

The Gift of Prophecy

Brian Allan Skinner

From the minute he was born, Oscar Diggs disliked his name. He did not learn to like it any better in school, where his classmates found they could make jokes about either or both of his names, and tease him mercilessly. He vowed to change his names some day—as well as his height, hair, eyes and everything else about himself he didn't like, which is to say, everything.

Oscar vowed to make something of himself. He pictured the gold seals of authenticity on the awards he would receive at the ceremonious ceremonies in his honor. He was surprised to see both his father and mother sitting just beyond the dais, crying with delight. His father looked proud enough to pop a button. But Oscar was not there yet; first he had to finish grade school.

His two closest friends at P. S. 11 were an exceedingly cautious Persian boy named Basim and a Chelsea neighborhood kid called Lance Parker, who skateboarded his way everywhere, including the school hallways and stairways. Lance was always in the doghouse at school, but he seemed not to care. Oscar wanted to be like that, but had no idea where to start. He hung out with Lance hoping some of it might rub off.

Oscar could not understand why Lance pretended to be unable to read. Did he want to be in trouble? Basim, on the other hand, worried that his teachers and fellow students didn't like him, and tried to please everybody, thereby making a pest of himself. Oscar felt he had more in common with Basim. The three of them were an odd, only-in-America combination. Lance suggested they call themselves the Groucho Marx Society. Though both Oscar and Basim knew who Groucho Marx was, Lance had to explain what he meant.

“Groucho refused to join any club that would have him as a member.”

“But if he didn't join the club, he couldn't *be* a member,” Oscar said, thinking he had it figured out.

“What kind of charter did they have?” Basim asked.

“Guys, you're missing the point. And why is everything a question of the law, Basim? It drives me crazy.”

“In my country there were laws for the important people and laws for the rest of us.”

“That's how it works here, too. Welcome to America, Basim.”

“I will fix that,” Basim declared. “It is not right.”

“No doubt. But could you start next year? What Groucho meant, boys and girls, was that

he did not want to belong to any organization with membership standards so low that even *he* would be accepted. He was being ironic and self-deprecating.”

“He what?” Basim asked.

“It means he shit his pants,” Oscar explained.

Lance dropped his skateboard to the sidewalk.

“You guys let me know when you’ve grown up. In the meantime, I’m outta here.”

He sped off before Oscar could untangle what Lance had said and he had heard, but it was too late.

“Scratch that, Basim,” he said. “It’s *self-deprecating*, not *defecating*. It means Groucho was making fun of himself.”

“English causes me to lose all hope. I will never graduate. They will send me back.”

“No, they won’t, Basim. If they deported everyone who murdered English, America would be almost empty.”

“Who’d still be here?”

“Lance Parker and Mr. Shakety,” Oscar joked.

They laughed more easily when Lance was not around. Basim put his arm on Oscar’s shoulder and walked him most of the way home down Eighth Avenue.

* * *

Oscar and his two buddies, the founding members of the Groucho Marx Society, graduated P. S. 11 together. They all enrolled in the Clinton School on 33rd Street, just west of Penn Station. It billed itself as a New York City high school with a curriculum for the nascent artist or writer.

Lance had a clever way with words and joked that Dorothy Parker was his great-great-aunt, so everyone knew why he chose Clinton School. But Oscar and Basim could not explain why they had crammed for the tough entrance exams when neither of them had the slightest interest in any of the arts. Though neither would admit it to the other, their choice had a lot to do with sticking close to Lance Parker.

Basim took all the English and writing courses he could fit into his schedule, realizing their importance to his interest in the law, but none of them intersected with Oscar’s or Lance’s

classes. After school and on weekends Basim helped his Uncle Habib at his halal market in the East Village. He lived with his Uncle and Auntie. His mother died when he was very young and his father had vanished after being arrested back in Persia. His Uncle was good to Basim and gave him time off whenever he asked. He liked Basim's friends, too.

Both the boys and girls wanted to hang around with Lance, though he didn't have much time for them. His second love—language being first—was his skateboard. He rode it every place and entered every tournament that came to his attention. He won a good many of them, for which he received both money and merchandise, especially if he allowed himself to be photographed with their sneakers or T-shirts or jeans. Both Oscar and Basim felt honored that Lance remained their loyal friend. He gave them some of his endorsement clothing and was generous with his money.

But now, except for passing one another in the hallways or sitting at the same table for lunch, the three boys saw much less of each other. For the next term in January, they made plans to find a class they could take during the same period. In the meantime, Oscar, Lance, and Basim got together every other Saturday to see a movie or just hang out on the High Line or go someplace for pizza.

Oscar had a talent for always finding the best pizza in whatever neighborhood they found themselves, as though his nose could pick up the savory aromas from blocks away. He managed to find halal pizza joints, too, usually in Brooklyn, so Basim could join them. Oscar had the further talent that he would call their order ahead, knowing what each of them preferred, and it was waiting for them when they walked through the door.

This Saturday night, Oscar told them to meet him at a pizza place on Broadway up near Columbia. He couldn't remember the name, but there was only one pizza joint on that block. Oscar was always first at the restaurant when they were going out for pizza, just in case he'd misread the vibes he received and the food was, as Lance phrased it, "not fit for inhuman consumption."

Basim was the next to join Oscar. He looked around awkwardly as though he might have the wrong place, smiling broadly when he spotted Oscar. He slipped into the booth and leaned forward across the table.

"What're we having?" Basim asked. "I'm famished. I rode my bike up here."

"Are you serious? That's over eight miles."

"Yeah, I know. Can I have your water?"

"Sure. I only spit in it twice."

"Yummy. What're we having, Oscar?"

“You know the rules. You of all people, the next Clarence Darrow. We wait until Lance gets here.”

“Or maybe Clarence Thomas. What if Lance is late?”

“That’s all been figured in. Trust me, Basim. And I ordered extra for you.”

“Yummy, bro.”

Basim ordered a Coca-Cola, even though most establishments honored the law banning everything containing sugar. The waitress served him a large Coke with lots of ice. Her dark, curly hair slipped forward and she smiled at him.

“Did you see the way that Kate chick was hanging all over Lance yesterday?” Basim asked.

“Who didn’t? But I think he likes her. He wouldn’t let somebody hang all over him if he didn’t want them to. He calls her ‘Kallipygous Kate.’”

“Kallipygous? I’m afraid to ask.”

“Kallipygous means to have nicely proportioned buttocks: a beauteous booty.”

“All in one word? Well, that she does.”

“What all in one word?” Lance asked, standing suddenly at their table.

He slipped in beside Basim and stared directly across at Oscar. He knew Oscar could not think on his feet.

“Disirregardlessly,” Oscar replied.

“No such word,” Lance insisted.

“There is now,” Oscar said, hoping he had put Lance off the scent with a distraction.

The three friends laughed.

“What’s in the box, Oscar?” Lance asked.

“My watercolors.”

“In a freakin’ pizza box? Your portfolio in a pizza box?”

Oscar laughed.

“Hardly a portfolio. Just messin’ around, you know. But later. Food’s here. And within one minute of the last member’s arrival.”

“You’re a wizard, Oscar,” Lance told him. “You’ve gotta explain to me how you do it, bro.”

“As soon as you tell me your technique for riding your board down the handrails in the stairwell.”

The friends laughed again and saluted each other with two waters and a Coke. They dove into their food, and spoke with their eyes, stuffed mouths, and waving fingers.

Basim was devouring his double portion of roasted chicken and rice with lima beans and dill. His friends raised their eyebrows when the aroma wafted in their direction.

Lance licked his fingers in between slices of what he referred to as “pizza for carnivores,” a pie with only a hint of dough and so much meat, in all forms, piled atop it that there was barely room for a smudge of sauce and a mushroom slice. It was the most politically incorrect dish his friends had ever seen.

“Bravo, Oscar,” Lance said. “Exactly what I have a taste for. Mmm. Want some? You, Basim?”

His friends shook their heads without looking up, busily making their ways through their own dishes. Oscar had a large bowl of multi-colored pasta with various sauces in layers: white, red, and cheesy-orange. At the bottom was a dark brown sauce he told them was chocolate. They wrinkled their noses, but offered no criticism.

When there was enough room in their mouths for a few words to get out, their conversation turned to the girls they liked. Lance admitted he had a thing for Kallipygous Kate.

“She seems to have one for you, too,” Oscar said. “Have you... uh... you know?”

“Not yet,” Lance replied. “Her family’s pretty strict and she buys into it. I gotta go slow. I like that better than her being able to speak eighteen languages, but is unable to say ‘No’ in any of them.”

They laughed as though there were no one else nearby, and slapped the table.

“Your Aunt Dotty again?” Oscar asked.

Lance nodded, having just stuffed the last of his carnivore’s delight into his mouth.

“What about you, Basim? Who do you like?”

“Whom,” Lance mumbled.

Basim looked around him and leaned forward, closer to his friends.

“I kind of like our waitress—or at least I like how she looks”

“She looks at you, too, dude, in case you didn’t notice,” Lance told him. “Your turn, Oscar. Who clicks your icon?”

“Wow, that’s an old one. I guess maybe Sally. I think she’s hot. Or is it ‘cool?’”

“Don’t ask me,” Basim interrupted.

“You mean ‘Long Tall Sally,’ Kate’s friend?” Lance asked.

Oscar nodded. He had a chocolate mustache from sipping the sauce at the bottom of his bowl.

“You two look ridiculous together. She’s too tall for you.”

“Who cares?” Oscar said, happy to play the leather rebel to Lance’s tweedy conservative.

“You do,” Lance reminded him. “You care entirely too much what people think. You need to be more careless, like Basim.”

He and Oscar laughed. Basim pouted.

The waitress cleared the table and asked whether they’d like ice cream or Italian ice. Oscar and Lance held their sides and puffed out their cheeks as though it were a practiced routine. Basim asked for a raspberry ice. It was certainly halal. The ice cream might not be.

Sensing what they were likely to request, the waitress brought three spoons and a soup bowl heaped with the raspberry Italian ice. Even three tables away, the diners saw the wide smile the waitress shone on Basim. He blushed, turning a darker brown.

“OK, let’s see your watercolors, Oscar,” Lance said.

“They’re not much. I’m not sure why I brought them.”

“To show us how bad they really are,” Basim remarked.

“Very good, Basim,” Lance told him, chuckling. “You’re more American every day.”

Oscar lifted the lid of the cardboard pizza carton and took out a small stack of his watercolors. He spread them across the table, watching out for any spills of food or water.

“They’re all the same,” Lance remarked.

“No, they’re not,” Oscar said. “Look closer.”

Lance picked up two of the watercolors, each just a few inches in size, and studied them closely before handing them over to Basim, who examined them even more scrupulously.

“OK, I’ll grant there are subtle differences,” Lance said, “but a casual glance suggests they are all alike. What did you want us to see?”

The stack of drawings was now parked in front of Basim. He seemed mesmerized by them.

“I did them all in a single afternoon,” Oscar told them. “I wanted the observer to see the changing light and the gradual unfolding and re-folding of the clouds as they floated past the window, like actors across a stage.”

“For what my opinion may be worth, I think they are super. And the proper medium for clouds—*watercolor*. But you didn’t sign any of them,” Lance pointed out.

“I hate my names.”

“I’ve heard worse. What do you think, Basim? Basim? What’re you looking at so intently?”

Lance leaned in toward the watercolors.

“Oh,” he said, and also zoned out, up into the stratosphere beside Basim.

Oscar was thinking about Lance’s remark that watercolors were the perfect medium for painting clouds. It was poetic. He glanced down at the handful of cloudscapes still in his hands. He hadn’t looked at them since he dashed them off in his art class. His instructor and fellow students had seen none of them. Only Oscar’s friends had witnessed his efforts and they sat deeply engrossed in them. Oscar could not remember if he’d already thought about watercolors as the perfect medium for painting clouds. He thought maybe Lance had said it.

The three friends sat watching the watercolor clouds drift from drawing to drawing around the table and back the other way. They knew they were seeing something unusual, but could not hang onto the thought long enough to form any impetus toward speech or action. The next thing they observed was the restaurant owner flashing the lights. They were the only ones

still in the place. The cook and waitresses had gone home. Oscar, Basim, and Lance looked at one another with similar befuddled expressions. It was midnight.

Lance apologized and, unrolling a couple of bills, he pressed them into the owner's hand. Oscar collected his watercolors in no special order and dropped them into their cardboard pizza box.

Basim was nearly panicked, worried about his Uncle and Auntie who would be expecting him any minute at the latest.

"Stay a little behind with your bike," he told Basim. "I'm going to hail us a gypsy. No arguments."

The three friends stood tall and did their best to look like adults. The black cab that finally stopped was unaware what was happening until it was too late. Lance opened the front passenger door and stood beside it as Oscar and Basim shoehorned themselves, and Basim's bike, into the back. Lance dropped into the front seat and told the driver where to go, handing him some cash. He turned sideways to face his friends in the back seat. No one spoke for several minutes

"Do we know what happened back there?" Lance asked his friends.

"No," Basim said, "but it had something to do with Oscar's clouds."

Both he and Lance looked at Oscar as the black car made its way down the West Side Highway.

"You do magic, Oscar, yet you don't seem to know it. You are a wizard," Lance told him.

"It is a gift, Oscar. Your gift. It is from Allah, from God, and you must use it. That is why God gave it to you. Just you."

"Thanks, guys. But it doesn't feel much like a gift. It feels like a cheap party trick anyone could do if he had half a mind."

"You need to learn how to use it better, Oscar, that's all."

"Like how?"

"Practice, just like me. And like Basim Darrow over there practicing for his first big case by all the reading he does. You don't get better at anything without practice."

Oscar shrugged his shoulders. The cab was on 14th Street. He was glad the grilling would soon be over.

They all climbed out in front of *Habib's Halal Market* on Avenue A. Lance paid the driver. The eponymous Habib stood at his store's entrance smoking a cigarette. The graffitied steel shutters were lowered over the windows, but not the door. A dim light shone from deep within. Uncle Habib seemed more relieved than annoyed.

"It is my fault, sir," Oscar said, stepping forward and bowing slightly.

"Then perhaps it is you I should punish. What should be your friend's punishment, Basim?"

"Is it not better to forgive, Uncle?"

"Yes, that is so. I forgive your friend. And by your example you will teach him not to let it happen again."

"Yes, Uncle, I will."

The friends said their good-nights amid their chuckling. Lance and Oscar included Uncle Habib in their farewells. The proprietor and his nephew went inside. Lance and Oscar went their separate ways up and down Avenue A. The steel shutter over the door was rolled down.

* * *

The magic of the scene between Uncle Habib and his nephew, Basim, lingered with Oscar for many years. The story played in his mind whenever he heard the word "gentle." The dialogue varied in its particulars with each retelling. But Basim's love for his uncle shone clearly in his respect for the old man. Uncle Habib's love was apparent in his sweet, but firm, reproach of his nephew. That was the kind of magic Oscar Diggs wanted to work: the magic that made people kind.

That same night when Oscar showed his friends his cloud watercolors, another watershed formed in his life—or, rather, it dried up. It was the last time he drew or painted anything. He'd been unaware of conferring anything magical, or even unmagical, upon his artwork until he showed it to his friends. And if magic was that unpredictable—if it could be conveyed simply by a touch—it was bound to be dangerous.

* * *

Lance dropped out of school the next year to pursue his skateboarding "career." Oscar and Basim tried to discourage him, but they both knew he was too smart for school. Then, it

seemed, Lance was always on the road, and the three friends lost their every other Saturdays together. They could not make their days coincide.

Oscar and Basim carried on their tradition several months longer, though Basim cancelled often at the last minute for a hot date. He was quite the ladies' man. As odd as they looked together, he and Long Tall Sally had become an item, and Oscar played the second fiddle.

At the end of the semester, Basim also left The Clinton School, though for the reason that he qualified for early university admission. He placed so high in his exams that he skipped his final two years. He enrolled at The John Jay College of Criminal Justice. It wasn't that much further uptown than Clinton, but the travel time got to be a problem. Between Basim's course load and working every spare minute for his uncle down in the East Village, Oscar wondered when he slept. He was often late, more a hurried and harried New Yorker than Oscar, who seemed the immigrant in his own city. Basim had become the native.

Oscar wished he could help his friend relax and act like his former self, but he didn't know that kind of magic. He told himself he knew only the useless kind that did nobody any good, least of all the magician. All he knew was some silly parlor trick.

Though none of them knew it at the time, *los tres amigos* enjoyed their last supper together at the uptown pizza joint near Columbia. Both Lance and Basim were late. Oscar turned his annoyance on himself and had a depressing evening. He alone had an inkling this would be their last evening together for a long time.

* * *

Oscar lost his parents while in his first year at the University of New Amsterdam. As was their habit, both his mother and father took up whichever pair of eyeglasses was closest at hand. He found it amusing to see his father in rhinestone cat's-eye glasses and his mother in nerdy horn-rimmed spectacles. But in this case it may have led to their each taking the other's medication as well, with doubly fatal results.

With a modest inheritance, Oscar decided he had no head for more schooling, either, and dropped out of the University. Basim had enough braininess for both him and Lance. Oscar felt less pressured to succeed. He decided he could now afford to do what he'd wanted in the first place.

Oscar had wanted to own a restaurant for as long as he could remember. If he could not heal people, he would at least feed them.

Just as this thought came to him, he glanced down at an ad in a student newspaper and learned the pizza place across from Columbia was for sale. He walked west to Riverside Park and sat down on a bench across from Grant's Tomb and called the number in the ad. He went to see it immediately.

Oscar learned he could assume the current lease and buy all the ovens and equipment outright. He did not have to buy the business, but decided that for now it might be best not to rattle the customers with a change in name. It would stay *PapaRoni's Pizza* a while longer.

Steadily and incrementally, Oscar's ability to read others' minds developed beneath the radar of his conscious attention. He knew as soon as a customer walked into his restaurant what that person wanted on his pizza. He prepared it in front of them while they were still deciding which toppings they wanted. Often it was in the oven before they made up their minds. They were astounded by how quickly their order was ready. They gave the place rave reviews and Oscar remained as busy as two bakers. He loved what he was doing, though it knocked the heck out of his non-existent love life.

What Oscar loved was making people feel good by feeding them good food. It didn't hurt his cause that he could anticipate his customers' wants by minutes and then hours. He often made his own favorite pizza without realizing it. That is when he found his magic scariest—and strongest: when he was unaware and did it naturally.

Everyone called Oscar a wizard. He knew the time had come for him to call his restaurant what it truly was: *ESPizza. We know what you want™*.

No one, including every restaurant reviewer in New York, knew quite what was going on, but they found it entertaining and they liked the food. If they knew it was something spiritual, they would have found it spooky and stayed away in droves. Oscar distracted them with threadbare magic tricks so that they paid no attention to what he'd really done: read their minds in the area where their desires originate. *That* they would have found even spookier.

Oscar never knew the identity of the person whose order he was mind-reading unless some of their self-chatter sneaked in on the same wavelength. He made a point of delivering the orders for new customers himself. It gave him a good deal of pleasure to see both their bafflement and their satisfaction with the laden pizza pie he'd brought steaming hot to their doors. Tonight's inkling told him only that the customer was an older fellow with an enormous appetite and more brains than sense. The fleeting impression, whatever it signified, made him think of Mr. Shackley from his and Basim's and Lance's high school days at The Clinton School. It wasn't likely to be he. Mr. Shackley would be 132 years old by now.

He looked down the hallway for the right number and pressed the buzzer.

"You are correct, Master Diggs. I'll be 133 next April, Allah willing."

Oscar stood with his jaw open, beholding an only slightly more wrinkled Mr. Shackley in a black satin Nehru jacket with red piping and buttons. Oscar thought it a bad imitation of a bad Charlie Chan. He wondered when his former teacher converted to Islam.

“I haven’t, my boy. But *Allah* is as good a name as any to invoke when facing an uncertain future, which is to say always. Yes, I can do it, too.”

Oscar’s jaw could drop no further. Then his old pals Lance and Basim stepped into the apartment alcove and relieved him of his five pizza boxes. Mr. Shackley led him to a small round table set for five.

“We’re here to buck you up, Pinhead,” Lance assured him. “Teach says when you’re good at picking up tiny signals, you’re also a strong broadcaster. We’ve all been picking up your distress signal. But let’s dig in, first. We’ve been waiting ten minutes. I’m famished.”

Basim chucked Oscar on the shoulder and smiled at him. They sat down and dove into the pizza boxes, passing variegated slices from hand to hand around the table so each could sample all. Mr. Shackley passed out two beers and three bottles of water, one for himself, another for Basim, who remained a mostly observant Muslim. The third bottle was for a mystery guest whom Oscar wanted to ask about, but he kept getting diverted.

Each thought of the last time the three friends had shared a meal—at the pizza joint near Columbia, the one Oscar bought and turned into *ESPizza*. Each knew the others were having the same recollection. They didn’t speak a word until the last slice had been snatched from Mr. Shackley’s hand, who’d tried unsuccessfully to engage a single one of them in conversation. They devoured everything not cardboard, leaving only crumbs and crust for the tardy fifth guest.

Oscar felt pretty good, satisfied with himself for once, pleased he had made his friends feel good, too. It took him a minute to remember why he’d been glum, so strong were his friends’ good wishes and good cheer. Even seeing old Shackley made his spirits brighter. He was unaccountably optimistic.

“In your own words, Oscar,” Basim said after a time of leisurely digestion. “No vibes bouncing off metallic objects and getting diverted or misinterpreted. We’re listening. Keep in mind the man who represents himself has a fool for a client.”

“I prayed since I was a boy to be special, to be someone with a gift that will help people and, yes, a gift that would make those people admire me and speak well of me. I had no idea what that gift should be. That I left entirely in God’s hands since I, least of all, seem to know what’s best for me.

“God has answered my prayer, but the joke’s on me. He’s punked me. He’s blessed me with the gift of prophecy, of seeing into the future, even if only a few minutes. He’s blessed me with the ability to predict in detail what toppings customers will want on their pizzas. It is a skill so incredibly banal that I cannot think of anything more ordinary and unspecial.”

“Then why doesn’t every pizza joint know what you want before you walk in the door or pick up the phone?” Lance weighed in.

Oscar shrugged. “So who’s it helping? Who’s it doing any good?” he asked.

“You make your living at it, don’t you?”

Oscar nodded.

“You like your work, don’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“And your customers, they like what you bake for them and they especially appreciate not having to wait for it. They all speak well of you and recommend you to their friends. Yours is a special gift. Your prayer has been answered, Oscar. Why can’t you see that?”

He shrugged again.

“You are feeding people, nourishing them and making them feel special. You provide their reward at the end of a long day,” Basim reminded him.

The raucous door buzzer startled everyone but Mr. Shacktey, who got up to answer it. The mystery guest was a nun in old-fashioned black-and-white habit. He bowed and waved her into his apartment, introducing her to his former pupils.

“This is Sister Hildegard. Sister Hildegard von Binghamton. Please, sit down. I’m sorry we forgot our manners and wolfed down our supper before you arrived.”

”That’s all right,” Sister Hildegard told him. “Please go on with your conversation before I showed up.”

None spoke a word, but watched as the Benedictine nun collected the meager scraps of their meal in one of the empty pizza boxes. Basim removed the remaining empty boxes. Sister Hildegard picked up the last unopened bottle of water and remarked that she would prefer a glass of wine instead. Mr. Shacktey brought her a squat wine glass, the sort usually used for red wine.

Sister Hildegard took the cap off the water bottle and, as she poured some into the wine glass, the clear liquid turned to a deep, rich red. She announced it was a Merlot.

“May I join you, Sister?” Oscar asked, surprising himself at his boldness.

“White or red?” she asked.

“White,” he responded, trying to catch her at her trick, whatever it was.

Mr. Shacktey set a second wine glass, more fluted in shape, in front of Oscar.

Sister Hildegard poured from the water bottle into Oscar's glass a pale yellow-green liquid that he was astounded proved an excellent Chardonnay. They nodded to and smiled at each other.

"Anyone care for another slice of pizza?" Sister Hildegard asked.

She got strange looks from everyone because they had each seen her compile the scraps of their meal in the empty pizza carton. When she lifted the lid, each scrap or tidbit was restored to a full slice, with a variety of toppings, into an entire, intact pizza. A cloud of appetizing steam arose from the hodgepodge pizza pie.

No one's jaw dropped more than Oscar's, but he also found it amusing. He laughed and reached for a slice. It was every bit as good as his original.

"Another one of my unique but useless talents, Oscar. Bread and wine. Bread and circuses. Loaves and fishes."

"But, no, Sister. You could feed the world.," Oscar protested.

"Yes, and probably keep a good many alcoholics perpetually in their cups. I'm afraid it only works for me and whomever else is gathered at table with me. It cannot be exported. Ours are small talents, Oscar, and they bring small and fleeting joy to people, helping them forget themselves and their string of cares for a few minutes. We are not adding to the world's pain and misery and meanness. We are on the right side, Oscar."

"Why did we get these strange talents, Sister? Why not everybody?"

The nun refilled their glasses, with red and white, from the same bottomless water bottle.

"Everyone *does* have unique talents—everyone here certainly does. But so does everybody out there. I have no idea what God has in mind, but I'd guess He expects us to use them for the benefit of others. I think it scares most people. It's spooky and no one's going to believe them anyway. Smoke and mirrors. Better hide that lamp under a basket before somebody sees it."

They all laughed. Sister Hildegard instructed them to each raise his glass. She filled them with water, beer, Chardonnay or Merlot.

"I didn't know you could do beer, Sister Hildegard," Mr. Shackley said.

"I didn't, either," she replied.

"A toast to misfits," Oscar proposed.

Sister Hildegard turned to him and smiled. “Where would God be without us?”

* * *

The gathering in Mr. Shackley’s apartment went on past midnight. His friends and teacher were relieved to note that Oscar’s less pessimistic demeanor had returned. Basim suggested they make a firm date for their next get-together and that they have it after-hours at *ESPizza*. No one objected.

Oscar drove Sister Hildegard home to her Order House on Riverside Drive just a few blocks from his own apartment. They promised to stay in touch, eager to compare notes on God’s bizarre sense of humor.