

MARKET FORCES

Paradise revamped.

BY IAN STEWART

When Andrew Gordon was crossing the railway lines and failed to notice the approaching InterCity express, he didn't have time to think about death. But if there had been time, he would, as an atheist, have thought: "This is the end."

Clearly it wasn't.

He found himself standing in an eerie, luminous landscape. A narrow path wound its way through banked clouds to an elaborate gateway, where a figure in gleaming white robes waited. He wore a halo. Short stubby wings sprouted from his shoulders.

This may require a rethink. "Saint Peter?" "Security pass, please, sir."

Andrew managed a shaky "Sorry, I don't have a pass."

"Ah. New soul in the Cloud." The man cocked his head, as if listening. "Gordon, Andrew Donald? 15 Wysteria Way, Dorridge?" Andrew nodded. "We don't always get notified, you see. Omniscience is all very well, but ... too much information. Accident, was it?"

"No idea. Never saw it."

Another cock of the head. "Train. 10:43 from Wolverhampton. Running late. Hard luck."

Something here wasn't right. "You are Saint Peter? These are the pearly gates?"

The man shook his head. "You're thinking of the previous administration, son. We don't do sainthood any more."

"But — your halo. Wings."

"Retro look. This month's promotional initiative from Marketing. This is the Security Entrance, and I'm Pete the Security Guard. We don't let any old riff-raff in."

"Only true believers? I have a horrible feeling —"

"Belief? No, that's obsolete. What matters now is added value on your soul."

"I always thought souls were a mistaken reification of patterns of brain activity. You mean I really do have a soul?"

"It's more a case of your soul has got you." Seeing Andrew's baffled stare the guard added, "You're a *Christian* atheist, that's your problem."

"I'm not a Christian!"

"No, but the God you don't believe in is the Christian God."

Andrew bristled. "I don't believe in *any* gods." He looked sheepish. "Well, I didn't."

"Sure. But the *main* one you disbelieved in was the one your culture tried to get you to believe in. That coloured your expectations for the afterlife that you also don't believe in. Not



total nonsense, but ... anyway, omnipotent or not, the Old Man adopted a new business model. He's now CEO, Chairman and CFO of Paradise Group. Holy Trinity, right? The afterlife is now a business, not a public service. The archangels have become the board of directors; archbishops and the Pope are relationship managers down in the Mundane. We had to let the cherubim and seraphim go, of course."

"What about Hell?"

"Hades Inc.? Our main competitor before Belle's new strategic vision." Seeing Andrew's puzzlement, he added: "Belle Z. Bubb, Hades' former Director of Human Resources, now CEO, Chair, CFO and Director of Inferno Technology as well."

"The Devil is *female*?"

"Belle's not exactly — look, there's no glass floor any more."

"You mean glass ceiling," Andrew said in reflex.

"No, I don't," said Pete, looking down through the clouds. "Where were we? Oh, yeah, souls. A soul isn't a *thing*, Andy. It's a spiritual instrument. An option on *you*, realized at death. Could be a call option, could be a put option."

"Sorry, I don't understand the jargon."

"Call option gives the right to buy at a set price; put option gives the right to insist that the other party buys."

"What caused the changes?"

"Lack of regulatory oversight, lavish bonuses, loss of stakeholder power, loss of employee power, third deadly sin ..." He leaned closer to whisper in Andrew's ear.

"Actually, mate, I

reckon the new corporate structure's worse than the old ways. Dodgy accounting,

perverse incentives. Most trade now is in derivatives. Conduct Default Swaps, Innocence Rate Caps ... not enough actual *souls* to justify the bonuses, you see. So the whole enterprise is built on sand, to quote the Chairman. A few years ago both companies nearly went belly-up because they'd accumulated a speculative bubble in CDOs."

"CDOs?"

"Collateralized Death Obligations. You take out an option on a portfolio of souls with bodies as collateral, package them together, trade the packages. Trouble was, no one knew what the things were worth. Thought it didn't matter: they could always realize the collateral assets. But when the market went belly-up and dead bodies were being dumped by the million, their spiritual value collapsed. Then Belle and the Old Man decided it was inefficient to compete, and went for horizontal integration. Merger in all but name."

"What about good and evil? They surely didn't merge those?"

"Course not. Under the previous management structure, our primary stakeholder base believed that whatever the Old Man said was good, *was* good. That gave authority to their concepts of morality and ethics and justice. Apparently. We still follow that principle. Anything that the directors of Paradise Group approve is good, by definition. Course, as part of the merger, same goes for Hades Inc.. It does save a lot of argument."

"But — what about people?"

"Not sure what you're driving at, son."

"What do ordinary people gain from all this ... commercialization?"

Pete looked shocked. "*Gain* from it? Nothing. Why should they? *People* aren't on the corporate radar. They're commodities now, not customers."

"But Pete, *I'm* people. What will happen to me?"

The Security Guard sighed. "Well, Andy ... now you're dead, your soul — the contract on *you* — matures. The option position unwinds, and ..." He cocked his head for the third time, pursed his lips in satisfaction. "Got that, Gabe. OK, Andy: the good news is, your soul is currently part of Paradise Group's portfolio."

Andrew almost collapsed with relief. Then he realized he might not have the complete picture. "And the bad news?"

"It's a put option." ■

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