

Prelude to a Fist
By Joseph Christiana

The halo sitting on Frank L's head was the curse that had held him back from achieving what he, his mother, and the Roman Catholic Church considered to be his true potential for greatness. Of course, it was the halo sitting on his head that inspired them to believe that he had potential for greatness in the first place. But that didn't matter. The point is that L was a defeated man. At forty-eight his abject countenance was so apparent, in fact, that those around him knew almost instinctively that he had finally relinquished any lingering aspirations to contribute to the common good in any sort of meaningful way. Of course this sort of capitulation is by no means uncommon in men his age, but because of the halo that gleamed eternally, mockingly, six inches above his head, L's surrender seemed just a bit more tragic, somehow more meaningful, certainly more disappointing than the inevitable outcome of the average American mid-life crisis. Most men opened secret credit card accounts in order to charge surreptitious vacations with buxom blonde waitresses while their wives pretended not to know. L toiled over the New Testament looking for answers and secret codes for the meaning of his life. And he wasn't even religious. He didn't even have wings. What good is a halo without wings? If he had heard the rumbling voice of God just once, maybe he could get behind this thing. The closest he'd come to the voice of God was a teenager playing with the P.A. system in Bloomingdale's. He winced with embarrassment every time he thought of the crowd that gathered around him when he dropped to his knees and offered himself up to the lord in the midst of Ladies Lingerie.

The descent into the abyss of L's listlessness was a slow and steady decline that started immediately after the halo suddenly appeared on his head in the third grade while sipping chocolate milk and waiting his turn on the see-saw. L was an average child in just about every way and when the aberration declared its proud arrival, he was in no position to successfully navigate the dangerous waters of becoming a playground spectacle, much less of becoming a deity. He began to weep nervously as soon as the first of the children began to gather around him agape. That they were looking above him, not *at* him, was all the more unnerving. He thought perhaps he had grown some rotten appendage like those kids in the Guinness Book of World Records, but when he reached up to the point in space where the children were staring, he felt nothing. By the time the crowd had encircled him, he was positively begging them to stop their gawking. They did stop, eventually, but only after one of the more profane of the children gave him a wedgy.

When his mother entered the principal's office later that afternoon to pick him up, he was badly scolded.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, young man? Wipe that halo of your head."

But he couldn't. At home, she took the wooden spoon to him repeatedly in an effort to restore L's humility, but it only made the halo glow brighter. He was sent to his room until he thought good and hard about what it means to have a halo.

But think as he might, the thing persisted. He tried hats, he shaved his head, he wrapped his cranium in aluminum foil but nothing could diminish the halo's glory and no one around him could make heads or tails of it. People seemed to be afraid of it and L's parents were afraid that people were afraid of it. The people, in turn were afraid that L's parents were afraid that they were afraid. And so on. L's Father was certain that it would make him, and his son, outcasts in the town. He was right. An enraged mob once attempted to stone L on his front lawn for

blasphemy, but luckily the season premiere of the Lawrence Welk show was airing and everyone rushed home instead.

A severe depression took hold of young L, but before his mental state could even be considered by his so-called guardians, the wheels of the oncoming circus were already in motion. The series of hospitals, doctors and researchers blurred before his eyes and for the better part of a year, he was poked and prodded, scanned and searched, questioned and tested, all to no avail. In the end, it was decided that there was absolutely nothing physically wrong with him. The halo was simply an illumination that was “absolutely unexplainable by modern science.” As such, more than one “rational” professional during that time converted their faith in the hypocritical paganism of Modern Science to the sublime rationality of Divine Creed. Doctor Adkins of the Howard Hughes Medical Research Institute was the first of the pilgrims and took it upon himself to call a press conference. There he proceeded to declare his love and devotion to Frank L, God, and the Roman Catholic Church.

“Not necessarily in that order,” he said. “I’m still working out the details.”

The speech Dr. Adkins made to the world was in all senses of the word inspired. He made a plea to the Scientific Community, Chevy Chase, Maryland, and the World at Large to cease any and all heathen endeavors --he named The Three Stooges, Powder Iced Tea, and Water Polo specifically.

His colleagues looked on slack-jawed and betrayed from inside their white coats but Dr. Adkins didn’t care. He and the other six scientists he enlisted to embark upon the path of glory became Carthusian Monks. By last account, they were in the midst of a five-year oath of silence in the French Alps.

All this triggered an onslaught of media attention that set the networks on fire and, in the ensuing spectacle, destroyed the L family. With reporters parked on the L lawn day in and day out waiting for a chance to stick a camera in the face of any member of the L family, L’s father took to drinking copious amounts of Wild Turkey. One night, after telling the bartender of the Tilted Stick that he’d always dreamed of riding the rails, he disappeared.

L’s mother, too, was not fairing well. She did her best to protect L from media exploitation, imploring the press to respect their privacy, but her pleas quickly fell on deaf ears. In the end, the media blitz was too much and she took refuge in a warm sea of Quaaludes, day time TV, and pickled eggs.

It was by sheer coincidence that Three Important Men arrived at the L home on the very same morning to each make their offers. The Hollywood Agent, The Chairman of the GOP, and The Archbishop all stated their cases with resounding force at the L kitchen table with the sunlight spilling on their hands. All of them made great promises of one sort or another. Their arguments, each constructed by crack legal teams on retainer, were air-tight. But however impeccable their lines of reasoning were, they went completely unnoticed by L’s stoned mother, who just wanted to get back to *Captain Kangaroo*, and they scared the hell out of L.

When no obvious headway was being made with the L family, the meeting deteriorated to a state of chaos. Verbal assaults were cast from one high-ranking societal representative to the other and before long the three otherwise reputable men were wrestling on the floor, yanking each other’s hair and gouging each other’s eyes. The Chairman of the GOP pulled a gun. But it was only a pop-gun that discharged a tiny flag that said “bam”.

L finally put an end to the madness. “The church! For Christ’s sake, stop it. I choose the church!” The Archbishop, wisely, had been the only one of the three to promise L protection from any further media exposure, so the choice was not a difficult for the sullen little boy, who

only wanted to be left alone. Shoving him in front of as many cameras as possible was not the foundation and object of the Archbishop's plan, as was the case in the plans of the Hollywood Agent and the leader of the Grand Old Party, both of whom felt exploitation was a cheap price to pay for fame, riches, and power.

So L was hustled to a monastery in Canada where he was treated like a priceless eggshell. While his every need was catered to, he was questioned about immortality and the use of prophylactics by a steady stream of Church Elders, including Bishops, Patriarchs, and the Pope himself. The church was true to its word otherwise; L spent his adolescence and the better part of his teen years in peaceful seclusion while the Church Elders awaited some divine intervention to tell them exactly what to do with him.

The divine directive didn't come in time though. L's quiet period ended abruptly one afternoon when, while snooping around the Archbishop's dusty office, he found copies of *Big Black Asses*, the entire collection, Volumes 1-21, in a drawer of the Bishop's desk. It just so happened that L, while perusing Volume 3, Issue 6, caught his reflection in the gold goblet and saw that the halo above his head was considerably dimmer than it had been since as long as he could remember. In fact, it was all but gone.

He put two and two together and immediately embarked on a mission to obliterate the halo once and for all. The dimming down and eventual disappearance of his holy corona coincided in direct proportion with the depraved works of art that L pumped into his mind. The Church Elders muttered nervously among themselves in corners while L explored the outer limits of obscenity. He was methodical in his endeavor, starting with Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, following the thread straight through to Disco and ending finally with William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. In fact, L was eating lunch naked, listening to Abba and masturbating to an owl when he was thrown out of the church once and for all.

Soon afterward, L surfaced in lower Manhattan. While sharing a basement apartment on St. Mark's with legendary New York Doll's guitarist Johnny Thunder, L led a life filled with fetishistic ritual sex, hardcore drugs of every variety imaginable, and cheap guitar-oriented punk rock. He also assumed a prominent position in the trash-art movement where, in a ground breaking performance, he fornicated with a blow-up doll likeness of the Virgin Mary while eating hot sausages out of a garbage can. He opened for the notorious Gigi Allen the following summer and the act quickly became an underground sensation.

Whenever the halo tried to reassert itself during L's punk days, usually in some seedy nightclub when he was on the brink of unconsciousness, it was regarded by the punks and Avant-Garde artists with a sense of irony. It was considered a brilliant performance-art piece, a parlor trick perhaps, but no more.

After half a dozen years of this sort of debauchery, L realized that he didn't have much of an appetite for this type of lifestyle. After a Disney Film Festival that culminated in a moving screening of *Herbie The Love Bug*, L abruptly dropped out of the scene to get on with the inevitable task of looking his destiny in the eyes. His spiritual epiphany convinced him that he was bound to lead humanity to a higher state of being. Maybe he was supposed to deliver them from evil somehow. Who knows.

"I can't deny it anymore," he declared. "I was born for great things!" The blue-haired girl behind the bar at CBGBs didn't look impressed. "It's a mockery," L continued, "of God and The Roman Catholic Church to be sitting here with the likes of these... these heathens."

DeeDee Ramone happened to be sitting next to him at the time and took offense. He punched L in the eye knocking him clean off the stool. He then gave him an atomic wedgie.

In the ensuing unconsciousness L saw a doorway flooded with light. A man holding a spiral cut ham was standing in the shaft of light beckoning to him. When L awoke, the halo was back in place, as proud as ever. L never figured out what the significance of the ham was. But he was hungry.

He immediately contacted the Hollywood Agent and the Chairman of the GOP to get the ball rolling again but was met by an impenetrable wall of minions. The Republicans had found a better savior in the Vietnam War and Hollywood was busy selling bad boys like Jack Nicholson and that monkey in the Clint Eastwood movies.

“There’s no room for goody two shoes anymore. Get lost kid.”

He tried to return to the Canadian monastery as well, but the Church Elders, somehow, could not see the halo anymore. They judged his fall from grace as final and he was banned from the church for eternity, halo or no halo. L was extended no clemency.

“You-know-who is also a so-called fallen angel,” the Archbishop said solemnly to L who was staring at his shoes at the time. “We can’t take the chance.”

So shunned from the three pillars of society, Hollywood, The Republican Party and The Catholic Church, L had no other choice but to return home to his mother who, he found out, was born again. She was also now a card carrying member of the Grand Old Party and an aspiring young actress, though she wasn’t young, believed in socialism, and hadn’t come out of a vagina, spiritual or corporeal, since she was born the first time. None of that mattered though. Her daily discussions with Christ convinced her thoroughly that L was the second coming.

L had his doubts. As a punk, he had read the book by Charles Colson and wasn’t convinced. The *Born Again* author was presently doing hard time for his conspiratorial efforts in the Watergate scandal. Word was Hollywood was in development on a biopic of the man. L’s world was getting smaller.

And he had to find a place to live. His mother’s newfound piety was insufferable and she insisted on serving him pickled eggs morning, noon, and night.

Aside from the occasional religious zealot accosting him in supermarkets, where they seemed to spend most of their time in the fish section, the years that followed rolled by ordinarily enough. Desiring as little face to face contact as possible, L found employment as a telemarketer contacting companies that wanted their logos silk-screened onto ball point pens. His cubicle was in a dingy corner of a converted warehouse. There, L wrestled with a life of missteps, failure, and disappointment.

Also, he was in New Jersey.

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Twenty years later, L was ushered out of his quaint suburban home in the usual manner. A scrambled egg, two slices of toast and one and half cups of black coffee provided the customary fuel. Hannah, his wife of fifteen years, provided the routine kiss on the cheek as he grabbed his briefcase en route to the front door.

There were but two minor deviations from the normal progressions of what had become the ritual of the mundane. The first was that L was to begin participation in a carpool that morning. The second, perhaps caused by a low-grade anxiety triggered by the first, was noted by his wife: “Your halo seems to be glowing brighter this morning.”

The comment caught L off-guard. The halo had long gone unnoticed in their daily lives. They discussed it as often as other couples discuss one another’s eyebrows or ears. In fact, the halo

had never been much of a topic of conversation between them at all, even when they were dating. Hannah respected L's right to have a halo, respected it as a part of him, and, as a part of him that he was obviously sensitive about, only recognized it at all on the occasions that L brought it up himself, which, invariably, was at times when it had caused him embarrassment, anxiety, or some other form of unpleasantness.

L was immensely grateful for Hannah's discretion. It was this very characteristic in fact that he was first drawn to. He suspected that Hannah might not have been so sensitive to such a defect, though, if it had not been for her own color blindness.

L had sold a gross of logo-ed pens to Hannah and they hit it off on the phone right away. After building a relationship on the anonymity of disembodied voices, the couple decided to meet face to face at an art museum. L had forewarned her of a "physical defect" and said he'd understand if, when she saw him, she decided to call the whole thing off. The warning frightened Hannah considerably. She was afraid that this strange man she was meeting might have a prosthetic nose or worse, a receding hairline. The halo, by contrast, was a welcome relief.

"I don't notice a thing," she said shyly.

"You're too kind."

"Sorry I'm late. I thought you said to meet on the Green Floor. I got confused and-"

"But this is the Green Floor."

Hannah blushed.

L let out an involuntary chuckle. "Geez, you're color blind! Christ, our first date, I take you to an art museum... and you're color blind!"

The comment wasn't meant to be malicious but Hannah broke down on the spot, right in front of Matisse's *The Dance*. L comforted her, cursed himself, and swore that he'd never again be so callous. It was there among the great works of art that they, the haloed man and the color-blind woman, bound themselves to one another for the rest of their days.

In her arms, he found asylum. In her caress he found healing. And if Hannah's consoling didn't quite quell the fires of unrest and self-doubt, it was at the very least a much needed respite from the eternal turmoil of the outside world and his halo's place in it. In those fleeting moments, the rest of the world, halo included, be damned.

"Must be something I ate," L replied. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the foyer mirror and saw she was right. It was glowing brighter. "Does it bother you?"

"No," she said, glancing at the nimbus, then quickly downward, realizing her transgression, "It's... nice."

L touched her chin and raised her head gently so her eyes met his own. He smiled briefly, a signal that all was right in the world, and left to get on with the day's business.

Sitting in the driveway of his fellow commuter's house, L ran over the usual list of excuses and decided that he'd use the magnetically-charged-metal-plate-in-the-head number. L was contacted by Mr. Prunkel through one of his online posts. They had never actually met face to face, and there was sure to be the obligatory interrogation regarding the halo. The Metal Plate in the head excuse always worked with a minimal amount of follow-up questioning since it implied serious injury. Over the years, L had become a proficient enough of a liar to "subtly" imply that it was too painful to talk about. Anyone with any tact got the asserted hint and usually dropped the matter. A silent tension inevitably pervaded, but that was better than fielding questions like, "Do you think I'm going to hell?"

Rule Number One of Carpool etiquette as suggest by Carpool.com (and agreed upon by L and Mr. Prunkel) was *Be on time*.

Mr. Prunkel was exactly sixteen minutes late when he exploded into L's car. He was wearing a top hat and smelled of burnt matches. L hated him immediately but didn't know why. It was an instinctive hate that he couldn't even articulate to himself. But he made an effort at cordiality.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm—"

"For Christ's sake!" Prunkel cried. "What the fuck is that on your head?"

"I—uh, had an accident. I"

"What in the war? Nuclear? What the fuck are we talking about here? Don't bullshit me."

"I have a metal plate. It's magnetically charged and"

"Didn't I tell you not to bullshit me? That's bullshit. What, you some kind of fairy?"

"No. I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't want to fucking talk about it!?"

"No."

L pulled into traffic. He felt his heart beating. His blood boiling.

"Then what the fuck do you want to talk about?" screamed Prunkel. "I mean that thing's a goddamn elephant, if I ever seen one."

"An elephant?"

"Something very obvious that isn't fucking being discussed."

"You mean *elephant in the room*. You have to use the other half of the phrase if you want it to make sense."

"We aren't in a room! We're in a fucking car."

"It's a figure of speech."

"That's exactly the point. Now where do you get off having something like that on your fucking head? You know how ridiculous you look?"

As they entered the New Jersey Turnpike, L reminded Mr. Prunkel of rule number two, "keep conversation to a discreet minimum," but was scoffed at.

"Rules? You're gonna lecture me on rules, now? What, you're some kind of goody two-shoes? You're one of those goddamn religious freaks! Jesus, just my fucking luck to be carpooling with a fucking Jesus Freak. A freak Jesus Freak, no less."

"I'm not a Jesus Freak."

"Then what's with the fucking halo, you fucking fairy?"

L thought silence would be the best retort, though he was nearing the edge of his patience.

"What? The silent treatment? That's what I'm getting now, you fucking religious nut?"

Mr. Prunkel broke rules number three and four in one fell swoop. He lit a cigarette while turning the radio up full blast. Air Supply's *All out of Love* vibrated the cab. L had had just about enough.

"Hey, Jesus Freak, you ever do anything like this?"

Prunkel had an especially degrading porno video playing on his laptop. It involved some combination of humiliation, garden hoses and candy canes. He shoved the device into L's face, obstructing his view of the road.

"What's the matter? Jesus Freak Fairy Boy never got laid? You still a virgin, Freak Boy?"

Prunkel was nudging L in the ribs, blowing smoke in his face as they sped past Elizabeth and Harrison.

L said, "At least I don't wear a Top-Hat. What are you? Abraham Lincoln?"

Prunkel stopped his tormenting abruptly. He snapped shut his porno-emitting laptop, clicked the radio off and flicked his cigarette out the window. The sudden silence was stark in contrast to the previous racket.

After a moment of silence Prunkel, seething, said “What did you say to me?”

L was unnerved by the disproportionate reaction to his comment. “What. I said you think you’re Abraham Lincoln or something.”

“That is it!” Prunkel grabbed the steering wheel and yanked it hard. L’s car veered across two lanes of traffic and plunged into the murky New Jersey swamp. When they finally slowed to a stop, Prunkel screamed, “Get out! Now!”

Prunkel stepped out of the car. L got out too, if for no other reason just so he wouldn’t be trapped helpless inside the car. As Prunkel approached, L stepped back cautiously, his feet squishing in the black mud underfoot.

“Listen, Prunkel,” L pleaded. “I don’t know what this is all about... but I’m sure we can settle it like adults.”

But Prunkel wasn’t interested. He was irate. “How dare you!” he screamed. “You’re going to pay for what you said, you fucking fairy!”

Just then a sudden gush of wind arose and carried off Prunkel’s top hat. Both he and L stood still for a moment. An eerie silence fell upon the swamp. Prunkel had an evil grin scratched into his lips.

L’s face changed expression three times in half a second and in that half a second, a lifetime of frustration and anger fell away. All the years of nonsense and absurdity didn’t mean a thing. The torment, the poking and prodding, the deviled eggs, the punk years, the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, they were all mere trifles compared to this single moment. L felt suddenly revived, as if he’d grown a new skin or just had a blood transfusion.

He clenched his fist and a grin grew on his face to match his rival’s. He was going to thoroughly enjoy this. All was right with the world.

Prunkel had horns.

Joseph Christiana

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