

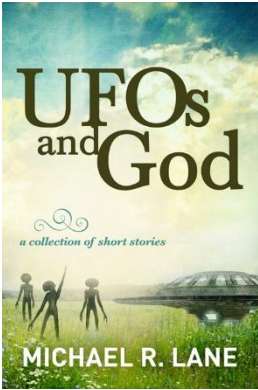
UFOs and God



a collection of short stories



MICHAEL R. LANE



UFOs and God is not single-themed but a medley of characters kayaking through the erratic channels of life. Some of these stories are sharp edged. Others are as inviting as a cozy room with a few adding a pinch of humor.

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A Collection of Short Stories

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About the Author

Michael R Lane's passions for reading and creative writing inspired him to devour everything from contemporary novels to classical literature. As a high school student, he wrote poetry for his own enjoyment. That joy blossomed into a zeal that would not be contained. Composing poetry rippled into short fiction writing that led to the literary path of creating short stories, novels and screenplays.

Michael studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Point Park College, Sonoma State University, and Portland State University. He has written creatively for more than three decades, and has had poetry and short fiction published in numerous literary publications.

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EMANCIPATION

THE GEM CONNECTION

A DROP OF MIDNIGHT (POETRY)

UFOs and GOD

A Collection of Short Stories

By Michael R. Lane

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SEATTLE

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To the overworked, underpaid and
underappreciated educators the world over.
A heartfelt, soul-felt thank you!

Whiff

The Embassy corporate car pulled up in front of its first sales stop on Pride Street. The corporate vehicle was pristine. The Embassy Elite Fleet team had done an immaculate job of cleaning it inside and out before turning it over to their top sales person. Inside the modern hybrid branded with the Embassy logo and contact information, Dominic Dinfield gathered himself to begin his rounds. Dominic normally made his rounds in the morning and caught up on paperwork in the afternoon. Intermittently, he would do an afternoon visit mostly as a follow-up to customers he had already signed or were on the fence. His numbers were amongst the best in the region so no one griped about his schedule.

Dominic was ten minutes late from his normal eight a.m. start. He wrestled with organizing his sales materials and customer information that had been mysteriously scrambled into disarray. The muddle of his briefcase was a fitting metaphor for the way his life had been for the last three months. For the last couple of days his son had been ransacking the house in search of his hidden birthday gifts. This time Dominic suspected his youngest had rifled through his leather briefcase on such a quest and decided not to mention it to his father.

Little did his son know all of his presents were neatly and brightly wrapped and waiting for him at his mom's place. Three months prior a joint divorce decree had been finalized for Dominic and his wife. It had marked a new dimension in his life; one that had emerged from structured discontent.

Without realizing it Dominic had come to place Teresa, eleven, and Mason, eight at the center of his universe. His children provided him with the impudence to ride the dive-bombing effects of lost love and shameful divorce and move forward into the light of redemptive hope. Just when he thought he was getting a handle on things the school year started. Dominic had only begun to work out the kinks of readying his children for school and himself for work. He had, of late, found himself feeling as though he was behind. Most times, he was correct.

It was also the first time Dominic had to handle all family responsibilities on his own. During the best of times, he would drop their children off at school and Rosario, who everyone called Rosa except Dominic, would pick them up after work. Rosario was also the one who herded their children in the morning while he prepared breakfast and readied their lunches. He and Rosario were rock solid as far as their parenting teamwork went. It was as husband and wife where they eventually faltered.

Rosario was a dynamo when it came to her professional career. She had an insatiable passion for business success and upward mobility. Her voracious appetite along with her stellar brilliance had landed her in no time a top executive position at one of the largest corporations in the world. Rosario was destined for a presidency that would be her gateway to a CEO position. Dominic had much more modest aspirations. He was content making a living wage at jobs with decent benefits as long as it meant he would have quality time with his family. Rosario put in long hours at the office. He did the minimum forty with few exceptions. Rosario always brought work home. He rarely did. As his wife sprinted up the corporate ladder, his advancement was at best modest until it ultimately became stagnant. To Rosario her work was divine. She cherished and relished her

professional achievements. While Dominic was always proud of her accomplishments, he savored most when they functioned as a family.

The idea of Dominic becoming a househusband had been discussed between him and Rosario. Try as he might, Dominic could not bring himself to accept that singular role. He did not mind bringing home a fraction of the income his wife generated, but he felt it necessary he financially contributed as a matter of principal. His male ego required it. He was the type of man his father had raised him to be. It was how Dominic was bringing up Mason. Archaic or not, that was the way of Dinfield men.

Dominic never doubted Rosario remained faithful throughout their marriage, as had he. It was not in their natures to cheat, although their reasoning for fidelity he believed differed. For him it was a promise of the heart. Dominic had not only married the woman he loved but had intended to spend the rest of his life with her. For Rosario love was only part of the equation. Marriage for her was a binding agreement to spend their lives together and contracts were something Rosario held sacred. This was, of course, supposition on Dominic's part. He had no desire to discover if his speculation was true. Rosario was his wife and for Dominic that was all that mattered.

Some viewed his ex as a cold fish. Dominic knew better. It was not only because after fourteen years of marriage their passion never dwindled in the bedroom; nor was it because Rosario was thoughtful and considerate when it came to matters she deemed important like family birthdays, holidays or anniversaries. Rosario was the tale of two women. On the one hand, she was a hard charging focused professional. On the other, she was caring and thoughtful but only rudimentarily affectionate as a mother and spouse.

As a result of Rosario's blazing success, they moved into a larger house in an upscale part of town. It seemed to alter their family dynamic. As Rosario skyrocketed toward her goals, their family found themselves further and further back in her rearview mirror. Rosario insisted they employ a nanny to help with the children. Dominic objected. Rosario won out. His wife insisted they hire staff to attend to household chores. Dominic argued they should handle those duties themselves. Rosario was once again the victor. Rosario insisted they

hire a gardening service to tend to their landscaping needs despite Dominic's adamant protest that he enjoyed doing the work. Dominic conceded on that point as well.

The large house they moved into became more of a residence than a home. A full time chef relieved Dominic of his cooking contributions. Dominic tried to reclaim a modicum of his role as chef by making his once family favorite strawberry waffles for breakfast. Rosario had already left for the office on that morning. Missing breakfast had become such a common occurrence for their mother that their children took no notice of her absence.

With a proud smile, Dominic placed his golden brown waffles teeming with fresh strawberries in front of his children.

"What's this?" Teresa said.

"Strawberry waffles, your favorite," Dominic said.

"Not anymore," Mason said.

"Since when?" Dominic asked.

"Since Jesse started making us breakfast," Teresa said. "Where is Jesse?"

"I gave him the morning off. So what is your favorite now?"

"I like omelets, crepes, and the special hot cereals Jesse makes like honey almond polenta," Teresa said.

"Mine are French toast, scrambled eggs and frittatas like the mushroom cheese frittata Jesse made for me yesterday."

"I was only expecting one dish," Dominic said.

"Sorry, Dad," Mason said.

"And don't forget about his homemade pastries," Teresa said.

"How can I," Mason said. "My mouth's watering just thinking about them."

"OK, I get the picture," Dominic said. "Jesse's a good cook."

"More like a great cook," Teresa said. "You should know, Dad. You eat breakfast and dinner with us every day."

"There's no denying Jesse is an excellent cook. Not even Jesse the great can make waffles like these. Give 'em a try. Discover what you've been missing," Dominic said, his smile fading along with his hopes.

Teresa and Mason poked at his best effort with frowns.

“Are we being punished?” Mason asked.

“Why would you think that?” Dominic asked.

“Just wondering,” Mason said, shrugging his shoulders, picking at his waffle as if it were broccoli, which he hated. Teresa felt similar about zucchini and treated her waffle the same.

Dominic had made himself a waffle. He cut out a bite size piece and ate it. He grinned with genuine pleasure as he chewed. His reaction had no effect on the children.

“Can we at least have some syrup?” Mason asked.

“And butter?” Teresa added.

“You’ve never needed syrup and butter before with my strawberry waffles,” Dominic said.

The picking continued.

Dominic had expected he would be hurt by a waffle rejection. Instead, to his surprise, he felt amused by the development. He leaned in close to his children. His smile as warm as his waffles. His voice confident, calm and reassuring.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said, looking back and forth between their questioning eyes.

“Take one bite. If you don’t like it, we’ll throw them away. *And*, I promise never to darken your breakfast with my strawberry waffles ever again.”

“Can we get that in writing,” Teresa said.

They laughed.

“My word is my bond,” Dominic said.

“No exit or arbitration clauses, or loopholes, and no statute of limitations on the aforementioned promise regarding the immediate termination of strawberry waffles?” Teresa asked.

“I give you my solemn word as your father.”

Teresa and Mason looked at each other. Dominic marveled at the way his children could communicate with just a glance. He loved the fact they were that close.

“Deal,” Teresa said, extending her hand to seal the agreement. Dominic shook his daughter’s hand while thinking of how much she was like her mother when it came to negotiating.

Teresa took a nibble. Dominic could tell it was still zucchini in

her mind. Her face lit up. Teresa cut herself a bite size piece and ate it.

“This is really good, Dad!”

Teresa proceeded to dissect her waffle into bite size pieces.

“Are you sure you don’t need some syrup and butter?”

Dominic asked.

Teresa shook her head not wanting to talk with her mouth full.

Mason had observed them closely. He had inherited his father’s gift of healthy skepticism. Due to urging from his sister, Mason tried a small bite. He smiled.

“Now I remember why I liked them so much,” Mason said. Like Teresa, Mason dissected his waffle and ate.

The children inhaled their waffles and asked for more. Dominic had been prepared for such a request. He stopped them at three. Teresa and Mason tried changing their dad’s mind with no success. They were disappointed. Until Dominic promised to make strawberry waffles for breakfast once a week contingent upon Teresa nullifying their oral contract. Teresa agreed air ripping up their formal agreement. Father and daughter sealed the deal with a hug.

While Dominic was pleased with his small victory, he accepted the fact things would not return to how they once were. His children had tasted the fine cuisine of a professional chef and there was no going back to amateur offerings. Along with his strawberry waffle day, Dominic maintained the privilege of taking his children to school. The nanny had taken over Rosario’s duty of picking them up afterwards.

Their mother had always treated Teresa and Mason with aloofness. In part, it may have been because Rosario was never keen on having children. Rosario felt more obligated to become a mother to fulfill her debt as wife and to deafen the nagging voices of their families on the matter. Once Teresa and Mason were born, Rosario seemed to accept them as solutions to a problem, as opposed to a glorious addition to their lives. In private, Rosario had tearfully confessed that shameful sin to her husband. A brutal secret they still shared.

In no way had his wife shown any bitterness, resentment, or spite toward Teresa and Mason. Rosario could even have been said to love them. When it came to nurturing, his ex didn't have that natural instinct. Rosario had a tendency to treat her children more like pupils at a boarding school rather than the woman who gave them life. Her instincts ran more toward fostering her career rather than motherhood.

For the children this was not an issue. They had been weaned off their mother since birth. Many of their mother's qualities had filtered into them. Their mom was different from those of their peers. Their mother was not doting or affectionate. She did not bask them with unworthy praise or drown them in positivity. Those qualities they received in droves from their father, grandparents and other relatives. Their mother was direct and honest in her dealings with them without being mean or corrosive. She was a practical, forward thinking individual in all matters, it seemed to them. This was her way. They accepted and loved their mother for who she was.

Teresa and Mason took the divorce in stride as if it was the inevitable outcome of a formula film. It wasn't because they didn't love their mother nor did they believe for a second that their mother didn't love them. They simply knew her better than her husband did. For that reason, they worried about their father. His strength was in question. They saw their mother as the strong reserved type whereas their dad kept his emotions in his shirt pocket ready to be extracted at a moment's notice. Their mom would be okay. He was the vulnerable one. His love ran so deep for their mother they were concerned as to how he would get along without her.

Dominic and Rosario agreed to joint custody with Dominic being the primary care provider of their offspring from their fourteen-year nuptial. Her career came first. Rosario had come to accept that realization. Rosario would pay child support. Dominic had not requested alimony although his attorney believed he could have won citing the fact Rosario made considerably more money as a corporate executive than he made as a cable TV sales representative. Rosario turned over the deed of the residence that she had purchased outright to Dominic. His ex had moved into a condo downtown that seemed to suit her fine. She verbally agreed to help in every way. Rosario

always kept her word. His ex cautioned Dominic not to allow his stubborn pride to get in the way of asking for help.

An example was Rosario felt Dominic should have kept the nanny. She would have gladly continued to pay for her service. Rosario believed why make parenting more difficult than it already was especially now that Dominic was for the most part a single dad. Rosario grudgingly remained mute on Dominic's firing of the nanny, but she insisted that the rest of the household staff, gardening service and chef remain at her expense. When Dominic resisted Rosario played one of her trump cards. Rosario told Dominic if he did not accept her terms she would fight him for custody of the children. Dominic knew Rosario would win hands down. His ex was never an unfit mother. Even a court with cataracts for justice could see that fact.

Dominic promised Rosario he would not allow his pride to stand in the way of the welfare of their children. Dominic knew he would have no trouble honoring that promise. It would be unfair to uproot Teresa and Mason from a community and lifestyle they had come to appreciate. Dominic adapted. He wanted to regain some of the wholesome working class character his family had before the wealth. He was taking cooking classes. He had wanted to win back the culinary praise of his children and believed the classes would help. His plan was to make more than the once a week strawberry waffles. When the time came, he would reclaim one of his roles as breakfast chef. From there, who knew what other family virtues could be restored.

* * *

Daylight

Evening surrendered to nightfall without a fight. Cloud cover and starlight, rain and sapphire, alternated throughout this vibrant gentrified community of brick houses, luxury apartments and condos and mixed-use urban design. Greenspace provided room for residents to roam through groomed natural environments custom fitted for their living and working spaces. Modern convenience was everywhere. Coffee shops, restaurants, juice bars and cafes, grocery stores and hair salons, yoga studios and boutiques, small businesses and corporate chains efficiently and expertly located for maximum exposure. All within walking distance or a short bike ride. If you needed something you couldn't find in your neighborhood then it was no more than a quick drive or public transport away. Most of those same items could be located on the internet if you were averse to vehicular traffic, expensive parking or public shopping in general. The human animal pampered and spoiled and settled into the ultimate fusion of the agricultural, industrial and technological systems with a hint of rustic thrown in.

Night was serene in this comfortable neighborhood on an average Wednesday in August. Urban sounds were minimal and

nonobtrusive. This was not unusual for this area of variegated race and wealth residents. A place that may be termed as a multi-culturally diverse community. Something often preached in America but very seldom practiced. While people of all sorts traverse the neighborhood at all hours, it was as if this part of the world had made a pact with the city Gods to permit urban day chaos in exchange for peaceful nights. And there is nothing like tranquility to grant voice to ones innermost concerns.

* * *

Brandon Taylor
9:32 p.m.

Brandon Taylor could not sleep. Two months, one week and four days ago, Brandon had turned twelve. With it came his first giant steps toward manhood in the forms of puberty and personal responsibilities. Puberty speaks for itself. The changes in his body were a shock he was still adjusting to. Once his voice finished making all sorts of funny noises when he spoke, it had dropped an entire octave. Sometimes when Brandon spoke, he didn't recognize his own voice. Girls he had been attracted to as friends for their personalities and like interests had taken on another dimension in his mind or perhaps he should say to his body. There was a physical magnetism he had never experienced before. Kissing had been something to make him want to gag. He made fun of smooching as being gross and stupid. Now he was curious, even anxious, to try kissing, especially with Amber.

Amber was one of his best friends. Now Brandon was beginning to see Amber as something more than a friend. He began to see her—dare he say it—as his girlfriend. It was a term Brandon had always found laughable when his older brother, Ramello, and Liana his sister in the middle, teased him about Amber. Now he not only liked the idea but fully embraced the vision. Although Brandon didn't know in the slightest what the difference was in Amber being his friend as opposed to his girlfriend. Judging from how Ramello and

Liana behaved with their opposite gender friends, holding hands, gross kissing and cuddling were certainly involved.

When Brandon shared his feelings about Amber with his mom, she said he was transitioning from a platonic love into a more physical attraction toward Amber. His mom being a clinical psychologist and an adult lost him sometimes. She went on to explain what she meant, which didn't help clear his head, using expressions like "biological selection and evolution, mating and courtship, human psyche" and "choreographed by nature." For his purposes of understanding they were artificial terms of some versions he had heard in his Sex Ed and Biology classes. If anything, his mom only thickened the fog. In the end, Brandon did remember her saying what he was experiencing was perfectly normal which made him feel better.

Amber and he talked about any and everything before puberty including what they had learned about human anatomy and sex education in school. For some reason, now that it was actually happening, puberty was not something he felt comfortable discussing with Amber anymore.

Brandon shared his puberty experience with not only his mom but also his dad, Ramello, and his closest male friends. He discarded the internet input finding it less helpful, providing more content than substance for a twelve year old. Brandon had gotten a lot of straight answers from the people he talked to. Some of the answers intrigued him, others frightened him and still others went right over his head. He was still trying to piece together the puberty puzzle.

Now that it was actually happening, it seemed surreal. Like the air we breathe or a plant grown from seeds. All of the scientific explanations of how and why these properties exist do not prepare one for their realities. Deprive the body of air and we suffocate. Neglected plants will not thrive. These truths can only be fully comprehended through involvement. Knowledge only predicts outcomes but does not train. To live one must experience life. Most of the people Brandon talked to concluded as did his mom that what he was going through was completely normal for a young man his age. Brandon had no

choice but to accept that puberty was an awkward coming of age, life experience, he would have to muddle through as best he could.

Brandon questioned a number of things about himself lately. Where did this physical attraction come from? When did kissing go from being something he and Amber made fun of as being gross and stupid to a mutual curiosity? He admitted he thought Amber was pretty, and he liked her smile and her voice and her laugh and how smart she was. Why did things have to change between them because of puberty? It all seemed weird to him.

Accompanying his adolescent challenge was that Brandon was entering a new school in just a couple of weeks. He was eager with anticipation and a hint of anxiety, ready to venture into the great unknown. As the day drew near, he was too excited to sleep. Brandon couldn't wait to see what high school was like. New students, teachers, classrooms, cafeteria, auditorium, gym, all of it made him feel like he was embarking on a wonderful adventure.

The name of his new school was Quadrivium Academy High School. A private all-boys school. Amber was going to Blessed Teresa's Catholic High School a private school for girls. Owen and Mason would be joining Brandon at The Quad. Derick didn't have good enough grades for a scholarship and his mom couldn't afford the tuition. Derick was going to Waldman High School. A good public school but not a college prep school like The Quad and Teresa. While that meant he and Derick would no longer be school buddies, they would still remain good friends.

Brandon was blessed with athleticism but only chose to use those gifts recreationally. Being a disciple of Aikido kept him off the bullies' radar after a few self-defense demonstrations against those who meant him harm. Brandon loved to learn. He loved being in a classroom headed by a teacher driven to teach her pupils. He had been labelled a geek and had no problem with that classification. Yet he didn't look the part. He didn't wear glasses. He dressed affordably but well within the acceptable fashion sensibilities of his peers. He was a notch below good-looking but cute enough girls found him attractive and he was witty and charming when he chose to be.

While Brandon was not brash, he wasn't the least bit bashful. He dove right into any situation for better or worse. He spoke his mind when he felt it was appropriate, defended himself and those he cared about whenever necessary, and never settled for less than he believed he deserved. His mother had described her youngest child as having a quiet confidence. Just like your father his mom went on to say. Brandon relished that assessment since his parents were two of his heroes.

Brandon, Amber, Mason, Derick and Owen would socially be considered middle of the road teenagers. They possessed both book and street smarts. They were not junior thugs or playas in training but they never knowingly allowed themselves to be victimized either. While peace was their way, physical violence was not beneath them. Their acquaintances ranged from some of the most popular jocks and cheerleaders to those bringing up the rear in artists and nerds. With their closest friends they shared more than passing hellos and brief small talk as they did with acquaintances. Close friends comprised the people they ate lunch with, shared juicy gossip, and hung out with at school functions and breaks. Those were their communal peers, their peps, and their schoolyard posse. They were the populous of their middle of the road school universe. And Brandon was going to miss the comradery.

Brandon would miss Amber most of all. Brandon had always liked Amber. Nothing eventful sparked their friendship. On the first day of school, Brandon saw Amber from across the school playground. He marched right over like a man on a mission and introduced himself. Amber told Brandon her name, they shook hands as they said "nice to meet you" at exactly the same time. They laughed at their twin greetings and their friendship was born.

They saved the seat next to each other on the school bus without the other asking. Endured the teasing of their schoolmates who poked fun at their relationship with laughs and good humor. Remembered each other's birthdays, favorite songs, shows, colors, video games, movies and more. Kept private each other's secrets. Visited each other when they were sick. Volunteered delivery of schoolwork when an illness had one of them down for the count.

Brandon was quick to anger when anyone had anything bad to say about Amber. Being just as quick to chime in when they possessed praise. Each cheered the other when they were blue. Bolstered their confidence when life dealt them a gut punch. Best friends are an extension of family his mom believed. Brothers or sisters or cousins from another mother. While Brandon felt that way about Mason, Derick and Owen, there was something more to it when it came to Amber. A special something he had been trying to nail down as of late.

Brandon always enjoyed doing special things for Amber. Stuff his dad and Ramello referred to as being a gentleman. Like holding the door open for Amber, carrying her books, walking her—escorting as his family mentors called it—home or to class. Brandon enjoyed going fun places with Amber like the movies, amusement parks, museums, beaches, concerts, the zoo, shows and festivals. He simply liked hanging out with her. Amber was good company as Liana would say. Brandon couldn't agree more.

Amber was one of his best friends with little difference from Derick, Owen and Mason except for the gentleman thing and her being a girl. *Being with Amber is like basking in the constant warmth of an eternal sun. Is this what love feels like?* Those thoughts came to Brandon when he was with Amber one day. Wading through his mind like a breaststroke swimmer in a cool pond on a hot summer day.

The question of love shocked Brandon. So much so, he stopped and stared at Amber as if she had grown another head. While Brandon enjoyed poetry, he never fancied himself a poet. He had thought about how he felt about Amber before. Love was definitely a word he would have used to describe his feelings. But love as a friend or love as in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship way? Never had the question been so blatant. Never had the answer been so clear.

"I'm going to miss seeing you at school every day," Brandon said.

"We'll still see a lot of each other," Amber said, punctuating her statement with an innocent peck on the cheek.

Brandon took her hand. It was the first time they had held hands in earnest that he could remember. Brandon was confident it would be far from the last.

It was the first time they had held hands in earnest that he could remember. Brandon was confident it would be far from the last.

As they continued their stroll, Brandon felt relieved he hadn't told Amber the truth about what he was thinking. He believed one day he would. That day just didn't feel like the right time to share. He felt justified in his decision in the same way he felt the changes in his body. Brandon nervously fumbled through his rehearsed speech to ask Amber to be his girlfriend on a clear summer Thursday in late July on their way back from the Aquarium. Brandon had purchased a charm bracelet for the occasion. He planned to present it to Amber whether she said yes or no to his proposal. She said yes. He had no idea how he would have reacted had she said no. He was so happy he didn't have to find out.

When Brandon mentioned the idea of using his own money to buy a charm bracelet for Amber to his dad, his dad was all in. He even offered to chip in a little extra cash if needed. When asked by the jeweler what each of the pendants Brandon had chosen meant, Brandon explained: "The heart is a symbol of our love. The tree represents the beauty and depth of our relationship. And the cat is because Amber loves cats."

Both his father and the jeweler had big smiles when Brandon finished his explanation. Brandon had seen that smile on his dad before. It was one of pride. Brandon guessed the jeweler was smiling because she found what Brandon was doing to be cute. Her smile resembled his mother and big sister's when they felt the same way about him. Brandon was caught between reactions of joy and embarrassment. Ultimately, joy won out.

Brandon got down on one knee and delicately placed the personalized silver charm bracelet on Amber's left wrist as part of his proposal. Amber jumped around with excitement for a bit, calming down enough to throw both arms around his neck. Amber kissed Brandon again only this time on the lips. *That wasn't gross at all*, Brandon thought. *At least not with Amber*. They were officially a

couple. Now all he needed to do was figure out what being a couple really meant.

Owen and Derick felt nothing but relief on graduation day as if they had just finished a grueling mountain climb. Amber cried tears of mixed emotions as she shared her reasons with Brandon while he tried to comfort her with hugs. Amber was happy to be graduating. Sad to be leaving. Mason felt the same as Amber. Mason was sensitive in that way. Being a young man, he was conditioned not to shed tears in public. Instead, Mason stole away to one of the boy's bathrooms and did his crying hidden away in one of the bathroom stalls. Brandon knew because Mason's eyes were red when he returned. He never called Mason out on it. Brandon doubted he was alone in noticing.

Brandon was conflicted on graduation day as well. Like Owen and Derrick, he experienced relief in what he had accomplished without it feeling like as much of a chore. Like Amber and Mason, he was sad to be leaving minus the tears. Men don't cry. That was the mantra of the men in his household. What most of his male friends believed. Most females in his life disagreed, including his mom, Liana and Amber. Their arguments were rational. But they were not men. He was becoming a man. While Brandon didn't think less of any man who cried for him shedding tears was unacceptable, with the possible exceptions of being in excruciating physical pain or the death of a loved one.

He and his posse had attended Morrison Elementary together since the first grade. Eight years of developing an intimate relationship with familiar people and surroundings. Brandon was going to miss Principal Goodman, Vice-Principal Yee, Mrs. Angaza his Guidance Counselor, Nurse Rivers, his favorite teachers and cafeteria personnel and the maintenance workers he encountered during weekend and afterschool projects and events. The halls, the classrooms, the multi-media center and computer rooms, the gym and assembly hall, the recess areas, study halls and playground, the library and music room and everything in between. He was sorry to leave. Brandon was going to miss Morrison like he would miss a second

home. Like he would miss a good friend he knew he was destined never to see the same way again.

* * *

Job Search

My name is Jerome Green. Most people call me Jay. Family and close friends call me Jerome. I don't have a girlfriend and am not in the market right now. I'm hardworking and open to exploring my options. At five-ten, I'm in good shape, with brown skin, brown eyes, tight dreads, and a devilish smile. I enjoy movies, music, reading, texting, video games and chatting, prime time television and sports. I have no love for reality TV, social media, TV talk shows, talk radio or negative folks. If I were to fill out an online profile that's cursory me in a nutshell.

I just turned twenty-two and celebrated small and big time. Big time on my birthday at my parents' house with a home cooked birthday meal. Topped off with plenty of gifts and my favorite homemade chocolate birthday cake. Big bro, Eli and big sis, Madison were there along with sis-in-law, Alexis and Madison's fiancé, Gregg. It was big fun. But then I love my family and they love me back so what else would it be.

Small time the next night with friends at Club Diva in an all-night epic blow out. At least what I remember about it was. I can't believe how little I'm feeling the effects from a club night drink fest. I

guess drinking as much water as I could stomach and taking a couple of multi-vitamins along with four aspirin before going to sleep actually worked. After my involuntary morning purge, besides being a bit sluggish, I feel fine. Not much of an appetite though.

I want to call Monica. She's a woman I met at Club Diva. One reason I haven't called or texted Monica yet is my phone died. I'm waiting for it to recharge. The other reason is kind of strange.

Turning twenty-two is not a big deal. I don't feel any different. Nothing changes as far as the law and society are concerned. That nothing includes for me a single lingering question that has been plaguing me since I graduated high school. What am I going to do with my life?

No one's sweating me. I mean, I'm holding my own. Taking care of myself across the board, physically, financially, and spirituality to some degree. Right now, I'm exploring my options in the spiritual department. Nothing new about that. I've been searching for enlightenment since the eighth grade. While the three major world religions are still on the table there are a few less notables out there that make a great deal of sense. So far, nothing's grabbed me by the ecclesiastical shoulders and pinned me down.

I started learning about Drafting and Design in high school. Earned my associate degrees in Drafting and Design, and Information Technology from a high prestige technical college. I enjoyed the educational process. I was learning new things in a hands-on environment and I embraced the challenge of being a double major. Once I earned my degrees and quickly found gainful employment with a multi-discipline design-engineering firm the fun stopped. I'm bored. Cranking out product as quickly as you can get it out of the door isn't rocking my world. It's not even raising the roof. I'm good at it. It would be easy to turn it into a successful career. The major problem is I don't want to.

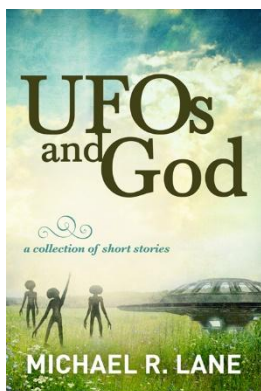
Switching over to IT would be like jumping out of a lifeboat to swim ashore. The people who work in IT always appear stressed. Not to mention under appreciated. The only time they're noticed is when something goes wrong. Even the thanks they receive for resolving a technical issue seems derisive as if they were personally

responsible for the glitch in the first place. My dad would call it going from the frying pan into the fire. I'll stay put for now.

My mom has this great upbeat expression she graced the family with on many a morning, "Today is the best day of the rest of your life. Make the most of it." Sometimes mom was right. Other times mom was wrong. Most of my days have been fair to middling. In any case, her intention is clear. Have a positive mindset for the day. Like seeing the glass as full rather than half empty. I know the expression. Is the glass half-empty or half full? Pessimism versus optimism. With the major optimistic spin my mom puts out there half full doesn't cut it. That mindset works pretty well for Eli and Madison. Me, I'm working on maintaining a half full prospective.

Eli knew what he wanted to be by the time he entered eleventh grade. International finance was his calling. Eli wanted to help underdeveloped nations get on their economic feet. Eli just turned thirty this year. He's already a success in the international banking community. Respected and appreciated by his so-called "third world" clients as well. My big bro is living his professional dream.

Madison realized she wanted to be a microbiologist by the time she was in the tenth grade. At twenty-six, big sis is already working for the CDC. A dream job for Madison. I've talked to them about how they made their career choices and it all came down to one word, passion. They love what they do. That's what I've been searching for, that passion, that love of something to emerge and jumpstart me on the path of my future. So far, everywhere I've looked, nothing. Not a spark, not a trickle, not a light bulb moment pointing to my purpose in life, and I don't know what to do about it. . . .



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