

The Immaculate Soul

By Cole J. Freeman

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Cover design by Cole J. Freeman.

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Every single one of them was the same. Male or female, it made no difference. Thinking about it hurt his head sometimes; trying to comprehend it was beyond him. They all walked inside a cloud that looked like dirty cotton. There was some beauty in it, to be sure, and that fascinated him, but the appearance was nothing compared to that of the children. The babies were the most beautiful, lacking any blemishes or corruption. The hazy veil that appeared as pollution-fouled snow surrounding adults looked like the sparkling crystals of pure salt as it covered and obscured his ability to view infants. He visited the hospital often just to see the phenomenon—or at least he *used to* visit the hospital. There were too many security restrictions now.

He was unable to see people's faces, and their bodies were indiscriminate beyond the mist that surrounded them. Indeed, it seemed to come from inside of them, and was impartial to light or shadow, giving neither any preference to alter it. Sometimes he felt it a curse. He had his own aura—the masking presence obstructed his vision in the mirror but never elsewhere—and years of hassle with simple tasks like combing his own hair had led him to the point of shaving his hair completely off during a good portion of his younger years. He rubbed his head, feeling the sharp stubble of new growth pushing through.

The television was on. It frustrated him greatly. He ignored it. His roommate had left a magazine on the coffee table. It lay askew among cans of his roommate's empty beer cans and cigarette butts. He studied the image on the front. It was a young woman, about twenty or so by his estimation, wearing underwear and a torn tee shirt. Her mouth was parted, revealing her teeth. She looked like a predator, hungry for the kill. The image reminded him of the first time he had seen death.

He had been sixteen years old, riding in the passenger seat of his mother's car. Even though the event had transpired so quickly that it was hard to recall the details, a few images had burned into his brain. He recalled that a drunk driver had run a red light and struck the car in front of him. As he ran to aid the injured, he saw the haze lift and fade away from the driver of the second car. What remained was a formation of flesh, the face still intact and clearer than he had ever seen. He had stared body, in fascination, for several minutes. At that time, he had discovered that the haze he observed surrounding every person was the life essence, the soul, of each individual. When his mother died, he stood in front of the coffin for a long time, seeing her face, in person, for the first time. He even gathered the courage to touch it, and for a brief period, he marveled at how normal people saw each other.

The magazine reminded him of the dead. Instead of sultry, provocative images, he saw only meat, filled with decay, and death. For every smooth curve of her body, there was the subtle underpinning of something darker that was swimming just underneath the skin. Perhaps it was cancer, or disease, or maybe the unsolvable process of degradation that every person knew as aging. Either way, the pictures in magazines or on the television showed no soul, and the only thing that remained for him to see

was death. There was comfort in what he saw in real people; the soul showed no favoritism to the individual, no elevation of status or beauty, except in the children. The soul showed *life*.

Most of the time, the soul would tarnish no later than age nine, but it most often lost luster when a person was around seven years old. Rarely, it happened sooner. He remembered vividly the day that his own soul had darkened, and it caused him much affliction. The day it happened he was in his old house, the house he grew up in, sitting on the floor of the kitchen. He had a toy; it had been special at the time but now he could not remember what it was. His mother, the dear woman, hunched over the sink and scrubbed at dirty dishes. Yellow rubber gloves covered her delicate hands and stretched up her forearm, where she had carefully folded them down so that the soap did not drip down her arm as she moved the dishes to the drying rack.

“Clean your room, please,” she said, “you’ve played for quite a while now.” Her voice was tired, likely from the long hours she spent trying to earn enough to pay the bills. He didn’t know how she had survived as a single mother. He never had the thought to ask until it was too late.

He had said nothing, but stood up and walked to his room. He shared it with his brother because the house was too small for each of them to have their own room. He didn’t clean his room immediately. Most of the mess was his brother’s, and his brother, being five years older, had escaped to some other location to play before mother could assign him any duties.

As he surveyed the room, his anger rose at the injustice of having to clean while his brother played. His brother, with the tarnished soul. Why was his own so flawless? If only others could see what he did, they might be longed for him and honor him above his brother. However, he had learned already that the world saw things differently than he did. He reached for the one thing that his brother cherished—a handmade flyable model airplane—and held it in his hands. He thought for a moment, and then took one wing and snapped it off.

It was a simple act, deliberate and quick. He felt a sudden pang of guilt in his chest.

“Oh no,” his mother cried from behind him. “What happened?”

“I found it like this,” he quickly replied. Another stab of guilt tightened his abdomen. His mother gently took the airplane and rushed off to try to repair it. Alone in his room, he turned and saw himself in the mirror. *His soul had become darkened, dirty*. He shrieked and cleaned himself in the washroom, but nothing would return it to its normal state. His mother, sensing his agony, tried to cheer him up, but was unable to understand the cause of his anguish. Suspecting that his disobedience had caused his new appearance, he confessed to breaking the airplane and cleaned his room three times during the next day. He even cleaned his brother’s area. Nothing would purify his soul. The rest of his life had been dedicated to discovering the secret to restoring his former glory.

He placed one of his roommate’s beer cans over the corpse-like image on the magazine and headed for the door. The air outside greeted him in a warm embrace, and the sun kissed his face and lightened his mood.

He walked among the misty figures in the park, following the trail around the green and well-tended landscaping. Some jogged, some rode bicycles or skates, some milled about. All were the same. No tarnished soul ever got darker than another, all stayed in the same state. He threw five dollars to a homeless person, a tradition that never bettered his condition yet did not stop him from trying again anyway. A sparkle caught his eye and he turned to investigate.

He loved watching children. Oh, how they shone! It was like sheets of crushed diamonds were draped over their tiny heads, and they moved as if they were sparkling and brilliant ghosts that were visible even in the daylight. The sight of it made him gasp with longing and itch with jealousy. This individual, however, was not a child.

He held his breath and watched the figure in amazement. *An immaculate soul*. Was it possible? The figure was getting smaller as it moved away. He rushed to catch up to it and followed cautiously about a hundred yards behind. When it stopped moving, he slowly let himself approach to about twenty feet. He stood behind an oak tree and peered around it.

“My child, are you following me?” the figure said to him with a smooth, deep voice. Although he could not see the person directly, the words possessed an indication of age and experience. It did not

seem strange to hear ‘My child,’ as the speaker had an air of wisdom and acuity that only comes with long maturity. There was comfort in it, a subtlety that made him wish for the father that he never knew. When he did not answer, the voice continued, “Come, sit with me.”

He obliged, nervously. He feared moving too close, afraid that he might somehow taint something so magnificent with his own deficiency.

“You have a special gift,” the voice said.

“You have an immaculate soul,” he replied with a dry mouth.

“Go ahead, you may ask.”

So, this strange figure knew what he wanted. He licked his lips and prepared the question.

“How... How can I?”

“You wish to be clean?”

“Yes, very much.”

The figure stirred. “Since the beginning of mankind, there has been a need for redemption. It has been taught.” What must have been an arm raised and pointed outwards.

He followed the arm with his eyes and saw a steeple in the distance, rising above the trees in the park. “No, I’ve seen them. Their souls mimic mine.”

“True, true. But they have been sealed until the day of their redemption. They will be purified.”

“What can *I* do?”

“You? There is nothing *you* can do but accept the gift. The purification will be done for you at the appointed time.”

“Well, what about you?”

The figure chuckled, not an act of disrespect but a reaction of simple humor. “I am not like you, my friend.”

He sighed and dropped his head. “I want to do it myself. I will find a way. I will be cleansed. I will owe no one.”

“There is only one way,” the figure said softly.

“Thank you for your time,” he said sadly. He stood and walked away, joining the trail again and mixing with the clouds of souls, himself exactly the same as all of them. A sparkle caught his eye. A child played, alone in the grass.

“Hello, child,” he greeted the small thing. “You have an immaculate soul.”

The child ignored him, running after a small insect that he had discovered in the grass.

He smiled. Oh, how he loved to see an immaculate soul.