scanned the horizon as he drove. “Lord, what’s next? Matty, any ideas?”

He found himself driving along the lake road. Such a beautiful day — just an ordinary day.

“Let’s park here.” Ray eased the car into a parking place facing the lake. “The shade looks good.” He looked at the passenger seat. “Looks like a good place to smooch.” His eyes twinkled. “No, I never give up, Matty. You are the best thing, next to Jesus, that ever happened to me.”

The lake sparkled as the setting sun reflected off the waves. Trees bowed in the breeze.

Ray must have snoozed a little. The light was different when he woke. He pushed out of the car. “Matty, I remember a trail over here. Want to go?” He walked around the car and opened the passenger side door, then shut it. “My arm little woman?”

He lifted his face into the breeze. The air was so sweet, so gentle. “Are you in the wind, Father?”

He closed his eyes, leaned against the hood, and drank in Father’s Presence. Sigh. He was so tired.

Ray stretched and as he did odd pieces drifted onto the hood. Just as he pushed himself up, he remembered the old path. He had wandered onto it when he was just a boy. It led to an old cemetery back then. “I wonder if I can find it. I was, well, a bit younger then.” He chuckled. “You too, Matty?” He pointed. “I think it’s over here.”

Ray pushed some bushes aside and saw the beginning of a trail. He held the bushes for Matty to get through, then let them swing back into place, with more flesh catching on them.

“Lord, I am so tired. Must have been the merry-go-round at the restaurant. Mindy is so cute. I feel like I have kids! Please guard them and guide them. Put your laborers around them. Draw them to You, Lord. If they will seek You, they will find You.”

A little further on the path, Ray recognized something, and his eyes lit up. “It’s still here.”

Before him was the old stone building he had played in when he was young. Or rather, now the foundation was outlined with stones in the shape of the building that once stood there. He followed the line of stone until he came to what was the doorway, and went in.

“Watch your step, Matty. I must be tired. Hard to see right now. Yes. It is getting darker outside.”

As he stumbled into the remains, he wasn’t seeing weeds and tall grass, but rather he saw himself balancing on each stone. He saw his little boy shoes on the ground and stones before him, jumping—arms out to keep steady.

The fireplace. “Oh, I remember getting caught playing with matches in here. Dad was so mad.” He shook his head. “Let’s sit for a while, Matty. I’ll help you down.”

He slumped onto the hearth. “Ouch. Long ways down. Longer than I remembered.”

He jerked awake. It was almost dark. “Must have nodded off again. Better get up and get home. We don’t want to miss our TV shows.”

He pushed himself up and turned to help Matty. He blew out a deep breath. “What a good day, huh Matty. The car is this way … I think. I must have really zoned out there.”

As he plodded along, pieces of flesh fell in big chunks to the ground.

“Lord, I’m tired, but … please help us get to the car … I need You … Lord. When it’s my time, I pray you’ll find me worthy.”

At every corner, every turn, he stopped and looked, sensing the path. Up one way, down the other. Seeking direction, feeling his way, holding his hand out at his side.

He came to a clearing, peaceful and beautiful. “Must have rained more here, than at our place.” A small pond shimmered ahead in the distance and Ray stumbled ahead, always careful to wait, then step ahead. Wait. Then step.

“Lord, I hurt so, today. Please show me my heart. Please forgive me for being mad at Mrs. Dornsby. Get those boys in the park Your kind of help. Help me forgive them. Oh, and Lord, take care of Isabella and Mindy. Oh, these old bones are … old. Help me.”

More and more flesh fell away.

He reached the pond and eased onto the green grass. “Sure grows better here than in our yard, huh Matty. Oh Lord, I feel You. It’s so sweet here.”

As Ray sat, flesh continued to fall away, until there was a brightness and splendor around him.

“Father, it would be so wonderful if we could stay here forever. I need to find my way back, but it’s so quiet here. Help me, Father. I have to be home to feed Nellie. She gets so upset when I’m late …”

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Sirens wailed and lights flashed, illuminating the dark woods.

The deputy called in on his radio. “Yes. Send an ambulance to the old lake.”

His partner tapped on the hood of the squad car. “Man, it’s just like old Ray. I saw him earlier at the fast-food restaurant with the woman and little girl. You know, the shooting in the park.”

“Yeah. He was at the post office before that, when Mrs. Dornsby hit his car.”

“Man. This one’s hard to lose.”

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Ray stood a few steps away, holding hands with dear Matty, and they both watched the deputies as they carried out their duties.

He hugged his head onto his dear wife’s, kissed every finger and stared into her eyes for the first time in twenty-three years. He caressed her hair, remembered everything about her. “It’s been so long, my Matty.” Sigh. “I’ve missed you so.” He stroked her cheek. “You’re so young. Just like when we first met.”

Matty giggled. “So are you, my dear Ray. So are you.”

He felt his own face and laughed out loud. “My face, my skin … it’s not droopy anymore.” He patted his chest and quieted. “Am I … are we—“

“Yes.” Matty’s eyes glowed. “Yes, dear Ray. We are in—“

Someone patted his shoulder and he turned to see … Jesus—His arms around them both. “Welcome, Ray. Matty and I have been waiting for you to come home.” His eyes twinkled. “Well-done, Ray. Well-done.”

Ray bowed his head. “Lord—“

“Shh. We’ll talk about it later. Right now …” He turned and opened his arm wide behind them. Mist lifted, revealing a huge court filled with people — waving, clapping, singing, dancing.

Melodies, drums, stringed instruments, tambourines, voices, piano-like instruments, cow bells. Instruments never seen on earth all joined together in worship.

Ray jumped up and down, pointing to his left ear. “I can hear with this ear!” Colors he’d never seen, couldn’t describe, reflected in rays set off by huge prisms with light streaming through. The light didn’t seem to have a source or point of origin. It filled everything, everywhere.

Angels surrounded them. They greeted old friends who had guided Ray’s path. With each slap on their backs, sparks radiated joy and understanding. Light flashed off each one, reflecting from the Father.

A path cleared as Jesus guided them into the center. Drums beat louder. Every instrument joined. Every voice rose. Every foot tapped or danced.

Jesus jumped and danced, then stopped suddenly. He clapped and all stopped. He shouted, “Ray is home!”

Laughter broke out and joyful noise resumed.

“Another one is home!”

**My Author Notes**

I love writing short stories because, well, they are short. They are also how I started writing fiction.

I have always journaled and through that process God has healed me, given me greater revelation about my path and relationships.

But short stories are where my child can come out to play. They are fun. I am gutsy in taking chances with the character’s lives in a short story.

I am re-reading Ray Bradbury’s Zen in the Art of Writing, and he inspires me, he thrills me. I can do this thing called writing.

Back to the stories.

Did I say they are short? A novel is looonnnng! I have written five novels, so I know a little about how the middle and end feel after a thrilling beginning.

Short stories are God’s Creative Writing 101 for me. They almost represent a chapter in a book and maybe someday one of these three stories may become part of a book. I’m practicing writing those chapters when I write a short story. I pretend each chapter is like a mini novel with its own story arc, characters, setting, etc.

(Describe each story and the writing/thoughts behind it.)

“Flesh Falling” is one of the originals. This may be a little rebellious, but I wrote this breaking all rules, such as: don’t be preachy, can’t be too Christian, shouldn’t have sex, don’t write in Christianese. I broke them all in “Flesh Falling.” I felt my character, Ray was that kind of man. I wanted to be true to him.

Sometimes, I just have to do it my way. It’s just more fun that way.

What inspired this story was a Bible verse: Galatians 5:24 - “And those who belong to Christ Jesus (the Messiah) have crucified the flesh (the godless human nature) with its passions and appetites and desires.”

As I walk through this life, I keep thinking about what that looks like — crucifying the flesh — flesh meaning our own desires, not the actual flesh. (Sometimes we have to differentiate with all the cutting going on nowadays.) How would I be living if at each provocation in life — someone confronting me, telling me what I have to do, pushing down a habit or addiction to drugs, shopping — I made a choice — the right choice? What happens in me as I go against my desires and choose God’s desires for me?