

# PEARLY GATES RESTAURANT

*Sean O'Grady is a member of St. Peter who is currently away at college in another state. He called me one day and started telling me about this story that he and his buddies had written.*

*Just off campus, there was a restaurant called Hell's Kitchen and they bragged about having the spiciest food in the world. On a diametrically opposite corner sat a restaurant called The Garden of Eden and they specialized in gourmet salads. On yet a third corner sat the Pizza Inn. The young men were sitting at a table outside the pizza joint where they could see the other two restaurants. As is customary to lads of their age, they started messing around and came up with this group story. They submitted it to the college paper, but it was rejected for being too religiously controversial. Sean then sent it to me since he thinks I'm attracted to religious controversy.*

*Pastor Fred Anderson*

Walking down the brick path leading up to the restaurant, I felt tired. After rounding a bend, I came to a fork in the path. Shrouded in a foggy mist, the small signs identifying the two paths could only be read by standing six inches in front of them. The fork to the left read “Smoking Area” and the fork to the right read “Restaurant”. The plant underneath the “Smoking Area” sign was leafless and black. In fact, when looking across what landscape I could see toward the smoking area, all I saw was hideous black shapes draped in the gray fog. I veered right on the path to the restaurant. There were numerous other signs on that path. One said, “Under Same Management for Over 2000 Years” and another said, “Soul Food Served Here”.

I finally reached the front of the restaurant, opened the heavy wooden door, and went inside. The hostess who greeted me looked exactly like a girl I had a crush on in high school, but I knew that couldn't be, unless the air up here prevented aging.

“Welcome to the Pearly Gates Restaurant, Fred,” said the hostess.

“Thank you,” I replied, as I searched for her name tag. “Thank you, uh, Jennifer.” That was also my high school crush’s name. “How did you know my name?”

“From your name tag, sir,” answered Jennifer.

I looked down at my shirt and sure enough I had a name tag on, but I didn’t remember putting it there.

“I hope you didn’t have any trouble finding us,” said Jennifer. “Travel in a cloud can be kind of tricky sometimes.”

“Uh, no, I didn’t have any trouble.”

“Would you like smoking or nonsmoking seating?” asked my hostess.

“Uh, I didn’t know I had a choice anymore.”

“Of course, you have a choice, Fred. Your experience here at the Pearly Gates Restaurant will be the last series of choices you have, though. So, we always suggest you make wise decisions.”

I don’t know why I even hesitated at the question. I don’t smoke.

“If you want to sit in the smoking section, I will need to see your Personal Fire Insurance Card.”

“Personal Fire Insurance Card? Uh, no, I don’t think I have one of those, so I guess I’ll take nonsmoking.”

Jennifer led me back to the nonsmoking section and seated me at a table with a broad view of the dining area.

“Michael will be your waiter, Fred,” said my hostess. “He’ll be with you shortly. Have a pleasant meal.”

“Thank you, Jennifer.”

When I opened the menu, the only thing I found inside was a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*. A young man with a very angelic face soon approached my table.

“Welcome to the Pearly Gates, sir. My name is Michael, and I will be your server this evening. Can I start you off with an appetizer or a drink?”

“Uh, Michael, I opened up the menu, and all I found was a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know how that got in there. That belongs with the menus for the smoking section. Let me go get you the proper menu.”

As I waited for Michael to return, I glanced around the room and noticed the delightful décor. If I hadn’t known better, I’d say it looked like the Garden of Eden—at least as I might have imagined it. Michael soon came back with the proper menu.

“I do apologize for the mix up, sir. In this room, you certainly don’t need to worry about Dante’s *Inferno*. Now, what would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have a nice cold water, no lemon.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll give you a few minutes to look over the menu.”

“Thank you, Michael.”

When I opened the menu, I found pages upon pages of epicurean delights from platters of grapes, pomegranates, and figs to the house special titled “A Feast for the Kings”. I eventually made up my mind, placed my order with Michael, and sat back to relax. A musician came around and asked me if I had any requests.

“Do you know ‘Amazing Grace’?” I asked.

“Certainly, sir. That is one of our most popular requests.”

As my mind melted to the music, I noticed a server walk by with a flaming dish—probably Cherries Jubilee—and go through a set of doors at the far end of the restaurant. I only had a moment to see what the room held as the doors closed rather quickly. All I can say is that it looked smoky and orange inside. My meal was scrumptious, and I told Michael to give my compliments to the chef.

“All I need now, Michael, is the check.”

“Sir, the man at table 3 picked up the tab for you,” said Michael. “He’s right over there ... I’m sorry, it appears he’s already gone.”

“Well, what a surprise. I wish I could have thanked him.”

“Now, Mr. Anderson, you of all people shouldn’t be surprised at that.”

“Yes ... you are undoubtedly right. What about your tip?”

“Already covered, sir. We work on a different pay system here at the Pearly Gates Restaurant.”

Well-fed, I walked out the exit into a greenhouse filled with row upon row of beautiful flowers. There were two men dressed in what I could best describe as dazzling clothes, tending to the flowers. I thought about going over to talk to them, but the bright light around them hurt my eyes, so I kept walking to the outside. The view outside the greenhouse was even more amazing than the beautiful flowers inside the greenhouse. Off to the left, though, I saw what appeared to be a back entrance for the restaurant. A hearse with a placard that said St. Matthew Christian Church backed up to the entrance. Dozens more long black hearses with different placards lined up in wait. I continued on and came upon a serene pond with mirror images of the gold and red autumn trees that lined its banks. A little dog stood on top of a small wooden bridge ahead of me. He had a good-sized bone in his mouth and when he looked down into the pond, he saw his reflection, and strangely, dropped his bone into the water. I eventually wound back around towards the front of the restaurant where I saw a line of taxicabs sitting and waiting. I approached the first one in line, opened the back door, and got inside.

The driver of the cab turned around and with a devilish grin said, “Any last requests?”

I immediately got out and decided to walk back home. As I left the restaurant grounds or cloud, I thought about something Mark Twain once said, “The good Lord didn’t create anything without a purpose, but the fly comes close.”

*What we can glean from all that, I’m not sure. If I had seen Joseph up there, I would have asked him to interpret it for me. So, I’ll leave it up to you to select any portion and learn from it. I don’t know if you have to be eating pizza or not to gain full insight.*

*Fred Anderson*