

THE DEAD ZONE

“Perhaps”
(fka “Playing God”)

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September 30, 2002

Perhaps, ultimately, there is only one thing that separates people who have faith from people who don't: the belief that things (especially bad things) happen for a reason, that the often painful events in our lives are part of a plan, a design... manifestations of God's will and not mere accidents... Unlike the rest of us, Johnny Smith can foresee some of these bad events and stop them from happening... Yet, in this episode Johnny learns that sometimes the right thing to do is to do nothing at all...

Johnny's often at the hospital, so he's constantly meeting a lot of sick people. Some of them know who he is, so he gets asked questions like: Johnny, am I going to get well? Am I going to beat cancer? Am I going to die?

What can he answer? What comfort can he offer these people if his visions show him that they will *never* get well... that there is no hope... that they only have a short time to live, etc... So, Johnny made a pact with himself: during his visits to the hospital, he *never* answers those kind of questions... Those kind of questions are too serious to answer, and the people who ask them are ultimately better off not knowing... As a health care worker familiar with the gravity of mortality and illness, Bruce has always seconded Johnny in this decision.

But then came George Rogers...

George Rogers is a terminally ill patient who quickly made Johnny his friend. George makes everybody his friend. He's the kind of guy who just breaks your heart.

The kind who's been dealt a bad hand from life but remains more thoughtful of and considerate towards other people than the guy who's got everything...

In the prime of life, George was struck down with a rare heart disease... He's at the top of the donor's list, but he's got a rare blood type – a tough match... He's newly married with a loving wife, but kids are out of the question, he says, until they get this heart thing figured out...

Yet, even with these problems of his own, in his conversations with Johnny, George is mindful of the difficulties Johnny must face as a psychic, remarks how hard it must be to deal with all the crazy reporters and the just plain crazies...

Johnny asks George why he's never asked him to look into his future and find out if he's going to get his heart.

It's not my business to know, George says, either I'll get it or I won't. It's God's will...

Only George's wife Cindy's often tearful eyes show the pain and fear behind her husband's positive attitude... And one day she asks for Johnny's help. Time is getting short, she says, George needs a transplant soon. She can't take it any more, she *has* to know, she begs Johnny for his help...

So, Johnny breaks his code and touches George to see if he is going to get his heart. He is. But the same moment Johnny tells Cindy the good news, he realizes he's made a terrible mistake in doing this... *He should have thought this through before acting...* Because what Johnny see is: George is going to get his heart from a young woman who's going to die in a car accident...

And Johnny realizes he's plopped himself right onto the horns of a classic dilemma, because isn't he morally obligated now to try to find out where this car accident is going to happen and to save this young woman's life? But if he does that, George won't get his heart and he'll die...

Johnny will spend the rest of this episode trying to solve this dilemma... It will become the most difficult choice he's ever had to make...

First, Johnny can't help but believe that there's another solution, a third option. He starts looking for a different heart for George. He has Purdy pull strings, has him look for other lists to put George on... Johnny doesn't care if these lists are halfway around the world... And indeed, using his powers, touching donor lists, etc., Johnny actually finds another heart that matches George's blood-type that will become available in the not-too-distant future – it seems perfect: this donor dies of natural causes, so no accident to prevent there. Johnny could roll the dice, hope that George stays alive long enough to receive this new heart, but then in a vision Johnny sees the person that this heart was meant for, the person who will now die if they don't get it, and Johnny realizes there is no solution here...

Worse, whenever he visits them, Johnny is haunted by visions he keeps having of George and his wife's future progeny, not just happy domestic visions of the many sons and daughters George is going to have once he gets his new lease on life but, since these are going to be children raised by a selfless, class act like George, Johnny has visions of the positive impacts these children are going to have on those around them... these include a startling vision of a brave son who, as an eight year old boy scout, will save a fellow scout from dying in a boating accident... Johnny realizes that if he changes the

future, that other boy is going to die, his parents are going to suffer that terrible loss, because George's son is never going to be born...

But how can Johnny just let someone die in a car accident? How could that ever be right no matter how many people it's going to help?

That question is beyond Johnny. It's a theological question, so he turns to an unlikely person for help: Rev. Gene Purdy. In a powerful scene, Johnny and Purdy's conversation turns to, of all people, Winston Churchill! Purdy tells Johnny how, during the second world war, the British broke a Nazi code and learned that a coastal city was going to be bombed, and were thrust open the horns of a similar dilemma. Churchill could chose to evacuate that city, save those civilians' lives, but that would show the Nazi's they'd broken their code and the war would drag on as a result, causing many more lives to be lost than the number of people in that city...

So, Churchill did nothing... He let that city be bombed... let those civilians die because, in the end, there was simply nothing else he could do...

Purdy says that most people, thankfully, are never put into that kind of position by life, but, because of his powers, Johnny is not going to be one of them... Dilemmas *do* exist, Purdy says, and sometimes there is *only* the choice between the lesser of two evils and not a way to make everybody win...

Purdy tells Johnny that all he can do is have faith that things happen for a reason, that even someone losing his or her life in a senseless car accident is part of a larger plan... Certainly Johnny himself, Purdy asserts, is proof positive of that belief – Johnny was put into a coma for six years, lost his fiancé to another man, was even physically crippled, but all these seemingly “bad” events brought about a power that allows Johnny

to change people's lives for the better – this power would simply not exist if that horrible accident had never happened...

Purdy's argument has a profound impact on Johnny, but it just doesn't seem ethical to deal with this problem in the realms of theological abstraction... Johnny's well aware that there's a player here he has, as of yet, had no contact with...

The woman who's going to die in the car accident...

So, Johnny starts looking for her. And using his powers, he eventually finds her. She lives in Kittery. She's a grade school teacher. Her name is Alice. Johnny tries to learn as much about her life as he can, but is extremely careful to keep his distance. He doesn't want to interfere in the fabric of her life... As Bruce once told him, change one detail in life and ALL of life changes. Johnny knows he shouldn't sit down and talk with this woman, introduce himself, get to know her, because it might cause enough of a disruption in the chain of events in her life that when the night arrives that she's destined to have her accident, she might leave her house at a slightly different time and the accident won't occur. So, Johnny becomes a psychic spy – he touches her mailbox, playground equipment he's seen her lean on at her school, etc., peeps into her life wherever he can, but is very careful that she never sees him, that he never disturbs her life's chain of events...

So what does Johnny see? Only that she's a good woman, a kind teacher, unmarried, a bit lonely. She's cute, but unusual, eccentric. She seems to be on a fast track to becoming somebody's wacky spinster aunt. Perhaps she became a schoolteacher for this reason, because she loves children but is doubtful that she'll ever have any of her own...

Johnny also sees that every Saturday night she goes to the movies by herself...

And then, accidentally, Johnny bumps into her! Mindful of not messing up the future, he tries to avoid her and to quickly move on, but...

There is an instant spark between the two of them... a compatibility... she even has her own version of Johnny's dry wit!

Now that his cover is blown, Johnny can't resist getting to know Alice a bit, since, ultimately, he's going to determine whether she will live or die... Now, as he touches her person, in addition to these visions of her present life, Johnny occasionally sees some magical moments from her childhood, the kind so dear to all of us... Why he keeps seeing these, he doesn't know...

Once, when Johnny touches her he sees what's going to happen: coming home from the movies, she is going to swerve to miss a deer and will crash into a tree... She'll be killed instantly and her heart will go to George...

Realizing that the original time-line is still in place, that his little involvements with this woman have NOT changed the future, Johnny returns to Cleaves Mills.

To find he can't stop thinking about her... or agonizing about the decision he must make...

Johnny doesn't take any action. Yet, the next time he's at the hospital and touches George's wife he sees that George is going to die! He isn't going to get his heart anymore... Is Johnny wrong? Through his interactions with this woman, DID he do something to affect the timeline? DID he create enough of a disturbance so that the accident is now not going to happen?

Johnny returns to Kittery, touches this woman and discovers why the accident isn't going to happen anymore: *he's going to prevent it...* In a vision, Johnny sees himself keeping Alice from going to the movies that night...

Johnny realizes he is going to decide to save her life in the near future... That's how the future has been changed...

But that isn't all Johnny sees...

He sees himself moving into a romantic relationship with Alice, a relationship that stretches years into the future...

It's a profound relationship, and not based merely on the gratitude this woman feels towards Johnny for saving her life or their compatible personalities. It's a host of things. For one, this woman has never felt that she was very important to anybody, that she was even noticed by anyone, and now that someone would choose her in this way, she's simply spellbound by the notion that someone would care that much about her.

But also, she understands Johnny's feelings of isolation, having been so lonely herself, and now his feelings of guilt surrounding this incident because she shares them! She knows that her life now is a gift, a gift given to her at the expense of someone else's life, and she understands how horrible it must have been for Johnny to have to make that choice... Eventually, she shares in ALL of Johnny's secrets, including the approach of Armageddon. She is, truly, "an help meet" as the bible puts it, the understanding partner who can help Johnny bear the burdens of his power...

She changes in this relationship, blossoms a bit under Johnny's influence, and Johnny changes, too. Having this woman in his life to help him with the burden of being Johnny Smith, well, Johnny appears happier than we've ever seen him...

Through these visions, Johnny *lives* this relationship with this woman even though it hasn't happened yet... And since Johnny feels things in his visions just as if they were real, instead of falling in love with this woman in a few months, he falls in love with her *now*, and his choice is made for him. He *loves* this woman... He *won't* let her die...

But there's something Johnny must do first. He can't just let Cindy wait pointlessly for the heart to show up that he told her would be available for George... Johnny has to be responsible for his actions, has to tell Cindy the truth, it's the only ethical thing to do... So he tells her, everything... That George isn't going to receive his heart because he – Johnny – is going to stop the car accident and save the life of the donor... Cindy is, of course, completely devastated... First she rails at Johnny – who is he to play god? But then she turns on herself, *if only*... if only she hadn't asked Johnny if her husband would live or die... if only she had been strong, strong like George and left it up to God's will... Now it's all her fault... *Her husband is going to die and it's her fault*... It's too much for her to bear. She breaks down, is attended to by nearby nurses, as Johnny, sure of nothing now, goes back to Purdy.

In this second conversation, when Johnny tells Purdy that he still doesn't know what to do, Purdy responds that, actually, he does. Purdy realized recently that Johnny's known what to do all along... And Purdy tells Johnny another story, not about Winston Churchill this time, but about the prophet Elijah...

Elijah, as prophets are wont to do, went into the wilderness hoping God would speak to him. Here are the verses:

And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind

an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

Remembering how, in a dream, Johnny's mother once came to him and told him *to heed the still small voice*, Johnny is chilled to the bone...

Purdy explains the verses to Johnny: the still small voice represents our quiet convictions, that little voice of conscience in us all... that's where God talks to us, Purdy says, and it's the most important voice in our lives, the voice that needs to be listened to above all others... Johnny ignored that voice, and witness the result...

Johnny knows Purdy's right... He felt from the beginning that these kinds of human events – i.e., the sensitive matters of life and death that one bumps into in a hospital – are something into which his powers should not tread... He *knew* he shouldn't touch George to see whether or not he was going to get his heart...

In short, Johnny realizes now that he was never meant to interfere in this... and this whole new future that Johnny's opened up as a result of that touch simply isn't meant to come to pass... George was meant to get his heart...

And it almost feels like Johnny's being forced now to give up the woman he loves is a sort of punishment for opening up Pandora's box in this way...

As Johnny leaves Purdy, Purdy tells him that all one can do, ultimately, is have faith that there is a plan, that even bad things happen for a reason... that those things in life that are beyond our comprehension are precisely the things we need to leave up to God...

Johnny knows what he must do...

He lets the accident happen...

He shows up at the emergency room afterwards... asks about Alice, is told that the ER Doctors have just finished harvesting her organs. Johnny asks to see her... They let him in... She's been cleaned up and is lying in on the operating table, her body hardly even looks injured...

Johnny stands next to Alice, profoundly alone. He's the only person in the universe to grieve for their lost life together, a life that never came to pass, a life Alice herself never even dreamed of... Johnny touches her and is overcome by a vision of those beautiful images from her childhood... images of the life she did have on this earth... and Johnny understands now why he kept having those...

They were trying to show him that she'd already had the life she was meant to have, but is it enough? Johnny has no answer to that question...

Our story ends with a vision from a few days later: Johnny watching George recovering with his wife at his bedside – the heart transplant was a success...George's wife looks up into Johnny's eyes, how can she thank him? What words could possibly convey her feelings of gratitude for the extent of what Johnny's done for her? She can only smile....

Johnny smiles, too, bittersweetly, then turns and walks away...

THE END