

Case 457 by Kade Mendelowitz

Lights up.

Raphael, a well dressed young person, sits at a desk center stage – In . (S)he stamps a piece of paper, then places it in a folder. Pulls up the next folder and reads the label...

Raphael: Number 457.

Ben walks in from Stage Left, looking anxious.

Raphael: 457?

Ben: Yes. I believe that's me.

Raphael: Benjamin Johnson?

Ben: Yes. Right. Can you help me?

Raphael: I don't know. Can you be helped?

Ben: Well, I certainly think so! I shouldn't need to wait here forever.

Raphael: Forever? No, no one waits here forever. Although I hear it can feel like it lasts that long.

Ben: You don't seem to have a very nice attitude.

Raphael: *You* want to talk about *my* attitude?

Ben: No. Oh, no. I didn't mean...

Raphael: *Cutting him off:* Because we can discuss *your* attitude...

Ben: I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. Wait – why, was my attitude part of why I'm here?

Raphael: Attitude always intensifies a situation. You know, it's helpful if you're remorseful, for example.

Ben: Remorseful?

Raphael: Yeah. You know: sorry for the things you've done.

Ben: But I haven't really *done* anything.

Raphael: *(Only partly under breath)* Please.

Ben: What? What do you have there? Can you tell me why I'm *here*?

Raphael: *(Looking into folder)* Oh, I see. This is your first review.

Ben: *(Nervously)* My *first* review?

Raphael: Yes. You see, they used to give you more of an individualized orientation upon arrival, but with the population explosion and the wars, well – some things have gone by the way-side.

Ben: Uh, I see.

Raphael: But, really. Most people figure out why they're here before they get a review. Haven't you been doing some introspective searching?

Ben: Introspective...

Raphael: Yeah. You know, (*finger quotes in the air*) soul-searching?

Ben: Soul-searching?

Raphael: Boy. You're not really very bright, are you?

Ben: Hey!

Raphael: Just how *have* you been spending your time here? It's not like you can sit around watching TV.

Ben: Look, now.

Raphael: No: you look. If you're going to get all pissy with me, I really don't have to help you.

Ben: You don't have to help?

Raphael: No. I only help people I feel I should help. It doesn't really matter to me if you stay here for all eternity. As far as I'm concerned, you can just go to hell.

Ben: (*Looks quite horrified*) Hell?

Raphael: If you want to.

Ben: I don't want to go to hell.

Raphael: Well, it might be just a little too late to think about that now.

Ben: Too late? Wait a minute! I'm not...

Raphael: What? You're not what? Beyond redemption?

Ben: No! I'm certainly not beyond...

Raphael: Look, you better get with the program. You need to get your act together.

Ben: That's what I want. I want to be with the program.

Raphael: All right. That's what I like to hear! You need to start to repent.

Ben: What would you like me to do?

Raphael: Me? Whoa. I think you've got me confused.

Ben: I'll do anything you want. Just tell me how I can clear my name.

Raphael: *Clear* your name? It doesn't really work like that.

Ben: Well how *does* it work?

Raphael: In a nutshell? Well, you know the expression "forgive and forget"?

Ben: Sure.

Raphael: That's a dumb expression.

Ben: Dumb?

Raphael: To forgive is divine, but to forget? No, no one really forgets.

Ben: They don't?

Raphael: No. That would be stupid.

Ben: Stupid?

Raphael: Sure! If you slap me in the face, I might turn the other cheek, but it would be stupid to forget you ever hit me in the first place.

Ben: It would?

Raphael: Of course! 'Cause then if you hit me again, I'd just keep turning cheeks. Then, you'd keep hitting me until my cheeks are all red!

Ben: I wouldn't do that.

Raphael: Darn straight you wouldn't.

Ben: No, of course. But, so how do I get you to forgive?

Raphael: Well, it's not for *me* to forgive.

Ben: It's not?

Raphael: No. I don't judge.

Ben: You don't?

Raphael: No. Someone else does that. Someone else decides your fate.

Ben: My...fate?

Raphael: Look, if I want to, I can help you present yourself with your best foot forward. After all, you want them to see you in a favorable light, don't you?

Ben: They might not see me favorably?

Raphael: Whew...you *are* new (*meaning naïve*). Look, after you spend some time here, you get judged. The result can be one of three things.

Ben: Three?

Raphael: Three. One: You move up. Two: You move down. Or three: your judgment might be delayed again.

Ben: Delayed?

Raphael: Delayed. Which means you would come back here.

Ben: Here?

Raphael: Here. You know? Waiting.

Ben: Waiting for what?

Raphael: Waiting for the universe to decide what to do with you. Haven't you figured that out yet? The Big Man doesn't know what to do with you – so you've been sent here. Then, you go to court. And they decide whether you move on, for better or worse, or whether you need more time here before you're judged again.

Ben: For better or worse?

Raphael: Sure. It can go either way! If they knew you were going to get the red carpet treatment, you would have been given membership to the elite club straight away! But, frankly, the universe is on the fence.

Ben: On the fence?

Raphael: Yeah. Literally. You're going to be on one side of the gates eventually. We just don't know which side yet.

Ben: *(To himself)* Oh, God.

Raphael: *(As if teasingly)* Can't hear you.

Ben: He can't hear me?

Raphael: Not from here.

Ben: What...

Raphael: Look, once you get to this point, your case has been delegated.

Ben: Delegated?

Raphael: You know: farmed out.

Ben: Farmed out?

Raphael: Yeah! You had your chance. You blew it. You could have taken the direct path; but you strayed. So; no "free pass". But, hey, at least you didn't go straight to hell, either. So, there's still a chance.

Ben: There is? Still a chance?

Raphael: Haven't you been listening? Yes, there's still a chance. But you no longer get to talk to God. That would be like calling up the Supreme Court. No, you have to present to a lower court.

Ben: A lower court?

Raphael: Yeah. A lower court. You're not *that* special.

Ben: Excuse me?

Raphael: Right. Well, sure, you're special. We're all special – every one. Only you blew your easy pass. No "get out of jail free card" for you. Do not pass "go"; do not collect \$200. You have to reflect on what you've done, present your case, and be judged.

Ben: Present my case.

Raphael: Sure. You know, so you explain yourself. Your "extenuating circumstances". We can all read your file.

Ben: You can?

Raphael: Sure. It's no mystery. The question is; *why* did you do what you did.

Ben: Why?

Raphael: Why. You know: *intent*. It's up to you to explain what we can't see from the paper.

Ben: What exactly *is* in my file?

Raphael: Everything.

Ben: Everything?

Raphael: All the glorious details. (*Ben looks nervous*) You've cheated...

Ben: Cheated?

Raphael: Cheated and stolen. From the government no less! You're 2002 Tax Return reads like a piece of fiction!

Ben: My *tax return*?

Raphael: Hey. Stealing is stealing, and "thou shall not steal."

Ben: Oh, right.

Raphael: And then there's Mary-Beth.

Ben: Mary-Beth?

Raphael: C'mon. Don't play ignorant with me.

Ben: We never did anything!

Raphael: You didn't have to. You wanted to! You conspired to! You tried to! It just didn't work. But not for your lack of trying; she just had better taste than that.

Ben: Coveting.

Raphael: Don't get like that! You knew it was wrong.

Ben: Oh, Jesus! (*Buzzer sounds; red lights flash*).

Raphael: Oh, yeah. That was smart.

Ben: What?

Raphael: Do not swear falsely.

Ben: OK, all right. Enough.

Raphael: Enough? We're just getting started. What about the time you kept the twelve dollars in change even though you know you only gave the clerk a ten spot?

Ben: The clerk?

Raphael: November 4th, 1997.

Ben: Holy cow! (*Buzzer sounds; red lights flash*).

Raphael: (*Making a note in file*) Do not make false likeness...

Ben: OK! I admit it! You're right! I did all those things, and I'm sure all of the things in your file about me!
But I'm not that bad!

Raphael: "*That bad*"? What does that mean?

Ben: I mean, I'm not a murderer or anything *like that!*

Raphael: Well, not of humans.

Ben: What does *that* mean?

Raphael: It means you haven't murdered any human beings.

Ben: What, did the bible say I should be a vegetarian?

Raphael: No, you don't need to be a vegetarian. There's nothing wrong with killing animals if you're going to eat them and use their skins for protection from the elements.

Ben: *What* then?

Raphael: 23 ants, 20 mosquitoes, 7 spiders, 1 mouse...

Ben: Ants?

Raphael: What gives you the right to murder an ant?

Ben: The right?

Raphael: What, just because you're higher on the food chain doesn't mean you should kill indiscriminately! No; subsistence is one thing; but to murder for being bothered? That's just not judged favorably, that's all.

Ben: OK, you're right. I'm simply not a murderer of humans. Isn't that what's most important?

Raphael: Most important?

Ben: Sure. Weren't humans made in the likeness of God?

Raphael: We are *all* God's creatures.

Ben: Well, *sure*...

Raphael: Have you ever really looked at an ant? They're amazingly intricate little buggers.

Ben: I'm sure they are.

Raphael: You should have more respect.

Ben: I'll work on that.

Raphael: That's the spirit!

Ben: What else can I work on?

Raphael: Well, a little humility never really hurt anyone.

Ben: (*Starts reaching for a notepad on Raphael's desk*) May I...

Raphael: What, are you kidding me?

Ben: Excuse me?

Raphael: You need to take notes for this?

Ben: Well, I just don't want to forget...

Raphael: Do you have anything else to work on while you're here?

Ben: No...

Raphael: Isn't this important enough for your undivided attention?

Ben: Sure, I just...

Raphael: Look, if you don't know how to be a good person by now, then perhaps I was wrong about you.

Ben: Wrong?

Raphael: Perhaps you can't be helped.

Ben: No, really!

Raphael: OK, let's do a practice run then.

Ben: Excuse me?

Raphael: You have 3 minutes to present your case. Your side of the story.

Ben: 3 minutes....

Raphael: Yes. We've read your file. We know the details. The facts are all laid out. But because your fate is undecided, you get reviewed. 3 minutes to explain yourself. To convince the deity Arkay that you are worthy of moving up instead of down. Or, of course, you will remain on the fence. Then you will be sent back – not to me, of course, or not immediately. No, you will be sent back to waiting until your case file is called again. Waiting in purgatory.

Ben: *In disbelief* I see.

Raphael: 3 minutes. Let's see what you've got.

Ben: *Steps downstage...* Uh, if it please the court, my name is Benjamin Johnson. I had a typical childhood, with parents who loved me more than I knew at the time. When I was young, I was jealous of my older brother – who was always allowed more freedom than me. He got to watch late night TV, go out with cooler girls. I stopped going to church when I was about 15. I'm sorry, but I stopped believing. I don't think I could tell you why, really. It just seemed boring, and I didn't want to get up early every Sunday. I wasn't very kind to our pets. I once pulled my dog's tail so hard he snapped at me, and when my dad heard him, he spanked him, and I didn't tell him it was really my fault. I trimmed my cat's whiskers – and he had a really hard time jumping on top of the refrigerator after that without knocking his head into the ceiling. I didn't mean it though...though I guess I knew it was wrong at the time. I did kill those ants. I thought it was fun to go out to our backyard with a magnifying glass...I didn't really think of it as killing... I had sex before I was married...a lot. And I used a condom, which you say is wrong, but I'm still glad I did to avoid spreading diseases. I donated money to worthy causes. Maybe not very much, but I did every year to support our Disabled Veterans, and cancer research. Wow, to think that the universe is unsure about me, is really hard to fathom. I tried to respect my elders, but I was rough on Grandpa every summer because he drove so slow. If I only knew this was all real, I would have acted better; and I'd happily make amends if I could...

Buzzer and lights flash differently from before.

Raphael: Time's up!

Ben: Time?

Announcer: *(Over the PA or prerecorded)* Case 457; Benjamin Johnson.

The curtain opens slightly (or is hand-breasted to one side).

Raphael: Good luck.

Ben goes upstage and walks through the curtain. The curtain closes behind him.

Raphael: *Stamps Ben's file and puts it in the first pile. Reads the next folder:* Number 458.

End