

July 1961

I was in the sanctuary of the Baptist church in Inglewood, California, not for another message from the sacred desk and certainly not for another excursion into the world of exorcism for fun and profit, but for a musical interlude.

Actually, I was on my way to pick up Bonnie when I saw was running a little ahead of schedule. Not wanting to chance encountering her father and become embroiled in a hot discussion of the upcoming national tiddlywinks playoffs, I had decided to drop by the church and spend a few minutes at the piano. Being on the church staff, I was entrusted with the priceless treasure of a key so I would not have to bother the senior pastor, the associate pastor, the minister of music, the janitor, or anyone else.

Having looked forward to a little time alone, my hopes appeared dashed when I found the door unlocked. I remembered there was a service that night but had not expected to find anyone on the premises as yet. On my way through the foyer and down the long runway that led to the grand piano, I looked around to see if I had any company, but no one appeared to be there. This was not alarming, as most churches are sizeable places, and it was very possible someone was in one of the offices, in the kitchen, or somewhere else on the grounds, so there was no cause for alarm or a frantic call to Inglewood's finest to come and hunt down a hymnal-pilfering burglar.

I illuminated the piano area with one of the spotlights, lending a touch of theatrical drama to what was to be my one-man concert. As I settled myself on the piano bench, a voice spoke my name.

"Yes?" I replied, looking around, a little startled but not nervous.

There was no answer.

I shrugged and turned back to the keyboard.

Suddenly I became aware of the man standing next to the piano, one very familiar to me, as he was the one I had encountered in front of my grandfather's house, as earlier related.

He laid a hand on my shoulder and enquired as to how I was doing.

I responded with a laconic "Okay" and waited, knowing there was more to come.

"Your playing is very nice," he said. "Would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

"No."

He began by asking my feelings concerning an incident that occurred some seven years before, at Centinela Park. I had been in the vicinity of the concession stands near the swimming pool and, as ever, the park was crowded and a somewhat frantic atmosphere prevailed.

At the time of the episode, the early 1950's, the park was the site of an amphitheatre with a very large stage. I was in the habit of getting up on stage and playing, mainly goofing around, for hours on end.

One day, while busily hamming it up for what I thought was an audience of none, I felt a chill race up my spine. The cause was a voice with no discernible source, requesting I leave the park and make my way to the railroad tracks, about a half a mile distant. Now more intrigued than frightened, I decided to comply and see what happened.

Along the way I passed a grove of hoary old trees, nothing unusual except for the fact that one of the trees seemed to have a human face, like an ent in *The Lord of the Rings*. This leitmotif was carried forward by the appearance of the face, which, as one might guess, was the grandfatherly visage of an old bearded wizard. I found it very comforting. The face seemed to respond to my emotions, as it grew until it covered the entire tree, after which it began to fade away.

I blinked, shook my head, and concluded I had either absorbed too much sun or had swallowed a surfeit of chlorine while swimming. Unfazed, I continued on to the railroad tracks. The path took me up a hill. I managed to make it halfway up before Act II commenced, with two more trees manifesting faces.

These countenances were joyful, wise, the type of jolly oldsters whose happiness stems from certain knowledge of secrets beyond the ken of most ordinary worldlings. This pair of smiling personages were the embodiment of wisdom itself, as old as and having seen as much as, the oldest redwoods, hence the arboreal connection. Far from being frightened, I was elated and experienced an inexplicable sense of fulfillment in their presence. I was pleased that these creatures not only manifested their joy but also permitted me to share in it. I was certain we would meet again someday, which was comforting, as they did not remain long.

I then snapped out of my nostalgic reverie.

"I remember you," I told the man whose memory jog had sent me back in time to commune with the trees. "You're the one who came to me years ago, at my grandfather's house."

"Good," he said, and was silent for a few moments, during which I familiarized myself with his appearance.

He cut an extraordinary figure, with his bright red eyes and strongly featured oval face. He exuded strength and confidence and seemed to exist in several dimensions at once, judging by his shape shifting. He manifested one appearance after another, each one maintaining the aura of safety and security he projected onto and around me.

He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "I will remember you in the fellowship of Zelcon."

Again that word! Would I finally be favored with some insight into Zelcon? Before I could petition an explanation, he returned from whence he had come.

My time with him was far from unsettling; indeed, I felt wonderful. His nearness and his words had provided me centering, grounding, a sense of stability.

I continued my playing, finished the piece, then left to pick up Bonnie, all the time considering my ethereal friend's words.

"The fellowship of Zelcon." What could that possibly mean? It sounded like something out of *Amazing Stories*, a cover piece garishly illustrated with helmeted spacemen abducting helpless Terran virgins. Such levity, however, was out of place with the experience and, somehow, with the very name Zelcon.

I did feel, however, that his visit was somehow tied in with the dismantling of old barriers I had held in place most of my life. For some reason, I thought of one of the few passages of scripture that had meant something to me, John 1:11, 12, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name."

In my case, I had come unto my own – or they had come unto me – and I was receiving power from this being.

I did not understand at the time, but many years later, in Oregon, I would finally put a name to my spiritual guardian who had been watching over me these many years.

A name I could believe in.