

BY BELINDA FORD, Florida

The man, otherwise known as 235-762, walked hesitatingly by the passing crowds of people.

He was a middle-aged man with misty, grey eyes that he squinted, hoping to protect them from the contaminated air that made them burn. His skin appeared chalky white as a result of staying under the protection of air-conditioned, windowless buildings. His lips were held tightly together in a hard, stern line. The faint wrinkles around his face revealed that he had laughed—at a time when smiles were a common expression of communication. But as the years had progressed and the world of machinery had advanced, people had also changed. The evidence showed in the cold, expressionless faces that were masked in clear, plastic gas filters.

He glanced at his watch. He realized that it was an hour before curfew. He stopped before the station to wait for the monorail that usually transported him home after work. He drew out his token and nervously tossed it up into the air and let it fall back into his hand. He felt strangely odd. It seemed as though an unknown force, far more powerful than he had ever felt, was possessing him. He put the token back into his pocket and began walking away from the station.

For some reason he felt compelled to walk home—something he rarely did, because of the high crime rate. He began to

THE ETERNAL PROMISE

walk on a route which led through the ruins of the older part of the city. He had been there only once or twice before, but he well remembered the eerie feeling that the crumbling city had given him. As he approached the city, he could see the old

buildings looming up against the horizon. The sun would be setting in less than an hour. He hurried through the rusty iron gates that seemed to groan with age.

He began walking through the deserted streets that had once been main transportation routes for cars, an invention of the past that had long since been replaced by the smog-free monorail. He stared in awe at the countless, unlit neon signs which once had glowed with a brightness that could pierce through the blackest night. On a bank building among the tall skyscrapers, he could see the large face of a clock with its hands frozen with time, never to move again. In the distance he could see peeing campaign billboards which boasted of promises that were never filled. Graffiti of profanity and rebellion marked the walls of every building.

Eventually he saw the iron gates that led out of the city. He walked a little faster, relieved at the thought of leaving the city of yesteryear.

But suddenly the lonely shadows of the skyscrapers seemed to close in on him. He clutched at his mask desperately in an attempt to loosen the tightening fear that gripped his throat and seemed to squeeze the very breath of life out of him. He wanted to run back to the security of the present—but a power, stronger than his human will, restrained him. This same power gently urged him to turn back to a desolate building he had overlooked. As he walked toward the building he felt more relaxed, even though his brow was drenched in perspiration.

The building looked much like the others he had seen. But after he walked in, he sensed that the room held a strange quality that made it totally different from any other he had seen. The first thing his eyes noticed were the

beautiful stained-glass windows. Even though they had been broken by vandals, they added an air of serenity to the sanctuary. He wiped the dust from one of the pews and sat down. After awhile he became aware that he had been in the same place many years ago. Out of the silence he began to hear the faint sounds of voices softly singing. He couldn't remember where.

As the singing continued, he kept searching his memory. But for what? Something that was lost? His eyes swept the room again and he suddenly remembered that it had been a place where he had come as an innocent, trusting child. He had prayed to an invisible God that had answered prayers many, many years ago. He dropped to his knees, and his tears began to flow like a fountain of water that had sprung from a dry desert.

Suddenly the singing ceased and a voice within began to speak. It wasn't an audible voice, but the reality of it could not be denied. It spoke of love, hope, and an eternal promise. He became aware of a Presence, and he no longer felt alone. He had finally found the treasure he had been unconsciously searching for—something that had been buried deep in the sands of modernization and progress. He rejoiced at the thought of keeping it forever and of sharing it with the world. He slowly arose and walked toward the door.

As he walked out, a soft ray of light shining through the stained-glass windows touched him. He stepped into the evening light and looked up into the skies. To his amazement he saw that the sun was no longer concealed by the dark mist but was now shining brightly. He smiled and his countenance took on a new glow. He walked through the gates, unafraid. The eternal promise burned within him. ☉

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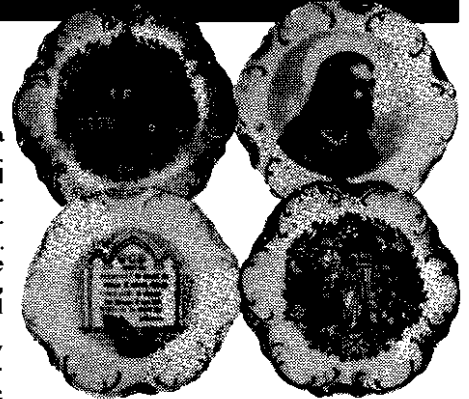
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