

GATES OF GOLD

By Erin Snyder

You can imagine Frederick Littlemin's surprise as he stood in a long line before the golden gates of heaven. Even if Fred had been a spiritual man, he would have found the cloud-floors and white robes a bit hard to swallow. As it was, Frederick had been a corporate attorney, and that left no room for religion. "Life is for living, death is for dying! Check the dictionary, jackass!" He had once screamed that into the face of a Jehovah's Witness before slamming the door. Right now, he wished he had been a little nicer.

Just twenty minutes ago Fred had been alive and happy. He had a date with a gorgeous twenty-two year old actress who thought he was a director, and he was getting ready to make a down payment on a new Porsche. That was before he choked to death on an olive.

All of this was jarring, of course. But nothing that had happened was a hundredth as shocking as the angel.

It was a real, bona fide angel, complete with feathered wings and a glowing halo. It floated beside the line, looking everyone over. The woman in front of Fred cried tears of joy when the angel was next to her. It ignored her and kept going. Then came the part Fred never would have expected. Not in his wildest, most fearsome dreams. Even if he had thought any of the rest possible, he never could have imagined the angel singling him out and asking "Is your name Frederick Littlemin?"

Yet that was precisely what happened. Ignoring the thousands of other souls before him, that winged being, that servant of the Lord, was standing before Frederick, speaking in a voice more beautiful than any he had ever heard.

The question still hung somewhere between Fred's right and left ear while he swallowed hard. It was as if all the liquid in his body (or whatever he was now) suddenly evaporated, and his husk of a soul was left dried up and shriveled.

The first time he tried to speak, he just coughed. Then, in the most timid voice an attorney is capable of, he answered, "Yeah. That's me."

"Would you please step out of line?"

It didn't seem to be a request, so, with shaking legs, Fred did just that. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Please follow me, sir." The angel led Fred alongside the line. The other souls waiting for their chance moved to the side, allowing them to pass. It was obvious to everyone that this was important.

They reached the front, where a short, fat man was sitting behind a desk. It was a nice desk, similar to the kind Fred used to have in his office.

"You're Peter," Fred whispered.

"And you are Frederick Littlemin. I apologize for making such a scene, but you're what we like to call a special case." Peter lifted a list. A long list. "Shall we start with the sins of the body?"

"I'd rather we didn't," Fred said, softly.

"There was something in here...something during college." Peter reached that section, and his eyes shot up. "Fred," he scolded, shaking his head.

"I was drunk," Fred whimpered, as Peter moved on.

"Things pick up after college. Lying. Cheating. Withholding evidence--"

"I was doing my job," Fred blurted out, before realizing that he had just interrupted Saint Peter.

"A job with consequences. You chose that job. You made choices. Choices like... hiding evidence of illegal disposal of toxins. Your actions allowed that practice to continue. I have a tally here of the number of children who died or became sick because of you, Fred. You. There's the incident with Roger Stevenson. Remember him? The man who tried to sue after his wife got sick at work. The company was willing to settle, but you told them you could win the case. And here, ten years ago. Do you remember Terrance Smith?"

"I... I don't know who that is," Fred confessed.

"I don't suppose you would. You never asked his name. You just called him a jackass and slammed the door in his face. Well, he was one of our agents. I can go on, Fred. We're just getting started."



