

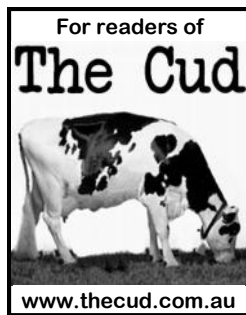
Cone Zero, Sphere Zero



David M. Fitzpatrick

Cone Zero, Sphere Zero

by
David M. Fitzpatrick



Excerpted from the anthology *Atheist Tales*

Originally appeared in *Nemonymous 8: Cone Zero*

Epic Saga Publishing
www.EpicSagaPub.com

CONE ZERO, SPHERE ZERO

© 2008 by David M. Fitzpatrick

Originally appeared in the anthology *Nemonymous 8: Cone Zero*, 2008

Reprinted in the anthology *Atheist Tales*, 2011

Cover image adapted from *Creation of the Sun and Moon* by Michelangelo

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means,
except for the inclusion of brief quotations or excerpts in a review,
without written permission from the publisher.

All characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This ebook does not have an ISBN.
Atheist Tales ISBN: 978-0-9833346-0-6

Introduction

It's January 2012, and time for The Cud's annual "All Things Lit" issue at www.thecud.com.au. I've been writing a column called "Cud Flashes in the Pan" for a while, writing flash-fiction speculative stories—75 to 800-ish words, in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the like, with various themes each month.

But this month, I went a bit crazy. Only one piece was flash fiction. The next was a lengthy poem with a sword & sorcery theme. And the third was a 3,000-word mainstream-fiction story.

The column has been a lot of fun, and this month has been perhaps even more fun. As such, I've decided to provide the story "Cone Zero, Sphere Zero" as a bonus. This one is over 8,700 words, so it really kills the whole "flash fiction" aspect.

This story first appeared in an anthology called *Cone Zero*, the eighth in acclaimed editor Des Lewis' *Nemonymous* series, in which the authors' names are not attached to their stories but rather listed in no particular order. Readers were encouraged to guess which author went with which story; the next edition would clue us in.

The story received lots of great press and praise. When I was assembling my own anthology, *Atheist Tales*, I knew the story would fit nicely there. But this story isn't about religion; it's about oppression and freedom, and how sometimes it takes just a few very brave people to dare to buck the societal norm

and try to uncover the real mysteries of life.

The story appears here as it does in *Atheist Tales*, complete with the nice introduction Des Lewis wrote for it. It's not the only story in that anthology; if you enjoy reading this, I encourage you to find *Atheist Tales* and take a few trips into the contributing authors' formidable imaginations.

But for now, enjoy! And keep coming back to The Cud.

*David M. Fitzpatrick
Brewer, Maine
January 2012*

Cone Zero, Sphere Zero" first appeared in 2008 in the anthology Cone Zero published by Nonymous. This story is, for me, a puckish, yet serious, experience in the blindness harshly imposed by a form of religion disguised as physics. In an incredibly believable way, the protagonists – with sudden brave independence – scale beyond restrictive human gang-packing emotions via mathematical formations of environment towards heights (or depths?) that show there is a hierarchy of beliefs. It is a "Science Fiction" of the spirit to provide the brave freedom to ignite the parthenogenesis of truth from "Story."

– D.F. Lewis, Editor, Cone Zero

Cone Zero, Sphere Zero

David M. Fitzpatrick

The sinister Enforcers, bedecked in the bright-red body-suits and head cones all citizens feared, came to Jellin's living cone shortly after the Light once again illuminated the World. An Avatar came with them, hovering nearby, observing everything as one of the eyes of the Immortals. Jellin hated those soft-looking balls of pink-orange flesh as much as he hated the Enforcers. It was because of what had happened with an Avatar near the end of the last Light that the Enforcers had come, Jellin knew.

"You are Jellin, son of Lumbis, son of Riksen?" the lead Enforcer said, more an imperative than a question. They knew who he was.

"I am," Jellin said, feeling his mouth parch. Agonizing memories of the pain cages he'd endured in his youth flooded through his mind, and he tried not to tremble.

"You are to appear before the Oligarchy."

It sounded like a statement, but Jellin knew it was a command of absolute authority. He knew he was in serious

trouble; there would be no warning for what he'd done to that Avatar. In fact, Jellin couldn't recall anyone ever having the courage – or stupidity – to kill one of them before.

“May I get my coat and my head cone?” he asked. He knew they couldn't refuse him, since being in public without one's head cone was a serious violation – for him, and for the Enforcers who denied him getting it.

“Quickly.”

He retreated into his living cone. The Light streamed through the triangular windows as he went to his dressing room and pulled his white coat on over his white bodysuit and found his matching white head cone. He fitted it into place over his bare head, and he realized he was trembling.

He turned to head back to the door and gave a start, stifling a yelp of surprise. The Avatar that had come with the Enforcers was there, hovering half a man's height away, studying him. They were always unsettling to behold: slightly squished ovoids with textured surfaces, barely glowing a light pink-orange hue, as if illuminated from within. Each had a subtle indentation that was slightly darker in color, more a light red shade, which was what people called the eye. An Avatar's eye always faced whatever it studied.

He regarded it in silence, and his thoughts went astray as usual: How did the Avatars fly as they did? Was there intelligence inside their roundish forms? Or were the supposed Immortals watching through them, as everyone was foolishly told to believe?

He banished the thoughts. He had to keep his mind clear. He didn't believe the supposed Immortals or their Avatars could read his thoughts, but it was best not to take chances. He stalked past the intrusive Avatar and felt it move in behind him as he left his living cone. Outside, he followed the lead Enforcer down his walkway, and heard the other two marching in step behind him. He was suddenly very scared.

They walked the trodden dirt paths that weaved in graceful

curves in and about the living cones of the community. Nearly naked children playing in their white loincloths stopped to stare from beneath their white head cones in gape-mouthed awe as they passed, and soon adults were peering out doorways at the spectacle. Avatars dotted the air here and there, some intently watching the children's games, others following adults around. They did that often, randomly appearing to study citizens for as little as ten breaths to as long as several complete Lights.

As they marched, Jellin could see the Light in the middle of the World, mounted atop the massive metal pole that shot skyward from the Master Cone towards which they headed. He couldn't see the Master Cone yet, as it was only about thirty men high; but the pole that spiked skyward from its peak was easily a thousand men tall. The Light, burning fiercely atop the pole, was a massive orb that illuminated the World.

Jellin glanced up as he marched stolidly behind the Enforcer, and beheld the ceiling of the World. The Cone they lived inside was massive, its apex so high above that it could not be seen. He knew from the scholars that it was as high as the World was wide—about ten thousand men high. In every direction, Jellin could see the smooth wall of the Cone, angling down from the zenith far above.

He lived a thousand men away from the center of the World, so it wasn't too long before the living cones became crowded together in the high-population area. Soon, he could see the Master Cone towering above the smaller living cones. The living cones grew larger and grander the closer one got to the center of the World, housing citizens of higher social levels. Eventually, the largest of them housed the Oligarchs themselves.

Eventually, they made it to the Master Cone in the center of the World. The massive metal pole shot out of the top of Master Cone, but Jellin couldn't look up at it without being

blinded by the burning Light high above. They led him up the hundred-step stairway and through the towering, triangular door, then through the gargantuan cone and into its expansive central hall. He'd only been in once, as a child, when a Scholar had taken Jellin's class there, and it was as cold and empty as he remembered. It was ten men across; on the very far side of the hall was the protruding curve of the thick metal pole that ultimately held up the Light. In leveled rows of seats before the pole, he realized the Oligarchy was gathered.

They were all seated, wearing flowing blue robes and blue head cones. Twenty-two Oligarchs were on the lowest level, then eleven, five, and three; above them sat the Oligarch of the Fifth Level, the Master Oligarch, presiding over them all. It was a hierarchy of power, but even those on the lowest level were as far above Jellin socially as the Light was above the World. He went very suddenly from scared to terrified.

“Jellin, son of Lumbis, son of Riksen,” the amplified voice of the Master Oligarch boomed. Jellin could see him speaking into a tube, which was linked to many cone-shaped outlet horns which somehow made it all louder.

Jellin felt his heart pounding madly in his chest as he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “Yes, Master,” he called out as strongly as he could manage.

“Do you know why you're here?” the Master bellowed.

“Yes, Master,” Jellin said to the floor.

“Indeed,” the Master said. “Look at us, and tell us why.”

Jellin raised his head, beholding the forty-two grim faces that regarded him as the criminal they believed him to be. “It was an accident, Master. The Avatar was behind me, and I didn't know. I spun about so quickly —”

“Silence!” the Master roared. “We're not interested in your tales of fright regarding an Avatar. We've all been startled by the eyes of the Immortals before. Enough of your whinings, and tell us if you know why you're *really* here.”

Jellin was stunned. He was certain the Enforcers had come

for him because of what he'd done to the Avatar, but apparently that wasn't the case. Destroying an Avatar was certainly punishable with a pain cage until death, but...

"I am commanding you to tell us why you're here, citizen," the Master said, his dark voice cleaving through Jellin's muddled brain.

"I'm... sorry, Master," Jellin managed. "I do not know."

"I see," said the Master. "Oligarch, read the charge."

An Oligarch of the First Level stood and unraveled a scroll, leaning in to speak into his own tube. "The citizen is charged with violating the Code of Life in questioning the nature of the World."

Jellin's mind tumbled. What was this all about? He knew better than to talk about his secret beliefs to anyone. He hadn't said a word to a single soul.

"During last Light, did you not tell one Bendik of your belief that there is a larger World outside the Cone?" the Oligarch on the First Level asked.

Jellin blinked in surprise. Was that what this was about? Did Bendik run his mouth again, as he had when they'd been children, and tell someone something he shouldn't? But Jellin had been careful for thousands of Lights to not say anything in Bendik's presence that could remotely be construed as —

"Answer the question!" the Oligarch of the First Level hollered, and Jellin shook himself out of his reverie. "Did you tell Bendik there is a larger World outside the Cone?"

"I did not, sir," Jellin said, choosing his words carefully. "I merely was considering the Cone's zenith, far above us. I wondered aloud if it is constructed like the Cone's wall, down at the base."

"But there is nothing to consider about the zenith," the Master boomed from above. "The zenith is like the wall—like the entire Cone. There is nothing but the Cone. This is the World."

Why?! Jellin screamed inside. Why do you think that? Why

can there be nothing else?

But he retained control, and nodded dutifully. “I understand, Master. It was just a random musing; I was merely curious about how the Immortals wrought this marvelous Cone.”

It was the kind of answer scholars burned into the heads of children and everyone expected to hear, but he wondered if it would be enough. Yet the ensuing silence stretched on for far too long, surpassing discomfort and becoming almost painful. In fact, Jellin realized that, after a fashion, the rest of the Oligarchs seemed to be faltering a bit, their hard gazes softening, their eyes darting to and fro—as if they, too, were wondering why the Master hadn’t responded for so long. Jellin was feeling quite helpless when the Master suddenly said, “Oligarchy, this meeting is convened. Enforcers, leave the accused here.”

They looked surprised, but the Oligarchs rose without argument and left their levels, filing out in their blue robes. They all fired dark glares at Jellin as they passed; he watched, confused, as they went, followed by the three red-clad Enforcers. The last Oligarchs to leave were the three of the Fourth Level, and one of them stopped next to him, awaiting the Master Oligarch to arrive.

“As ordered, you may leave,” the Master said to the Fourth.

“This is highly irregular, Master,” the Oligarch said, regarding his superior with slitted eyes.

“But within the confines of the Code,” the Master said. “I’ll not order you again, Jaupal. Leave us.”

Jaupal nodded, glared viciously at Jellin, and then turned on his heel and left. The Master waited until Jaupal was gone before turning to face his prisoner. Jellin had rarely been this close to an Oligarch before, and certainly never this close to the Master. Now, but half a man apart, the man towered a head taller than Jellin and, in his billowing robes, seemed so much huger. His face was old and worn, angular as if sculpted from stone, and his eyes were a brighter blue than his robes.

He regarded Jellin sternly.

"You're afraid of me," the Master said.

"Yes, sir," Jellin said, hearing his voice quaver.

"You have nothing to fear," the Master replied, and his voice was lower and softer. "I have read your history, Jellin. When you were young, you flirted with sacrilege quite often."

"All children stray," Jellin recited automatically. "When I was punished, I learned the errors of my ways."

The Master actually chuckled then, a light smile etching itself into his chiseled face. "I don't think so. Children tend to transgress three or four times, because the punishment for questioning the nature of the World is quite severe—as you well know. You spent far more time in pain cages than most children. Twelve times, was it?"

Memories raced through Jellin's mind like a thousand sharp rocks. He remembered his incarcerations in the pain cages: strapped tightly within the form-fitting bars, arms and legs spread wide, naked and enduring the pain of an Enforcer who repeatedly stabbed him with needles. Emotion overwhelmed him, and he closed his eyes to fight the threatening tears. He nodded in silent answer.

"Twelve times," the Master repeated, moving slowly to walk around Jellin. He moved out of sight, footfalls muffled beneath the robes as he orbited his captive. "The first time is brief—a few needles, in for just ten breaths. Every subsequent time in the pain cage means more needles and many more breaths."

Jellin could feel the phantom memories of the long needles, like elongated cones, sliding through his skin and ripping their way through fat and muscle as they spiked deep inside him. They were fatter towards the ends, and they hurt even more as they went deeper. And they had tiny, sharp nubs on them, and the Enforcer would twist them as they slid them in...

"And you went twelve times," the Master said, shaking his

head as if in awe as he finished his circular pacing and stopped to once again face Jellin. “No child ever had, as far back as anyone can remember, or heard told in stories. By that twelfth time, the Enforcers were inserting thirty-six needles, and letting you scream for one hundred twenty breaths. And those needles burn, don’t they?”

They did, like fire, after his sixth trip to the pain cage. And they got hotter every time after that. Jellin tried not to remember, but the Master was making him.

“You never transgressed again after that twelfth trip, but somehow I suspect you merely learned to keep your mouth shut. You had ideas that there was more to the World than what we see here in the Cone, and ideas like that which remain through twelve pain cages don’t ever go away. Do they?”

Jellin didn’t answer. He didn’t dare to.

“Tell me what the World is,” the Master said.

“The World is the Cone, ten thousand men high and ten thousand men across,” Jellin recited. It was rote, as given him by the scholars. “The Cone is the center of everything. Outside the Cone is Oblivion, and the Immortals who created us and provide for us.” He felt like an idiot for even acting like he believed it, even if it was exactly what the Master expected.

“How do the Immortals provide for us?”

“The Immortals provide food and water, wood and stone, cloth and tools, and cause our waste to be removed,” Jellin said. “We cannot see them, but we see their miracles every day. They are ever-vigilant, constantly watching us through their Avatars.”

The Master stepped suddenly closer, leaning in until his nose almost touched Jellin’s. “Do you really believe all that dung, young man?”

Jellin froze. He didn’t believe in *any* of that dung, not one stinking lump of it, but he never told anyone – not since he’d learned to shut his mouth after his twelfth pain cage. But it sounded like the Master didn’t believe in any of that dung,

either. He snapped his head leftward, at the Avatar which floated just out of reach, its reddish eye silently watching them. How could the Master dare to say such things in the presence of an Avatar?

But certainly, the Master was only trying to trick him into admitting his blasphemous beliefs. And as an adult, he knew time in pain cages wasn't measured in breaths, but in Lights. They'd insert countless needles that twisted in burning agony, and leave them there until the violator finally stopped screaming and crying and begging. Most died; those that didn't usually went mad, and were later given over to the Immortals during the sacrifice that was held every thousand Lights. The few survivors were never quite the same – but never violated the Code of Life again.

"I asked you a question!" the Master barked, but his face wasn't as foreboding as it had been. "Do you really believe in all that dung?"

And in that moment, sheer illogic and senselessness overtook Jellin, and he realized he just didn't care if they locked him in a body-contoured pain cage for a hundred Lights and drove him insane. He'd spent his life faking stupidity in order to escape torture, and now he realized being insane or dead would be a much better existence. So he took in a shaky breath and said, "No, Master. I don't believe a word of it."

"Is that so?" the Master said, his brow furrowing, his blue eyes darkening. "Then what is the true nature of the World?"

He was in too deep now to stop. "There are things outside the Cone, and they aren't Immortals," he said, almost fiercely. "This isn't a World – it's a prison. And we're made to believe this ridiculous garbage to keep us all in line."

"I see," the Master said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "And what do you think we should do to heretics like you?"

"Nothing," Jellin said. "All citizens should be free to think and feel how they wish, and free to speak their minds."

The Avatar floated silently nearby, watching. Jellin glared

at its eye, as if challenging it. The pain cage awaited him; what more could they do?

“Tell me about this accident you began speaking of earlier,” the Master said. “You turned around, and were surprised by an Avatar. What were you going to say?”

He’d already sealed his fate; there was no point in mincing words now. “I was going to say I accidentally hit it with a rock,” he said, stoic and square-shouldered. “I was going to say I turned to throw it, and the Avatar was there. But it was no accident.” Energy surged through his body like the Light illuminating the World, and Jellin liked the feeling.

“Ah, killed one, did you?” the Master said, almost bemusedly. “Hit it right in its eye, and it floated straight up into the sky, didn’t it?”

It had, popping skyward like a rock sinking in water, only in reverse. He’d stood there, mystified, as it tumbled up until it became a speck, and finally vanished. “Yes, Master,” he finally said. Why was the man so calm about this? Why was he not calling for Enforcers?

The Master stepped in closer until Jellin could feel the man’s hot breath on his face. “That took a lot of courage,” the Master said. “That, or you’re truly that sure of your convictions. But no worry; I happen to know the Immortals don’t punish us for destroying Avatars. Come to think of it, has anyone ever seen the Immortals strike anyone down for anything? Of course not. Only *we* strike our fellow citizens down.”

Jellin blinked in surprise. It wasn’t the response he’d even remotely expected, and he had no idea what to say.

The Master stepped back, surveying Jellin, and then he smiled. “Do you know where my country home is, son?”

“It’s... near the Cone’s wall,” Jellin said, confusion spinning around in his mind like a tangled ball of string. “I’m not sure where.”

“It is located precisely on Trajectory 572,” the Master said. “I am hereby commanding you to meet me there, alone, at the

end of this Light. I also command you to tell no one of this conversation. Your very life depends on it. Do you understand?"

Jellin felt himself nodding dumbly, and let himself bask in the confusion as the Master called to the Enforcers to allow Jellin to leave. The Avatar followed.

The Master Oligarch watched Jellin vanish through the hall's door. He breathed deeply, the fires of excitement scorching through his body. This could be it, he knew. But first he'd have to deal with Jaupal. He knew he had only to wait a short time, and presently Jaupal entered the hall and moved toward him, blue robes flowing. He stopped challengingly close to the Master Oligarch.

"A strange occurrence here today, Zindel," Jaupal said.

"Nothing strange at all," Zindel said. "But mind your place, Jaupal. In these chambers, you'll not refer to me by my name."

"Ah, excuse me, *Master Oligarch*," Jaupal said with a mock bow of the head. "Silly of me to forget my place—but surely you can understand, given your aberrant behavior today."

Jaupal always was a daring sort, and it annoyed Zindel. He stepped closer to his underling, face to face and eye to eye with the man. "Careful, Jaupal. The codices of the Divine Compendium make the penalty for questioning the Master Oligarch quite clear."

"They do indeed," Jaupal said evenly. "Just as they make clear the penalties for all forms of blasphemy—no matter who is guilty of it, regardless of his station."

They traded dark stares for several long moments, and then Zindel smiled. "That's what I've always liked about you, Jaupal—you're never afraid to take a stand for what you believe is right. Now, I am leaving shortly for a few Lights of rest. I'll see you back here for the next session."

Without another word, he stepped around the Oligarch of the Fourth Level and strode out of the hall. He could feel the

other’s eyes boring into his back as he went, but even Jaupal couldn’t sway him from his mood.

Because he’d finally found the one he’d waited for all his life.

The World had one thousand trajectories spiking out from the Master Cone. The thousand numbers encircled the Master Cone’s base, with marks to help citizens orient themselves. Jellin found Trajectory 572 and set off when the Light had faded to about half-brightness. It would be dark soon, and it was already dim enough that he could barely see the distant, sloping wall. By the time he was almost to the edge of the World, he could barely see anything but the illuminations inside the living cones—which grew sparser as he went, until they were but rare beacons in the dark. All the while, the lone Avatar flew along beside and behind him, like some physical manifestation of a programmed conscience that he had no interest in heeding.

The Master’s country home was exactly in line with Trajectory 572, and the structure sat barely twenty men from the Cone’s wall. He trudged through the grass to the living cone’s door and raised his hand to knock.

And then he hesitated. This was insane. What was he doing here, after Light, at the Master Oligarch’s country home? Had he lost his mind?

He was trying to decide whether to turn around and flee when the door opened. The Master smiled out at him, and it was very strange. One wasn’t required to wear a head cone at home, but it was still bizarre to see the Master Oligarch without one. He was as bald as all citizens, and he wore a white bodysuit.

“You’re... you’re wearing white, Master Oligarch,” Jellin stammered.

“Yes, the color of the lowest class of citizen,” the Master said with a chuckle. “I tire of the blue robes, really. Now, do

come in, and don't call me Master Oligarch. My name is Zindel; please use it." He gestured over Jellin's left shoulder. "I see you brought your friend with you."

Jellin looked back at the Avatar hovering there, studying him. He nodded. "This one came with the Enforcers, and hasn't left me."

"No matter; bring it in with you."

Dazed, Jellin followed Zindel in. The place was larger than Jellin's living cone, but not terribly extravagant. Zindel offered him a seat on one of the three sofas arranged around a triangular table in the sitting area, and then brought him a bottle of purple water. Jellin was immediately impressed; only Oligarchs got purple water. He'd never tasted anything like the sweet liquid before.

Zindel sat on another sofa, drinking his own bottle of purple water. On the triangular table were food cones of colors Jellin had never tasted, and Zindel offered them freely. Jellin ate hungrily, popping cone after cone in his mouth, savoring the alien flavors and enjoying every moment of it. Zindel regarded him in silence as he ate and drank for a short while, as if Zindel understood what a unique pleasure it was for him.

"I dream of something more than the sustenance provided us," Zindel finally said. "I dream of a world beyond this Cone. Like you, I believe there is more. We agree there are no Immortals, but everything we need appears to us every one hundred Lights, without fail. Citizens have seen it come into existence, right out of nowhere—a flash of light, and there is all we need. If not Immortals, then who?"

"I don't know," Jellin said. "But I believe there is some reasonable explanation that doesn't require Immortals."

"Excellent answer. I, for one, reject the very idea that any one being is superior to any other. Our society is entirely based on such a hierarchy; I don't like it, but I've lived it because my forefathers have been Oligarchs for tens of generations. But my grandfather had his doubts, and he secretly told them to my

father and me when I was very young. But my father violated his trust, and immediately reported my grandfather’s blasphemy to the Oligarchy.” His face grew dark and sad. “He sent his own father to his death in a pain cage, and took his place as Master Oligarch. I was just a boy, but the logic of my grandfather’s words—and the terrible, mindless behavior of my father—has stayed with me ever since.

“It’s simple logic, really—which is something that is sorely missing in the Divine Compendium. When children ask why the World is shaped like a cone, we open to the Codex of Creation and explain that the Immortals made it that way to emulate their own Grand Cone. When they ask what’s outside the Cone, we open to the Codex of the Immortals and explain the vast nothingness called Oblivion. When they question something in the Divine Compendium, we open to the Codex of Commandments, which instructs us to never question anything, and to the Codex of Punishments to show them what awaits them if they do. And just for good measure, we always throw in a bit from the Codex of Destruction, telling them the fate that awaits us all should the Immortals be sufficiently angered. You know the story.”

“Yes—the Immortals will destroy the shell of the Cone, and expose us to Oblivion,” Jellin said. “I know it well. The twelfth time I was sent to the pain cage was because I pointed out a contradiction that I was sure even the Scholars would have to see, but of course that didn’t happen.”

“You’re talking about the contradiction with the Codex of Creation, I presume.”

“You know it?”

“Quite well. Creation states that the Immortals set the open-bottomed Cone down, embedding it a great rock floating in Oblivion. But Destruction clearly says the shell has a closed bottom, and the Immortals filled it with stone and dirt.”

Jellin brightened excitedly. “Yes! It’s so dreadful a contradiction—yet the Divine Compendium was allegedly written by

perfect, inerrant Immortals.”

“Exactly. That’s to say nothing of the Codex of Prophecies, where no two Immortals have the same view of the future, and often the same Immortal tells us two different things.”

Excitement welled within Jellin. “Then change will come to the Cone at last! You’re the Master Oligarch—all you have to do is decree changes, and they’ll happen. Our people’s eyes will finally be opened!”

“Now wait a breath,” Zindel said, holding up a wrinkled hand. “If I start talking about these things, they’ll have me in a pain cage as fast as any other citizen. I’m already under suspicion for earlier today, when I dismissed the Oligarchy to speak with you alone.”

“You mean... you put yourself at risk?” Jellin said.

“Quite. But for a good reason, son—you! I’ve never heard of a child who endured twelve pain cages. A few go five, maybe even six... but twelve! I’ve followed you quite closely, Jellin, and I knew there was more to you than a stupid child. You’re the first person I’ve ever been able to discuss this with, and that’s very refreshing. But more importantly, you’ve shown you’re not afraid to think differently, no matter the consequences. You have the rare gift of rational thought—which will help lead our people to the truth of what is outside the Cone. But the first step to that is for us to leave the Cone.”

Jellin’s mouth sagged open. “But how can we possibly do that?”

Zindel gestured beyond him. “With help from our ever-vigilant friends.”

Jellin turned to the forgotten Avatar which floated silently at the edge of his vision. “The Avatars? How can they help?”

Without a word, Zindel rose, bottle of purple water in his hand, and stepped toward the Avatar. The pink-orange thing pivoted in the air, skittering back and surveying him, but never saw it coming. Zindel suddenly cocked his arm back and threw the bottle at the Avatar. He was only half a man away,

and the Avatar had no time to react. The bottle smashed squarely in its eye and there was flash of bright light. The Avatar tumbled through the air and into the wall as the glass shattered on the floor. Black smoke puffed out where its eye had been, and it rocked forward until the burned-out eye faced the floor. Then it shot straight up and into the ceiling, bouncing a few times until it came to a stop, unmoving.

"That's what happened when I threw the rock at it!" Jellin cried, coming to his feet.

Zindel chuckled. "I discovered that five thousand Lights ago. That particular Light, I was in an exceptionally bad mood when one wandered into this very country home, when I was trying to enjoy solitude. I reacted without thinking, striking it with my fist. I was astonished when it flew up to the ceiling, but once I thought about it, I realized what it meant. Since then, I've worked diligently to bring my invention to life."

"What invention?" Jellin asked.

"Come with me."

Zindel led him to the rear of the spacious living cone, then up the stairs to the apex level. Jellin expected it to be just like any living cone's apex level—a open-spaced second floor, the ceiling of which was cone's pinnacle. But when Zindel opened the door at the top of the stairs and gestured proudly within, Jellin looked in and stared, mouth agape.

The ceiling was packed with hundreds of floating Avatars. They were all clearly dead, with only the ceiling keeping them from shooting ten thousand men high into the sky.

"How did you kill them all?" Jellin said, astounded. "How have you not gotten caught?"

"After the first one, I was admittedly afraid of the supposed Immortals," Zindel said. "But no retribution came, and I realized the Avatars were merely creatures of some sort, not the vehicles of divine eyesight. So whenever one came to me, I'd wait until I was indoors and alone, and I'd kill and capture them. After I had ten or so, I began experimenting. Ten

Avatars contained in a net will hoist a large jug of water without a problem.”

Jellin’s mind opened with understanding like the Light in the morning. “You’re saying we use them to hoist a man into the sky – to see what is at the zenith?”

“Yes!” Zindel said, excited, his eyes sparkling. “I believe the way out of the Cone must be at the zenith, and we must go there. I weigh just the same as thirteen jugs of water, so one hundred thirty Avatars can lift me. I have four hundred Avatars in here – *four hundred*, Jellin – enough to lift three times my weight!” He turned to Jellin and placed his hands paternally on the younger’s shoulders. “I’ve constructed a lightweight basket in the back yard, and I’ve made a net from strips of cloth. The net will hold all four hundred Avatars. They will lift us into the sky, Jellin, and take us to the Cone’s zenith, where we will discover the secrets beyond this World!”

The sky basket, as Zindel called it, was a man-and-a-half long and nearly a man wide. In its center was a hole wide enough to climb up through. They spent the next morning tying the sky basket to the ground with several ropes, so it wouldn’t float away without them, and securing the cobbled-together netting. The netting was made of strips of cloth, tightly spun and knotted with others, its small openings not nearly large enough for an Avatar to slip through. After a brief lunch of orange water and an assortment of food cones, they made many trips in and out of the house, using a smaller net to move the Avatars outside and stuff them into the big netting.

By the time all four hundred Avatars were jammed inside, the netting had expanded quite admirably. The basket was off the ground, pulling taut the ropes that anchored it. Jellin was amazed: Zindel had done it. This was actually going to work. They were actually going to the zenith of the World.

The netting was ring-shaped, surrounding the sky basket’s outer walls and piling high above. But the inner ring was open,

which Zindel said would afford them access to the zenith when they got there. To clear the tops of the Avatars, Zindel had built a ladder that laid neatly on the basket’s floor.

The last thing they did was secure what Zindel called the “main line” – a rope that was tied to a metal anchor point just inside the central hole in the middle of the sky basket. It snaked down to a metal loop in the ground, then shot across the lawn to a bigger loop that was embedded in the wall of Zindel’s living cone. It then doubled back to the first metal loop and back up through the middle of the sky basket, where it was again tied.

“When we’re ready to leave, we cut all the ropes – except this one,” Zindel said. “It’s ultimately attached to the living cone, which I assume will be well more than enough to keep the sky basket secure. Once this is the only rope anchoring the sky basket, we’ll know for certain that my guess is correct: that our flight will indeed be level. When we’re absolutely certain, then we’ll untie the main line.”

And then it was done and ready, even as the Light began to dim and darkness began to creep through the World. They stood together in the dimness, sipping cold red water and regarding their achievement, and Jellin didn’t feel any bit of the vast social separation that had always been a given between a lowly citizen and a member of the Oligarchy.

The mesh-formed torus of dead Avatars floated magically in their cloth-ribbed prison, lifting the basket just six or seven hands off the ground, straining against the many ropes securing it firmly to the ground. To Jellin, the construct seemed much like him and Zindel – like it, too, was straining to leave the ground and explore the zenith of the Cone.

“Why do you need me?” Jellin said softly as the Light grew ever darker. “You did everything yourself. You could go alone.”

Zindel sighed, sipped his red water, and smiled. “On the one hand, I suppose I want a comrade in this – one who

believes as I do. But for more practical reasons, I need you as a witness. I intend to return and tell others what is outside the Cone." He broke off and furrowed his brow. "I suppose it's a bit late to ask this, but are you willing to return with me, risking death in a pain cage, to tell the people the truth?"

Without hesitation, Jellin said, "Yes. I'm afraid, but I'll not back down now."

The remaining faint Light snuffed itself out, and the World was cloaked in utter darkness. Zindel patted Jellin on the shoulder and said, "Let us get some sleep. At first Light, we embark on this grand adventure."

Jellin came awake suddenly. Zindel was shaking him frantically. "Wake up!" he cried. "The Oligarchs have arrived with Enforcers!"

Jellin leaped from bed, fully awake, yanking on his shoes as Zindel said, "They're almost here – the entire Oligarchy, and tens of Enforcers. Get to the sky basket while I stall them!"

"But you're coming with me!" Jellin cried as they bolted for the cone's rear door.

"Right now, they can't see the sky basket behind the cone," Zindel said as he threw open the back door. The sky basket and its netting full of dead Avatars floated above the grass, pulling the many ropes taut. "It will take you several minutes to untie the ropes while I stall them. Undo all but the main line, and I'll make a run for it. Go!"

Jellin ran across the yard, crawled under the bulge of Avatars, and squeezed up into the basket. He began deftly untying the rope anchors. One by one they fell away; with each one, the sky basket jerked roughly, angling differently, threatening to rip the remaining anchors free. Finally, only the main line remained, keeping the sky basket level. As Zindel predicted, it balanced perfectly.

Jellin stood and looked over the Avatars. He could hear muffled sounds from the front of the home, but he couldn't tell

what was going on. Surely Zindel must have realized the ropes were untied by now!

He waited, terrified and uncertain, at the ready.

“On whose authority do you bring the Oligarchy to my home?” Zindel demanded of Jaupal, putting on his best show of absolute authority.

“As Oligarchs of the Fourth Level,” Jaupal said, gesturing to his two peers flanking him, “we have the authority to make all decisions when the Master Oligarch is not present.”

“You seek to move against me?” Zindel said, face hard and eyes dark. “You’d better be sure of your allegations, Jaupal—whatever they may be.”

“You chose to speak to the citizen named Jellin alone, which was very irregular,” Jaupal said. “Then you released him, unpunished and unquestioned.”

“That is my prerogative as Master Oligarch,” Zindel said. “Don’t forget that.”

“Nevertheless, your behavior has necessitated this,” Jaupal said. “Citizen Jellin has been missing since the Light before last—strangely, when you decided to retreat to your home for rest. With a unanimous vote of the Oligarchy, we have come here to search your home. If we find that you are colluding with a citizen in matters of blasphemy, your punishment will be swift and severe.”

“And if you’re wrong,” Zindel growled, “I shall replace the entire Fourth Level of the Oligarchy and send you all to the pain cages.”

Jaupal seemed nervous for a moment, but then he smiled. “We shall see.” He turned to the horde of Enforcers standing at the ready. “Spread out. Search the cone, and the land around.”

“Belay that order, Enforcers,” Zindel barked, and the red-clad men stopped in their tracks. “I am the Master Oligarch, and you shall obey me.” He knew it wouldn’t buy much time, but he had to be sure Jellin had the sky basket untied.

“Enforcers, you will do as ordered,” Jaupal said evenly. “The Master Oligarch is under investigation. The Code prohibits him from punishing you for following our orders. But defy us, and you will all go to the pain cages.”

The Enforcers began moving again, and Zindel knew there was no stopping them. He said, “Wait—there is one more thing to consider.”

The Enforcers paused, looking to Jaupal for guidance. Jaupal said, “What is that?”

“You must untie the rope,” Zindel said with a smile, and then he hollered it: “You must untie the rope!”

“What?” Jaupal said.

“*You must untie the rope!*” Zindel screamed wildly, waving his arms and wailing in Jaupal’s face. “*Untie the rope! Untie the rope!*”

And for good measure, he hauled off and punched the confused Jaupal in the face.

“*Untie the rope!*”

There was no mistaking it. Zindel wanted him to untie the rope. But if he did, he’d fly away and leave Zindel behind.

There was sudden furor from around the living cone—noises of many men.

“*Untie the rope!*”

He dropped to his knees and frantically untied Zindel’s complex knot as quickly as he could. *Come on, Zindel!* he cried out in his mind.

And then he heard the thundering footsteps of many men as he released the knot, and the sky basket was free. He felt it shoot straight up as the rope snaked through its loop and out the bottom of the basket. He peered over the edge as the sky basket rose, and he saw the long rope bouncing across the ground, feeding back through the far metal loop as he rose.

And then he saw Zindel, careening into the back yard, as ten Enforcers pursued. Zindel went out of his sight below, and

then Jellin felt the basket jerk violently. It kept rising, albeit a bit more slowly, and when Jellin scrambled to the hole to look down, he saw Zindel dangling from the rope. He hung just at its tail end, and he was already two or three men off the ground. Below, Enforcers leaped up at him, to no avail. More Enforcers, followed by Oligarchs, rounded the living cone even as the basket sailed high above them.

“Climb!” Jellin hollered to the spinning Zindel.

Zindel was, hand over hand, and even as the Avatar-stuffed netting bumped into the sloping wall and jolted violently. Zindel swung wide, bashing into the wall as the sky basket skittered at an angle up the wall, heading for the zenith.

As soon as Zindel was close enough, Jellin reached precariously down through the hole and helped haul him in. They balanced their weight by sitting at opposite ends of the basket, and Jellin cried, “What happened?”

“I punched Jaupal in the face,” Zindel said with a smile. “I can’t tell you how good that felt. I broke and ran in the confusion, and just barely caught the rope before it would have been out of my reach.”

He struggled to stand and looked up. The Cone’s sloping wall was barely above their heads, and the sky basket continued heading up at its steep angle, the netting of Avatars sliding up the wall. The whole thing spun slightly as it bumped along.

“We’re rising a bit faster than I thought,” Zindel said. “We should make the zenith very quickly.”

Jellin glanced out the hole, at the ground far below. “I suppose this is a bad time to ask about how we get back down.”

“We remove Avatars, one at a time. Eventually, we should begin descending.”

They rode skyward in silence for a long while before Zindel peered out over the Avatars, shielding his eyes, and announced, “We’re rising above the Light.”

Jellin stood and looked out over the mass of Avatars that was lifting them above everything. Sure enough, they were rising above where the Light glowed brilliantly atop its pole in the center of the Cone.

"We've already traveled beyond where any dreamed," Zindel said. "Soon, we'll know the truths that are hidden from us."

Every time Jellin peered down through the hole in the basket at the World far below, he was terrified. But every time he looked up at the zenith far above, he was excited. It seemed to take forever, but he guessed it was nearly time for the midday meal when he could see the curving, sloping walls narrowing and coming together.

"We're almost there," Jellin said. "I see the zenith. I can actually *see* it, Zindel!"

They closed on it, and suddenly they were there. The Avatar cushion bounced into place, rocked side to side, and then moved no more. Above them was the zenith, just half a man above their heads, and the ring of Avatars surrounded them on all sides. It was eerily dark, save for the Light shining up through the hole in the basket's floor and lighting their enclosure. It was like a new World, all their own. He glanced down through the floor hole, and far below was the brilliant sphere of the Light.

"There's a seam of some sort there," Zindel said. "Let's get the ladder set up."

Jellin could see it, just above the Avatars. It was like the very zenith of the Cone, about a man across, was set atop the whole thing.

They juggled their feet in order to get the ladder off the narrow basket floor, and managed to prop it up against the wall of the Cone, just above the Avatars. The ladder's feet fitted into steadying braces Zindel had built into the basket's floor.

"There are no dead Avatars trapped up here," Jellin observed. "Somehow, the dead ones are let out."

But Zindel was already climbing the ladder, getting up as far as he could and feeling the seam. "There's space in here," he called down. "I can just fit my fingers in. Maybe there's a — wait, I feel something."

And suddenly, there was a groaning sound, and the zenith of the Cone began to yawn open like a giant mouth. On some unseen hinge, it tipped up and away, humming as it did, and Zindel and Jellin stared up in wonder. Above, there was blackness. Jellin held his breath as the zenith tipped out of sight, and as Zindel slowly rose to poke his head out of the top of the World. Jellin heard the man suck in his breath.

"What is it?" Jellin said. "What's out there?"

"The Divine Compendium is wrong," Zindel called down. "I didn't know what to expect — but I didn't want this."

He descended the ladder and collapsed heavily into the basket, looking like a beaten man. "They'll never believe us," Zindel said, crestfallen. "They'll put us to death in pain cages no matter what. They'll just say that's what Oblivion looks like, and blame us for incurring the wrath of the Immortals. But even if we did convince them, we're still trapped in this World forever. Go ahead... see for yourself."

Jellin did, scaling the ladder carefully, his hands and legs shaking. He made it to the top, slowly poked his head out, and beheld the World outside the World.

The Cone was inside an impossibly huge sphere, a hundred thousand men across, but there were other Cones. And there were Cubes, Spheres, Pyramids, Cylinders, Domes. Geometric shapes everywhere on the inner surface of the sphere, next to the Cone and upside-down above it and everywhere else in between. The shapes were separated by the space of a hundred men; directly adjacent to the Cone was a smaller sphere, a towering rectangle, a squat cylinder, a dodecahedron, a pyramid, and another cone — that latter narrower and taller

than Jellin's own.

And throughout the inside of the megasphere, millions of Avatars flew. They zipped this way and that, moving from one shape to another. Jellin watched in utter shock as tens of them, in a tightly-grouped cloud, swarmed silently to the top of the adjacent rectangular structure. A door in the top of the structure flipped open, and several dead Avatars popped out, floating toward the center of the gargantuan sphere. The new Avatars zipped into the tower, and the small door closed.

Jellin could see the wall of the Cone was barely two hands thick, and when he peered over the edge at the bottom of the sphere far below, he saw what were clearly steps formed into the side of the outer wall. His eyes searched the other shapes around him, and he spied a few other formations like it—one going down the side of a pyramid, another circling around the outside of a dome, yet another zigzagging back and forth across the face of a cube.

Jellin clambered back down the ladder and collapsed in the basket across from Zindel. The two sat in stunned silence.

"What does it mean?" Jellin finally asked.

"It means we haven't escaped our prison," Zindel said, his voice flat. "We've only realized that our Cone is but one cell in a prison more vast than we could ever imagine."

"So all those shapes are worlds, full of people like ours—unsuspecting people?"

Zindel sighed and nodded. "I think so."

"Then we have to find a way out of the sphere," Jellin said.

Zindel laughed weakly. "And what do you think is outside the sphere? Maybe a larger sphere, or a cube, or something, with more giant shapes containing other cones and spheres and pyramids."

"It can't go on forever," Jellin said. "Eventually, there must be an outside to all this."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But no matter what, we're stuck here. Returning home means death. We can't go out there, for we

don't know where to go to find the sphere's exit. Even if we wanted to, we have no food and water."

There was a humming sound, and the zenith of the Cone slowly flipped back into place. They watched until they were again sealed in.

"There is one way to perhaps convince them," Zindel finally said. "Listen to me: I'm going to give my life for our cause, Jellin."

"What?" Jellin cried.

"Yes – I'll jump from here, straight down at the Light. The impact may well destroy it. Think of it – one of us destroying the work of the Immortals!" His eyes were wide, and he looked a bit crazed. "When you return there, you tell them what happened – tell them that I jumped to destroy what their Immortals have wrought!"

He came to his feet with a holler, and Jellin came to his, and Jellin was faster. He leaped across the open hole, terrified he'd fall, and collided with Zindel, bringing him back down. The offset weight caused the sky basket to pitch suddenly over, and Zindel hollered in surprise.

"You can't jump!" Jellin cried. "You can't leave me to do this alone!"

"You fool!" Zindel yelled. "It's the only way!"

"You're the fool!" Jellin yelled back. "They'll kill me no matter what happens! We have no choice but to leave the Cone. We may die out there, but better to take that chance than return to this cursed Cone where a painful death is certain!"

Zindel's wide eyes softened, and he finally remembered to breathe again. "Either way, it's death – senseless death in a senseless prison."

"The only hope of making any sense of it is to go out there," Jellin said. "Did you not see the steps? Whoever put our people in the Cone must have assumed that one day we would emerge on our own. There are steps on the other shapes – they must have always known we'd one day leave

these prisons. It's our responsibility to climb down there, Zindel—maybe our responsibility to free people from other shapes, too. We need to let them know what it's like outside their worlds."

Zindel nodded slowly, a weak smile working its way across his face. "And this is why I needed you on this adventure, Jellin. Without you, I'd be falling for the Light now, and nothing would have changed—not in our World, not in anyone's World."

Jellin reached out and squeezed his hand. "Then let's explore these many Worlds. We free all those we can, and find a way out of this sphere—and out of whatever contains it, and on and on until we finally unlock the secrets kept from us."

Zindel smiled and came to his feet. "All right," he said. "We'll do it. For reference, we're leaving Cone Zero, inside Sphere Zero. I say we start with Cone One, which I believe is adjacent to us."

"I vote for Cube One," Jellin said with a grin. "A lifetime inside one cone is enough for me right now."

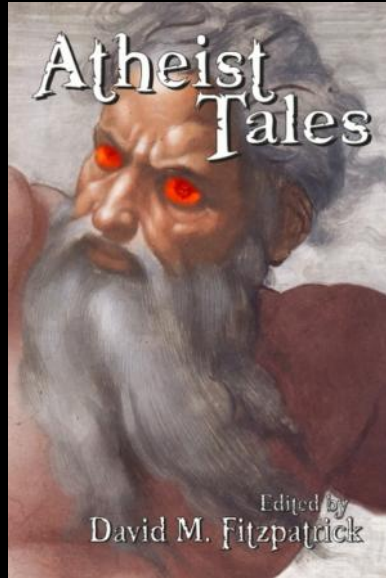
Zindel chuckled. "Point taken. Cube One it is."

They reopened the Cone's zenith, and abandoned their sky basket and Cone Zero. They began the long descent down the outer stairs and into the future.

About the Author

David M. Fitzpatrick's 50 short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. He has co-edited two anthologies and edited five more. By day, he is a Special Sections writer for the Bangor Daily News in Bangor, Maine, and freelances as well. He lives in Brewer, across the river from Bangor. He keeps hoping Stephen King's errant Muse will accidentally land on his house on the way to King's. No luck yet.

Read more great fiction in



Stories by:

**Bill O'Neal • Jane Gallagher
John Lance • James Hickey
Sarah Trachtenberg • Gary J. Beharry
Dan Thompson • Corwin Merrill
Earl Lee • Marianna Manns
David M. Fitzpatrick • Dan Barker • Vin-
cent L. Scarsella**

**And international bestselling author and
renowned atheist **DAN BARKER****