

BUILDING HEAVEN

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Andrew Osborne

B.A., Harvard University

M.A., University of Massachusetts, Boston

Directed by Professor Thomas O'Grady

Building Heaven began as a short story I wrote for one of Askold Melnyczuk's writing workshops in pursuit of my Master's degree. The plot explores and dramatizes issues relating to my own fear of death, my hopes for an afterlife and certain obsessive questions I have about the nature of happiness, reality and morality.

Expanding on the original story in a semester-long independent study overseen by Tom O'Grady (my director for this final project), I began to research different religious and cultural representations of the afterlife, from the dawn of man to our modern secular society, in search of creative and philosophical inspiration.

My scholarly investigation of the Great Beyond is summarized hereafter in the Introduction, while my fictional take on the subject follows thereafter.

The plot of *Building Heaven* concerns the life and afterlife of a lawyer named Pete Herlinger, his family and their various acquaintances. The section included here is part one of a proposed five part novel, in which Pete begins his post-death existence, forcing him to question his most basic perceptions of self and reality. Future sections of the novel concern Pete's further travels in the afterlife in search of God, love and the ultimate meaning (or meaninglessness) of his existence and existence in general.

Irrespective of my ultimate ambitions for *Building Heaven* as a full-length novel, I hope you will enjoy the following excerpt as a satisfying, stand-alone work of speculative fiction.

INTRODUCTION: AFTER LIFE MYTHOLOGY AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

“Paradise is exactly like where you are right now...only much, much better.”

-- Laurie Anderson

My paternal grandmother, Lil, and maternal grandfather, Joe (or “Grampa”) both died in the past three years, at the ages of 98 and 97 respectively. Given the longevity on both sides of my family, I figure I’ve still got several decades ahead of me, assuming I don’t succumb to cancer (like my mother’s mother Louise, who died before I was born) or heart disease (like my father’s father Lawrence, who smoked three packs of Newports a day). I’ve known a few people who died too young, and I live in a time of constant war, famine, genocide, disease and terror...but thus far (knock wood), none of it has cut too close to me personally or left indelible scars on my soul.

Yet despite the fact (or perhaps *because*) my life has been relatively carefree, I have in recent years grown increasingly obsessed with Death. Maybe it’s sentimentality or pure egotism, but I have always been frankly horrified at the prospect of my individual “self” and those who are dear to me ceasing to exist, utterly and forever, with no recourse or hope of recovery.

Modern science provides little solace when it comes to mortality: technocrats offer solutions for merely *extending* life, but at best they have only the vaguest notions about what constitutes a soul, and at worst they confirm my fear that death truly is the end of consciousness. In her book *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, author Mary Roach travels the world’s universities and research institutions searching for any shred of hard, quantifiable evidence of God, the human soul or an afterlife, eventually concluding only “that not everything we humans encounter in our lives can be neatly and convincingly tucked away inside the orderly cabinetry of science” (294).

Religion provides somewhat better news, depending on which mutually exclusive belief system you choose to endorse: either we’re all reincarnated based on karma (until we finally achieve nirvana) or we’re rewarded (or punished) for eternity based on our acceptance of Zeus or Jehovah or Christ or Allah...or, if it turns out the Vikings were right (in what would no doubt be a surprising twist for most of us), then we’ll all go to the land of the death goddess Hel (except for the warriors, who get to battle and feast on roast goat in Valhalla forever).

Naturally, it’s difficult to reconcile such a myriad of deeply conflicting theories, yet my own religious upbringing (in the liberal humanist tradition of Unitarian Universalism) stresses respect for diversity, and thus one of the questions I’ve chosen to explore in my work-in-progress *Building Heaven* is the potential nature and purpose of a “one-size-fits-all” hereafter, flexible enough to assimilate the infinite range and varieties of human behavior. Thus, my reading and research for this project has focused on the imagery of diverse conceptions of the afterlife and the ways in which artists and writers throughout history have dramatized the moral and spiritual concerns raised by the prospect of Death.

With regard to imagery, I have always been fascinated by humanity’s bizarre and fantastical depictions of the Other Side, from the Sea of Glass surrounding God’s throne in Jewish tradition and the rivers of milk, water, wine and honey in the paradise of Islamic faith to the three-headed dogs and *grand guignol* tortures of Greek Elysium and Christian Hell. Often, visions of the Beyond are simply funhouse-mirror reflections of the hopes and fears of the cultures or individuals depicting them. In simpler times, when humanity was at the mercy of nature, it was enough for a blissful afterlife to consist of nothing more than good weather and a plentiful supply of food and water, as in the heavenly realms of certain African and Native American tribes, while the Eastern concept of nirvana is even simpler, requiring nothing more than one’s individual soul merging with the Universe as “a drop of rain joins the ocean” (McCombs).

By contrast, the afterlife requirements of many Western and Middle Eastern religions are notably more specific and materialistic. For instance, while the Norse warriors of Valhalla require only a well-stocked banquet hall (and plenty of fellow warriors to battle), the Muslims inhabiting Djanna are promised virginal

Houri slavegirls, while some modern American Christians expect streets paved with gold and their very own “custom built homes,” where they can eat all day and never get fat.*

Common to most versions of the Great Reward is some aspect of eternal bliss, whether it be the collective oneness of nirvana or more humanistic pleasures like the virgins of Djanna, the joyful battles of Valhalla, or Virgil’s description of the Fortunate Grove, “Where the blest dwell. The air here is freer / And dresses all the fields with brilliant light; / They have their own sun, their own stars. / Some exercise upon a playing-field / -- Games on the grass or wrestling on yellow sand; / Some keep time with their feet upon the ground, / Dancing and singing songs” (164).

Yet even in paradise, deceased souls often have jobs and responsibilities, albeit generally pleasant ones – a reflection, perhaps, of the endless commitments endemic to human existence. In Asamando, the afterlife of the Ashanti people of Africa, “the dead still have to farm and tend animals” (McCombs) while the pious spirits of Dante’s *Paradiso* spend their eternity singing praises to God while circling the Divine Essence, a point “of so intense a beam / That needs must every eye it blazes on / Be closed before its poignancy extreme” and from which “Dependeth Heaven, and all things that exist” (*The Portable Dante* 513).

While I remain decidedly ambivalent about the prospect of merging my individual consciousness into the great sea of the universe or, alternately, an eternity spent battling Vikings, tending cattle and/or circling a bright beam of light, it goes without saying that pretty much any one of these scenarios is preferable to the various historic manifestations of eternal punishment. For, much like Tolstoy’s oft-quoted line about families, the permutations of bliss may be limited, but variations on pain and sorrow are virtually infinite.

It is perhaps indicative of humanity’s intimate familiarity with suffering (as opposed to the ephemeral nature of happiness) that our visions of damnation are so much more specific than our hopes for paradise. Nonstop burning in various pits and lakes of fire is a popular motif across many belief systems, but most religions offer no shortage of alternative punishments for the wicked. Legal codes based on Vedic scripture dating back to 500 B.C. specified the following reincarnation-based penalties for Hindu miscreants: “One becomes indeed a kind of heron by stealing fire; a house-wasp by stealing a house utensil; by stealing dyed cloths one is born again as a fowl called *jivijivaka*” (Roach 45).

Yet, these fates are mild in comparison to the baroque sadism of Western and Middle Eastern tradition (particularly as exemplified by clerics, zealots and poets). The Greek and Roman gods in particular were notoriously vindictive, as demonstrated by the fate of Tityos in the *Aeneid*, whom Virgil depicts “lying, his body stretched over nine acres / A huge vulture with a crooked beak / Pecking at his indestructible liver” (162) for all eternity. In *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil is once again linked to incidents of creative torture, this time as Dante’s guide through a Christian *Inferno* heavily influenced by pagan iconography, where sinners are tormented by creatures like Harpies and the Minotaur and the punishments are cruelly ironic, as in this description of the fate of those Diviners who claimed to foresee the future: “They walked at a solemn pace that would be called / Liturgical here above. But as my sight / Moved down their bodies, I sensed a strange distortion / That made the angle of chin and chest not right – / The head was twisted backwards: some cruel torsion / Forced face toward kidneys, and the people strode / Backwards, because deprived of forward vision” (*The Inferno of Dante* 159).

Like most renditions of the afterlife, these descriptions of heaven, hell and purgatory are largely allegorical, seasoned with perhaps a dash of wishful thinking. The promise of eternal bliss not only provides hope for us beleaguered mortals but, when combined with some mechanism of supreme judgment (and usually a threat of punishment for transgressors) it also serves as a useful tool for maintaining order and disseminating cultural values. Traditionally, these values tend to echo the power structure, discouraging rebellion (and the not unreasonable desire to abandon the hardships of Earth for the glories of paradise ahead of schedule via suicide) while stressing ideals of duty and obedience to the status quo. Virgil, for example, depicts the afterlife rewards of valorous combat in the *Aeneid*, while the ancient Sumerian adventures of Gilgamesh stress the importance of fruitful multiplying: “I have seen the sonless man in the Netherworld. / ...He sits by the wall and weeps. / ...How is it with the man with seven sons? / As if he were a companion of the gods / he sits upon a throne and listens to music” (91-92). This concept of the afterlife as an infallible divine bureaucracy also proved attractive to Dante, whose journey from the abyss to the zenith of heaven provided reassurance that injustices done to good people like the virtuous Empress Constance (*Paradiso*, Canto III) or the innocent children of traitorous

* This description of Heaven combines elements from the “Heaven Tour” website (<http://www.heaventour.org/>) and a Jerry Falwell sermon I witnessed at his church in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1991.

Count Ugolino (*Inferno*, Canto XXXIII) will be avenged after death, whereas tyrants and hypocrites like Atila the Hun (*Inferno*, Canto XII) and the corrupt Pope Nicholas III (*Inferno*, Canto XIX) will receive their ultimate comeuppance.

Unfortunately, the moral logic of much religious allegory can too frequently seem arbitrary, cruel or downright nonsensical. In pantheistic societies, the clashing agendas and fickle behavior of the gods help to explain the frequent contradictions of life and fate (as dramatized by poor Aeneas' ongoing quest to figure out just what, exactly, the gods expect of him in the *Aeneid*), but the inconsistencies and foibles of a single, allegedly infallible Supreme Being are much harder to reconcile. Why, for example, are sinless men like Virgil condemned to damnation for living "before the Christian faith, so that / They did not worship God aright" (*The Inferno of Dante* 27) – in other words, punished by a "just" God for something they could not possibly help? Why would a merciful God condemn sinners to eternal suffering? How can allegedly infallible Popes proclaim Holy Wars in God's name when the Ten Commandments forbid killing and Jesus preached "love thy neighbor"? Or, to cast the issue in terms of the 21st century American culture war, why would God "intelligently design" a world containing evidence of evolution and then expect us to ignore it unless He's deliberately trying to confuse us?

While questions of what constitutes a "good" person are inextricably linked to the reward and punishment dichotomy associated with most afterlife mythology, "goodness" is often defined primarily in terms of obedience to divinity -- which raises the further question of whether God (or gods, as the case may be) should be worshipped out of fear or respect. Milton explores this issue in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, depicting Satan as a prideful but not entirely unsympathetic character who refuses to be ruled, rallying his fellow damned rebels to "seek / Our own good from ourselves, and from our own / Live to ourselves, though in this vast recess, / Free, and to none accountable, preferring / Hard liberty before the easy yoke / Of servile Pomp" (237-238).

This desire for autonomy certainly strikes a chord with modern Western sensibilities relatively free of the helpless fear and ignorance of early humanity. In a skeptical, democratic age, it's easy to play devil's advocate with old beliefs. Why, for example, does God (a.k.a. Allah, Jehovah, Zeus, etc.) require constant, eternal praise from His creations? Doesn't He get bored with all the self-created self-congratulation, or does He merely possess an ego of infinite proportions? Does God really hate homosexuals as much as His followers say He does? How can humanity be said to possess free will if God already knows everything we're going to do? What is the point of free will if Adam and Eve (not to mention Satan and his followers) are punished for using it (and, for that matter, why is Satan allowed to keep tempting and bedeviling man if he's supposedly been condemned to an eternity in Hell for challenging God's sovereignty in the first place)? How can Satan's meeting with Jesus in the desert truly be considered "temptation" if Jesus is God and God is infallible? Likewise, how is Christ's death on Earth a sacrifice if He's not really mortal and knows He can't be killed (as opposed to all us mortals who *don't* know anything for sure and just have to take Christ's Word for all His talk of Heaven and redemption)? Finally, of all the tests of fealty God could have set for Adam and Eve, why does he forbid Knowledge? (And why does this sound so uncomfortably close to the behavior of repressive regimes throughout history who maintained power by keeping their subjects ignorant?)

In unquestioning societies, the answers to these and other metaphysical riddles are simply whatever the Powers That Be say they are, and this clear and unwavering certainty provides a seductive existential comfort zone difficult to attain in more skeptical cultures. Indeed, as Lord Byron posits in his Biblical "mystery" play *Cain*, the true Original Sin that led to humanity's downfall was not so much disobedience of God's will, but rather the loss of innocence engendered by a turning away from the simple complacency of faith towards the restless, eternal pursuit of the unknowable: "Methinks the Tree of Knowledge / Hath not fulfilled its promise: - - if they sinned, / At least they ought to have known all things that are / Of knowledge – and the mystery of Death. / What do they know? – that they are miserable. / What need of snakes and fruits to teach us that?" (229).

In *Cain*, the devil is back once again to stir up trouble for us hapless humans, using our own "dissatisfied and curious thoughts" (227) to exacerbate our confusion and tempt us via prideful rationalization into misguided and self-destructive acts (for instance, fratricide) conceived in frustration as some kind of half-baked (and ultimately doomed) vendetta against the seeming cruelty or indifference of the Almighty. Ultimately, then, in Byron's relatively modern estimation of the "old" values, it is pointless to rail against God (and, by association, Death), since doing so is roughly equivalent to rejecting existence itself, as Cain himself learns too late.

The danger, then, of a secular age is the prospect of moral chaos and existential anarchy, unmoored from any sense of order. In this interpretation, challenging God (i.e., the unchangeable realities of the universe) is a hopeless enterprise, as Satan himself learns (but refuses to accept) in *Paradise Lost*. Likewise, pointing out logical flaws in literalist interpretations of religious texts and noting the hypocrisies of those who claim to interpret God's will is simply not enough for a modern agnostic like myself, since the rejection of God and/or religion inevitably leaves a void which must be filled through some combination of action or belief.

Indeed, the ongoing culture war in America can be seen as an attempt to fill this void, either restoring or rebuilding value systems in response to changing social conditions. While religious fundamentalists urge a return to the absolute values of bygone eras, progressive thinkers struggle to understand morality in a universe where many have come to doubt the certainty of divine justice. In Strindberg's play *The Ghost Sonata*, for instance, a character known as the Old Man dispenses his own selfish vigilante brand of earthly justice until he is brought to heel by one of his victims, a supernatural character known as the Mummy, who chastises:

We are miserable human beings, that we know. We have erred and we have sinned, we like all the rest. We are not what we seem, because at bottom we are better than ourselves, since we detest our sins. But when you...choose to sit in judgment over us, you prove yourself worse than us miserable sinners. For you are not the one you appear to be. You are a thief of human souls. (293)

Yet, without the infallible judgment of a Supreme Being (enforced through afterlife reward and punishment) or some other clear sense of purpose beyond the fulfillment of earthly desires, what hope is there for helpless victims (like those of the Old Man) with no recourse to supernatural means of redress? For that matter, what hope is there for *anyone* if there turns out to be no grand design for the human soul?

Again, science goes only so far in providing answers to the larger questions of life. As Stephen Hawking notes in *A Brief History of Time*, "Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why*" (174). But still our fears and questions persist, inspiring modern metaphysical and supernatural visions which are tellingly reflective of the permissive, skeptical, psychoanalytical nature of modern society in the same way ancient depictions of God and the hereafter were grounded in warrior codes of loyalty and feudal obedience. Whereas texts like the *Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* describe a harsh universe ruled by all-powerful, infallible deities, contemporary representations of the Great Beyond are often morally ambiguous landscapes where God is notably absent and the rewards and punishments are delineated by human psychology.

In the film *What Dreams May Come* (Vincent Ward, 1998), *everybody* goes to their very own self-styled version of Heaven, except for poor unfortunate souls like Annie (Annabella Sciorra), whose internal guilt and sorrow is great enough to trap her within a self-created Hell of her own design. As with many other modern parables of the supernatural, human love (possibly but not necessarily an extension of divine love) is the power which transforms damnation into salvation when Annie's husband (Robin Williams) rescues her from her own self-loathing, validating her worth through a demonstration of his willingness to sacrifice his own soul for hers. The ability to love and forgive oneself (and others) is also central to the mythology of Mitch Albom's 2003 novella *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, wherein each new arrival achieves peace by having the purpose of his or her existence explained by a quintet of souls they encountered in life. The story's protagonist, Eddie, is a bitter, lonely old man plagued by memories of war and tragedy and mired in feelings of worthlessness. By meeting with his "five people" and reviewing key episodes from his life, Eddie does ultimately find inner peace, without which heaven would be wasted on him – as, by extension, life is wasted on those who refuse to appreciate and accept their mortal lives.

For the living and the dead in Alice Sebold's popular 2002 novel *The Lovely Bones*, the key to heaven is acceptance and letting go. Susie, the story's teenage narrator, is raped and murdered in her small Pennsylvania town, then watches the aftermath of the crime from a heavenly waystation, where an afterlife guide explains the only way for her to find peace is to "stop desiring certain answers... Simply put, you have to give up on Earth" (120). Ultimately, Susie is able to accept the loss of her earthly life and potential by letting go of it, while back in the "real world," her family learns they can only ease the pain of Susie's death by fully embracing their own lives.

Like most afterlife fables, the modern works I studied use supernatural and metaphysical symbolism to explore healthy and unhealthy ways of living and grieving. Time and again, across various genres of film, theater and literature, the cumulative message of modern civilization boils down to perhaps the sum total of humanity's advice to itself on the topic of death: *carpe diem*. Or, in the words of one of the subjects

interviewed by Studs Terkel for his book on death, *Will The Circle Be Unbroken*, "...the exact opposite of death is life. Every day you're alive, it reminds you that death's coming, so let's get something done here, let's do something with what we have" (346).

Ultimately, this simple need to *do something* in the time available is the most valuable insight (and spur) I've gained from my prolonged contemplation of mortality – while in craft terms, I have attempted to assimilate some of the ideas and imagery from my reading into the framework of my own work, *Building Heaven*. Given that my story posits the afterlife as a real place inhabited by souls exhibiting individual human consciousness, the question becomes: how would such an organ function and what purpose would it serve? Operating on the assumption that no one religion could justly or logically reconcile every strain of human belief and morality, my conception of "Heaven" is thus, of necessity, secular and non-judgmental, the final destination for every soul that has ever or will ever exist, regardless of their sins or virtues in life, making free will a truly no-strings-attached proposition (with all the complications and consequences thus implied).

In this imagining, the only limit to free will is the free will of another autonomous spirit. In other words, no soul is allowed to exert unwanted harm or constraint on another. Thus, every soul is entitled to absolute freedom, so long as one's liberty does not come at the expense of another soul's freedom. My theory is this scenario would be paradise for some and hell for others, but ultimately even such total freedom would not be enough to satisfy mankind. At some point, our souls would still need a God (or gods), if only to answer the ultimate question: *WHY?*

In all the works reviewed for my final project, the divine answer to that question is always more or less a variation on the old parental standby, "BECAUSE I SAID SO, THAT'S WHY." In Eastern philosophy, the answer is more along the lines of "WHY NOT?", while atheists believe the answer is "NO."

As for me, I think it's entirely possible the only answer to the question is to ask it.

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The ancient Egyptians postulated seven souls.

Top soul, and the first to leave at the moment of death is Ren, the Secret Name...

Second soul, and second one off the sinking ship is Sekem: Energy, Power, Light...

Number three is Khu, the Guardian Angel. He, she, or it is third man out...depicted as flying away across a full moon, a bird with luminous wings and head of light...

Number four is Ba, the Heart, often treacherous...

Number five is Ka, the Double, most closely associated with the subject. The Ka, which usually reaches adolescence at the time of bodily death, is the only reliable guide through the Land of the Dead to the Western Lands...

Number six is Khaibit, the Shadow, Memory, your whole past conditioning from this and other lives...

Number seven is Sekhu, the Remains...

*from The Western Lands
by William S. Burroughs*

REN (The Secret Name)

Morning. I'm awake. I'm still here. Intravenous feeding time. The fat white nurse adjusts the feeding tube without a glance in my direction. The overhead fluorescent lights are still flickering...flickering...*flickering*...

...ignore it, ignore it, *think*...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.

I can't move. Okay.
...hello?

...*HELLO?*

...I can't speak...

...what's happening? What happened? Okay, *think*...

...hospital room. Private room. The fat white nurse -- Mary. Her name is Mary...I've seen her twice...three times. Just now, last night, yesterday morning. And before that...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.
Dancing, digital, yes...

...*I remember*...

SEKHU (*The Remains*)

There were two Marys on the coma ward at Cedars-Sinai, neither of them particularly attractive. Skinny Mary, the ward administrator, was all thin lips and petty tyranny, while Fat Mary resembled nothing so much as a cartoon mole: sweet and nearsighted, timid and sexless, muttering “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear” whenever she felt overwhelmed or under the gun.

“So I hear ol’ Herlinger woke up.”

Fat Mary chirruped in surprise, startled from her reading, and looked up to see the tall black orderly Ray leaning across the counter of the sixth floor nurse’s station. “Oh, what? Yes,” she replied, capillaries flushing pink as she tucked her book away a little too quickly. “Well, actually, no.”

“No?”

“I mean, he spoke, but it didn’t make sense.”

Ray shifted his weight, trying casually to steal a glimpse of Fat Mary’s book. “So what’d he say?”

“Mr. Herlinger?”

“Yeah.”

“He said *five*.”

“Five?”

“Mm-hmm. Yep.”

“That’s it?”

Fat Mary adjusted her thick glasses, pushing them tight against the bridge of her nose. “Well, he said a few other things, but that was the only word I could really understand.”

“So you were there when it happened?”

Fat Mary’s head bounced a quick nod. “His vitals went haywire yesterday just after you left, like he was having a seizure. I got there first and he was muttering something, as if he was talking in his sleep. Then he said, very clearly, ‘*Five*.’”

“Huh,” Ray said, yawning like a cat. “So what’d the doc say?”

“He wasn’t sure *what* to think...I guess it’s pretty unusual for patients to speak after so long in a vegetative state.”

“How long...”

“Since he came in? Well...” All at once, Fat Mary lowered her voice dramatically, so Ray was compelled to lean closer. “...that’s kinda the *weird* thing. I checked his file, and *guess* how long he’s been here?”

“Tell me.”

“Five years, five months and five days *exactly*.”

Ray smiled. Weird hospital stories and gossip were a shared currency between them, a hobby to break up the monotony of their days on the ward. “*Five*, huh?”

“Yeah. Kinda spooky.”

“I hear that,” Ray mimed a shudder, only half playacting: Herlinger gave him the creeps, for real. Not so much the scarred wreck of the man himself, but what he represented – a lightning strike of tragedy Ray didn’t care to think about.

“So what else been goin’ on?” he said, eager to change the subject. “What’s the word around the campfire?”

Fat Mary shrugged. “Nothing much exciting.”

“Yeah? How ‘bout you? What’s up? What you readin’ there?” Ray probed, hand striking with sudden precision to snatch the book she’d been hiding in a quick, casual motion. “*1001 Baby Names*?”

Fat Mary’s lowered gaze and violent blush instantly told Ray he’d miscalculated. Sometimes he’d catch her reading gooeey romance novels, and he liked teasing her about it – but this was different, more personal. It was no secret she loved babies, and was forever angling for a transfer to the maternity ward. But whether she’d ever have a child of her own, he knew, was a different, more painful subject.

Fortunately, she had a ready response: “Oh, well...Elphaba just had puppies, so...”

“She did? Congratulations!” Ray smiled, feeling the awkwardness pass. “You’re a grandmother!”

Fat Mary laughed, feeling it too. “Yeah, right, some grandma...I’ll be giving most of ‘em away...”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe you could hook me up with sumpin’ for Baby Joyce...what are they?”

“Dachhund-beagle. I call ‘em deagles...they’re supposedly real good with kids.”

“How many you got?”

“There were nine in the litter, and I’m keeping two.”

“Emiko and Erzsebet,” Ray suggested, opening to a random page in the baby name book.

“Hey, I like those...what do they mean?”

“Let’s see...Erzsebet is ‘consecrated to God,’ and Emiko...‘blessed, beautiful child.’”

“Ooh, that’s a good one. *Emiko*,” Fat Mary said, committing it to memory. “And how’s about *your* beautiful child? Joyce?”

Ray flipped to the “J” section. “Joyce...*merry*.”

“That’s so perfect!”

A big grin of tiny teeth flashed in the mental photo album Ray carried everywhere. He loved his daughter so much it was almost painful to think of her when they were apart, separated by the hours of his long hospital shift at Cedars. Every morning he dropped her at Happyland Day Care was a desperate act of faith; every night when he retrieved her a joyful thanksgiving. He wasn’t a religious man, but he *was* superstitious, which accounted for his dread of Herlinger, as if tragedy were contagious.

“Let me see,” Fat Mary said, reclaiming her book, flipping it to: “Ray, *wise protector*...”

“More like blind piano man,” Ray replied, modest. “Or anyway, that’s where my folks got the name. How ‘bout you? What’s it say for Mary?”

Fat Mary turned to the appropriate page, read and scowled. “Bitter.”

Ray just laughed in surprise. “Oh, now, that can’t be right...” – but before he could reach for the book again to check, the elevator bell rang at the far end of the hall, causing both their heads to snap instinctively towards the sound as sliding doors revealed Skinny Mary and Dr. Ku, stepping onto the floor.

“Now *there’s* a bitter Mary,” Ray whispered, winking to Fat Mary as he made himself scarce, heading away from the elevators towards the employee lunchroom.

No one used “Fat” or “Skinny” around the Marys – it was, rather, just a handy way of distinguishing them in third party conversations or lunch orders, as in “I’ve got Fat Mary down for a tuna melt...does anyone remember what Skinny Mary wanted?”

In person, Fat Mary was always just Mary, while Skinny Mary was usually referred to as ma’am or Ms. Barnes or Nurse Barnes or occasionally Nurse Ratched. And, whereas Fat Mary was liked but generally taken for granted, Skinny Mary had somehow managed to secure a fairly unassailable position in the hospital’s political rigging without being particularly well-liked by anyone.

“...so you basically have no contact information for Mr. Herlinger other than legal, correct?” Dr. Ku was saying as he stepped off the elevator.

“And the insurance reps,” Skinny Mary confirmed, fingering the file in her hands.

“Would the lawyer know how to reach anybody with more of a *personal* connection? It might help with the cognitive recovery.”

“We’re still waiting for a call back,” Skinny Mary said, pausing by the nurse’s station to ask, “Anything new on Mr. Herlinger?”

“No change since this morning,” Fat Mary reported. Her counterpart continued on without a second glance, quickening her step to match Dr. Ku’s long strides as they made their way to Herlinger’s room.

His eyes were open, staring, as they entered. Skinny Mary was unnerved in spite of herself, releasing a tiny gasp as Dr. Ku approached the patient’s bed, seemingly unaffected by the lizard stare, the mottled skin, the frozen expression of horror and despair. “Mr. Herlinger, I’m Dr. Ku, this is Nurse Barnes...can you understand what I’m saying?”

Herlinger was silent for a moment, pupils flicking back and forth, lips quivering, before he finally rasped a single word: “...*five*...”

“That’s very good, Mr. Herlinger, but I need a more specific response to let me know that we’re communicating. Can you try that? Can you say anything else?”

“...*five*...”

“Okay,” Dr. Ku continued briskly, removing a penlight from the breast pocket of his white hospital jacket. “I want you to watch the light, follow the light...”

Herlinger closed his eyes.

“Mr. Herlinger...*Pete*.”

Skinny Mary checked the patient’s vital signs, reported no change. Herlinger’s eyes remained tightly shut, lips pursed, teeth clenched.

Dr. Ku watched him for a moment, then reached for the patient file. “He’s been here five years?”

“Going on six...”

“And no eye, ear, nose or throat trauma in that time, including the original incident, correct?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge, no.”

The burning crackle of shuffling papers drowned out a slight increase in the sound of Herlinger’s breathing as Dr. Ku skimmed delicate fingers through the dense patient file. “So, no sensory degradation apart from the paralysis, no articulation issues...we should get Dr. Oster in to confirm that, and schedule a new CAT scan...”

A sharp intake of breath drew their attention back to Herlinger, and Skinny Mary was the first to notice the strained expression, the single tear of sorrow or frustration squeezing out from the corner of his left eyelid. “His lips...”

The steady beat of the heart monitor sped its tempo as Dr. Ku watched Herlinger’s mouth quiver and pulse. “He may be aphasic...Mr. Herlinger, can you hear me?”

“...five...sin...”

Herlinger’s voice disappeared again, but his mouth continued, struggling. Skinny Mary remembered something and shifted to the doorway, calling Fat Mary into the room. “You’ve had some experience reading lips, haven’t you?”

“My grandfather was deaf. I’m a bit out of practice, but...”

Skinny Mary steered her towards Herlinger’s bed. “That’s okay, do your best.”

Dr. Ku stepped aside at Fat Mary’s approach. “His speech abilities may have atrophied, but he’s definitely saying something.”

Fat Mary leaned close, watching for sibilants and bilabial fricatives, goading her dormant skills to match the faint sounds of the patient’s breath with the motion of his lips and tongue. “...five...sin...” Herlinger wheezed. “...where...”

“There were...five of us...in the car, where...” Fat Mary translated. Herlinger’s eyes snapped open again, staring desperately into the twin windows of her thick prescription glasses as she concentrated on his words and finally understood: “There were five of us in the car...*where is my family?*”

REN (*The Secret Name*)

I know they're gone. I just need to hear the names.

Father. Mother. Wife. Son.

If they were alive, somebody would have mentioned them by now.

I just need to know what happened. I remember only...

...flashes: driving in the rain, digital numbers on the dashboard...

...5:55:55...

...evening, my wife beside me, my parents in back, flanking my son, Pete Junior...

...my eyes flick to the rear-view mirror. Pete, Jr. smiles in reflection. My wife, Karen, screams in terror...

...eyes forward, too late. A black, onrushing form... a Humvee in my lane, blinding headlights through the windshield...

...one last moment, all of us together, then...

...IMPACT, airbags -- mine "saves" me, Karen's kills her. Screaming: my son, my parents, Detroit steel. My son, dead. My wife, dead. My parents, dead. My body, dead.

Of course, this part survived, my thinking part, trapped in useless flesh all puckered with bed sores, poked with needles and catheters.

I'm some kind of miracle to them, all the doctors and gawkers who parade by my bed like museum tour groups, poking and prodding and scribbling notes. They tell me it's miraculous I survived the crash in the first place. They tell me it's miraculous I recovered from a vegetative coma with my faculties intact. They tell me I was unconscious five years, five months and five days.

But they won't tell me where my family is.

I wish I knew.

KHAIBIT (*The Shadow*)

Karen paced the driveway, seething with impatience as Pete futzed endlessly through his neurotic stations of the cross inside their modest Valley home, running from room to room checking and doublechecking window and door locks and God knew what else while his son and parents waited, yawning, crowded together in the back of the Herlinger family's sensible blue Ford Focus.

"All right, I'm coming!" Pete called, appearing briefly in the open front doorway of the house before dashing back to the kitchen to make sure the stove was *really, really* off (so the house wouldn't fill with gas and explode in their absence) and the refrigerator was *definitely* running (so the pork chops inside wouldn't go bad and give them all trichinosis).

Karen sighed and climbed into the passenger seat to wait. "What's taking him so long?" Pete's father asked, not unkindly, from his perch behind the driver's seat.

"Your son is a little obsessive-compulsive," Karen sighed, locking eyes with Bob Herlinger's gentle, steady gaze in the car's rear-view mirror. "In case you hadn't noticed."

"Better safe than sorry," Pete's mother Tilly chirped, instinctively defending her darling son in put-upon tones as Karen and Bob communicated telepathically through the mirror: *we both know where he gets it, don't we?*

Bob smiled at Karen's pretty blonde reflection, then lowered his eyes to the *Popular Mechanics* in his lap.

"Grandma, have you ever seen a Giganatosaurus?" Pete Jr. asked, apropos of nothing, adorably and inexhaustibly five.

"A Giganto-saurus?" Tilly twittered in the kind of patronizing kid's show voice that made Karen's teeth itch.

"GIGANATO-saurus."

"Why, I'm sure I've never heard of such a thing! Sounds like a *monster!*"

"It's not a *monster*, it's a *dinosaur*," Pete, Jr. explained in the sardonic, eye-rolling tone he'd learned from his mother. Then, with the patient kindness of his father and grandfather, he said, "But I see how you could make the mistake. Dinosaurs *look* like monsters. In fact, dinosaur means *terrible lizard...*"

"No!"

"Yes. In fact, I'm pretty sure I told you that before."

"You did?"

"I think so. But anyway, I don't think I told you about Giganatosauruses."

"And what can you tell me about Gigantic-sauruses?"

"*Giganatosaurus*," Pete Jr. corrected her, matter-of-fact.

"How do you know so much?"

"I read," Pete Jr. shrugged, continuing his lecture. "Giganatosauruses were even bigger than a T-Rex."

"That's pretty big."

"Yes."

"But do you know what's *even bigger*, Petey?"

"Sperm whales."

"And, uh, do you know what's even bigger than..." Tilly tripped awkwardly over *sperm*, to Karen's silent amusement, pronouncing only "...*whales?*"

Pete Jr. quickly scanned his memory before declaring, "Nothing's bigger than a *blue* whale, except maybe the Bruhathkayosaurus, but scientists aren't sure about that one yet."

"Well, *I* can think of something *bigger* than *both* of those."

"Really?" Pete Jr. asked, curious. "What?"

"*God.*"

Karen instantly spun around in her seat, annoyed at Tilly's heavy-handed attempt to bring the conversation back to religion, as usual, when Pete Jr. dropped the bomb: "Oh, but that's just a myth. We don't really believe in God."

Pete's parents had just arrived from Virginia that morning, and the ride from the airport had been dominated by Tilly's glowing report of a recent visit to Jerry Falwell's church in Lynchburg. Raised Catholic, she'd only recently converted to Evangelical Christianity, much to Bob's chagrin.

“She just won’t shut up about it,” he’d warned Karen at the baggage claim and, in fact, only a pointedly diplomatic segue by Pete had managed to prevent open culture war between his mother and wife...but now the fight he’d been hoping to avoid had finally arrived.

“*WHAT* did you say?” Tilly gasped, eyes bugging wide as her son clambered into the driver’s seat.

“Ready to go?” Pete asked, cheerfully unaware of the barometric pressure surrounding him.

“*Do you know what your son just told me?*” Tilly hissed as Pete, Jr. blinked around the car in fear and confusion, uncertain what had touched off his grandmother’s anger.

“Tilly, please...” Bob tried, without hope of success.

“He said *you don’t believe in the Lord!*” Tilly continued, proving her husband correct. “He said God is a *myth...a five year old boy!*”

“Well, he *is* very bright for his age,” Karen offered, for her father-in-law’s benefit.

“Honey, please,” Pete scolded, without rancor; then to his mother: “Can we talk about this *later?*”

“What’s wrong?” Pete Jr. asked, trying to understand the situation.

“I don’t know what your *mother* has been telling you,” Tilly said with a poison apple smile. “But God is *NOT* a *myth*. Without *God*, you wouldn’t be here...”

“Tilly,” Bob repeated, more serious this time. “Please. We have a long trip ahead...”

“Why aren’t you supporting me?” Tilly shot back, aggrieved.

Bob seemed to have an answer that he didn’t want to speak aloud, so Karen supplied the words instead: “*Because it doesn’t concern you.*”

Pete winced as his mother swelled with righteous indignation, seemingly ready to burst, then abruptly changed gears to a tone of quietly menacing accusation. “My *concern* is for his *eternal soul...*”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Karen nearly laughed, exasperated and bemused.

“Don’t you speak to me like that, young lady.”

“And don’t *you* tell me how to raise my son,” Karen shot back, turning fully around in her seat again to look Tilly in the eye. “Believe it or not, there are people in the world *who don’t believe everything you do.*”

“Yes,” Tilly replied, suddenly and strategically beatific. “But it doesn’t make them *right.*”

And with that she fell silent, staring pointedly out her window, though everyone knew it was hardly the end of the matter.

REN (The Secret Name)

Motion, light. The hospital...I'm still here. The fat white nurse is changing my catheter, none too gently. Daylight streams through the window.

At first I don't understand. The Korean doctor was just here at the foot of my bed, scribbling notes. I remember darkness outside, Jay Leno on the t.v. across the room, suspended from the ceiling.

Time has passed. I don't remember falling asleep, I don't remember dreaming. The space between my last thought and this moment simply disappeared without marker, as if...

My last thought. It takes a moment, but then I remember. My last thought was a wish.

My second wish.

I remember now...

...the accident, the chaos of light and terror, then darkness. They tell me it was *years* of darkness. Five years, five months, five days.

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.

I saw the numbers in the darkness. My first thought upon waking from my long sleep, my first memory...and something more.

The numbers brought me back to the car, the night of the accident. The memory brought me back to myself. Yes. I heard the flickering of the overhead lights, then slowly my vision cleared and I saw the room...*this* room. The fat white nurse was there, adjusting the feeding tube without a glance in my direction.

I tried to speak. She didn't hear me. I wished for a voice, and finally spoke...

...*five*...

She heard me. My wish came true. My first wish, first of...

...*five*...

Five wishes.

I have five wishes from...*where*? Some mystical quirk of numerology, I suppose, an underlying code, fives instead of sevens lining up a cosmic jackpot...I don't know. I can't be sure.

But they're mine.

Five wishes, five for the five who died: Karen, Petey, my parents, me. It's all I have now. Five wishes. A big responsibility. And from what I know of wishes, they must be worded carefully, exactly. I've already wasted two: one to speak, and two...

...oh no...

...in sudden horror, I realize what it was that I wished for, my second wish...*to know where my family went*. "Where are they now?" I wondered, followed by a wish to know.

And then...nothing. A void. For untold hours, my consciousness disappeared, ceased to exist, until my body, this physical tether, brought me back.

The implications are monstrous.

I wanted to know where my family went and the answer is oblivion. The woman I loved, the child, my parents – they exist now as recollections and moldering bones and nothing more. Their *souls*, if ever such existed, are absent from creation; they tread neither the earth as spirit nor the heavens as angels.

Even to have learned they were in *Hell* would be an improvement over *nothingness*...

...but no, their souls have simply been *erased*, utterly and eternally, and when I die, it will be as if they *never existed*...

...and when the Earth dies, all of human existence will finally reveal its true purpose, *utter futility*...

...*FUTILITY!*

I choke on the annihilating darkness in my heart like a drowning man, gasping for a breath of hope...

...and then my hope arrives.

SEKHU (The Remains)

Ray didn't know what to say to his daughter. Her little dachshund-beagle puppy, the one she called Weinie, never opened its eyes that morning. The little runt body was cold.

"I'm sorry, Baby," Ray sighed, eventually. "I guess...I guess he was just too good for this world."

"What do you mean?" Baby Joyce said, big eyes wide in fear and confusion.

"I mean..." Oh, God, Ray thought, realizing his daughter had never heard the cliché about being too good for the world before, had never had reason to acquaint herself with its meaning. At five years old, she barely understood the concept of the world outside South Central, let alone the greater sprawl of Los Angeles surrounding them and the oceans and continents and stars and moons and planets beyond that. Let alone death. And now Ray had to find a way to explain the Great Mystery in twenty minutes, before daycare.

"Okay, it's like this," Ray said, packing apple slices and Melba toast and tiny squares of American cheese in Tupperware for his daughter's midday snack. "Remember when your Talking SpongeBob stopped talking?"

"Yes," Baby Joyce said, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Well, that's what happened to Weinie. He just broke."

"Can you fix him?"

"No," Ray smiled, rubbing her nappy head. "I wish I could."

Baby Joyce considered this for a moment, then smiled back at her father and said, "That's okay. I still love him, even if he's broken."

"Put on your shoes," Ray said, cleaning up the breakfast dishes, wondering if Fat Mary had any puppies left.

After dropping Baby Joyce at Happyland Day Care (really just a small, two bedroom house full of toys and Disney videos and neighborhood latchkeys, overseen by a kindly old widow named Indrani Jones, who used to run with the Black Panthers back in the day), Ray doubled back home to dispose of Weinie's body, chucking the carcass in the dumpster of a 7/11 he passed on his way to Cedars-Sinai.

"You're late," Skinny Mary said as he emerged from the hospital locker room in his orderly scrubs.

"Family emergency," Ray mumbled, avoiding eye contact, hoping that was the end of it. He couldn't afford to lose the job, not with his coke-whore ex-wife threatening a custody fight over Joyce. No way. But for once, Skinny Mary let the matter slide without some vague threat or high-handed remark, and Ray hurried off on his rounds quickly, lest her temper shift.

An hour of bedpans and spongebaths followed before Ray tracked down Fat Mary in the employee cafeteria to ask if she had any more puppies. "Weinie's dead."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," the pudgy white nurse said, patting his arm. "Was Joyce upset?"

"She will be tonight," Ray sighed, creaming his coffee. "She thinks Weinie's broken...but she's got lots of broken toys she still plays with...I don't know what she'll do when she finds out I tossed Weinie in the garbage."

"You didn't have a little doggie funeral for him?"

"There wasn't time...besides, Joyce don't know from funerals. She don't know the difference between alive and dead. That's why I was hopin' you maybe had some more puppies."

"Gave 'em all away," Fat Mary shrugged. "How old is Baby Joyce again?"

"She'll be six in October."

"Don't worry...she can handle it. Just tell her Weinie's in heaven."

"She'll wanna go visit him," Ray said, anticipation of his daughter's reaction already knotting his stomach. "She don't understand about death. Shit, I don't understand it my own damn self."

"So maybe just explain that death is the opposite of life."

"Yeah, well, I'm not all that sure I understand *life* any better," Ray yawned, sipping his bitter hospital coffee.

The staccato click of heels on linoleum drew their attention to Skinny Mary, coming up fast behind them. "Mr. Herlinger needs his catheter changed," she said without stopping, conspicuously brusque.

Herlinger was awake. Fixing the tall black orderly with his filmy gaze, he gurgled, "...*nothing*..."

"What's that?" Ray said, even more uncomfortable in Herlinger's presence now that his least favorite patient had risen undead from his long coma, hissing out madness in cracked, sepulchral tones to anyone who would listen.

"I had five wishes...I wished I knew where my family was, and then...*nothing*!"

"Okay, Mr. Herlinger, calm yourself down."

Ray wasn't in the mood. Moving as quickly and efficiently as possible, he sponged the patient's scarred, blotchy flesh while a glistening bead of sorrow trickled down Herlinger's face. "My family is gone...nothing remains...no soul, no God, no hope..."

"C'mon, now..." Ray sighed, empathy dissolving his own distemper, fumbling for words of hollow consolation as he mopped tears from the invalid's cheek with a wadded paper towel. "...you don't know that."

"*BUT I DO KNOW!*" Herlinger croaked, hysterical, froth in the corners of his mouth.

Ray felt a sudden flash of panic, desperate to contain the situation before Skinny Mary appeared in the doorway, furious with him for upsetting her miracle patient. "For God's sake..."

"*THERE IS NO GOD!*"

"*Shut up!*" Ray snapped, riding a surge of adrenalin. "You don't know that, okay, man? You're upset, you're outta your head, talkin' all this crap..."

"No! I had *five wishes*..."

"There's *no such thing!*"

"You're *wrong!*"

"All right, fine, whatever," Ray conceded, relieved Herlinger had at least dropped his volume. "You made a wish and it didn't come true."

"It *did* come true. It showed me the *only* truth..."

Ray moved slowly towards the door, hoping the invalid would stay calm until he was safely out of the room, off the ward and punched out for the evening. "Yeah, well, at least you got a few *more* wishes, right? That's more than most people can say."

Herlinger gasped, his expression shifting unnervingly from despair to euphoria in a matter of seconds. "You're right...yes, of *course!*"

"Should I get the nurse, Mr. H.?" Ray asked cautiously, backing safely into the hall. "You need anything, or we cool?"

"I have what I need," Herlinger replied, quiet again. "Thank you."

"Awright, then...lights on or off?"

"Off, please."

Ray doused the lights.

After Herlinger, Joyce was a piece of cake. Weary from his workday, Ray commuted home in a state of anxiety, bracing himself for an emotional scene that never materialized.

"Where's Weinie?" Joyce asked upon her return from Happyland, dashing back and forth between her room and the kitchenette where Ray was microwaving burritos, a special treat.

Taking his daughter's tiny brown hands in his own giant paws, Ray knelt down to her eye level and said, "I'm sorry, Baby...Weinie had to go to Heaven."

But instead of tearful demands for a return of her broken dog, Joyce merely smiled, curious, and asked, "Why are you sorry?"

"I just thought...uh...you'd be sad," Ray said cautiously.

"Heaven's not sad," Joyce giggled, kissing him on the chin.

The drama hit at 2AM.

Baby Joyce woke screaming in the middle of the night, calling for her mother, calling for her dog. Ray dashed into her room and turned on the light, kneeling down beside her, stroking her nappy head, trying to calm her down.

"Where's Mommy?" Joyce cried.

"Mommy's far away, Baby, you know that."

"Where's Weinie? I want him back!"

“Sssh...hush, now,” Ray whispered. “Weinie’s up in Heaven with Grams and Grampy, keepin’ ‘em company.”

“R-really?” Joyce sniffed, calming down now that her father was beside her.

“Really.”

“Are they feeding him chocolate? Chocolate is bad for him.”

“No, they ain’t feedin’ him chocolate...they know better. They feedin’ him steak.”

“He likes steak,” Joyce yawned, clutching her father’s arm like a blanket.

“I know.”

“Tell me more.”

“Sure, Baby Joyce,” Ray smiled, and started building heaven.

REN (The Secret Name)

And when the Earth dies, all of human existence will finally reveal its true purpose: utter futility.

...but then Ray, the orderly, reminds me of the wishes.

The wishes!

Maybe there's no Meaning of Life, no God, no Heaven, but I still have three wishes, and that's enough. I have a purpose. I know what to do.

Should I spend a wish to know the mind of God? No...after all, what good would it do me to discover there is no God, or that God exists but that He is capricious or mad or otherwise little concerned for my welfare? What if the Meaning of Life has nothing to do with humanity at all?

No, too metaphysical. I don't need meaning, I don't need answers...only eternity: I want to continue. I want to be happy. I want to be.

*Oh heaven...
heaven is a place...
a place where nothing...
nothing ever happens...*

A music video on television, the Talking Heads. I've known the song for years, but never truly understood the lyrics until now: heaven is my family in the car before the crash. Heaven is my wife beside me, my son and parents in the backseat...enjoying their company, forever. No destination, no sorrow, no end...heaven.

And if there is no heaven, then I'll damn well create one...but for who? Only the good, the pure, the righteous? Who am I to judge? And who am I to determine paradise?

There's only one fair answer: *everyone* goes to their own blue heaven, *everyone* lives forever.

With eternity to play with, I hope the rest will somehow work itself out.

So...

I wish for an afterlife, as of now, where every soul that dies or has died or will die from now until forever shall go to create an everlasting paradise of their own choosing, the entirety of said domain to be commonly known as Heaven, which I may visit at will prior to my own death, amen.

KHAIBIT (*The Shadow*)

The hours following Pete, Jr.'s innocent blasphemy were thick with Tilly's silence as Pete navigated Route 1 towards San Simeon, the ruined destination of their newly impossible attempt at a relaxing family vacation together.

Pete hadn't seen his mother since his move to the West Coast and, more importantly, since *her* move to Christian fundamentalism, and the breadth of the gulf that had widened between them in the meantime was disorienting. Tilly had always been a formidable presence with her Medusa's mane of silver-black curls and the sheer glittering will of her gaze, but until Karen, he'd only ever been on the right side of that indomitability, shielded and protected by it. Now, though, he felt like a siege army, facing the impressive battlements of a onetime ally, wondering how the defenses he'd relied upon in happier days could be turned against him in the bloody savagery of all-out war.

It was only recently that he'd come to appreciate how much Karen reminded him of Tilly in her strength and resolve and how it was this similarity, rather than superficial differences of generation or background, that had always kept the two women in his life at a tense distance from one another, two queen bees, twin lions on the veldt. At five, Pete, Jr. was already an unmistakable product of this vital maternal lineage, while Pete grew increasingly passive with age, more like his father than he'd ever cared to admit.

Yet ultimately it was Bob who broke the stalemate, brokering a truce between Karen and Tilly while Pete was escorting Pete, Jr. to the bathroom at a rest stop just south of Santa Barbara. "You know," he said, in the quiet, hypnotic tones of a drowsy snake charmer, "we don't have to settle this today, and we *certainly* don't want to upset little Petey..."

"No, of course not," Tilly said quickly.

"No," Karen agreed.

"But you can't shelter that boy forever," Tilly admonished. "Sooner or later, he's going to have to learn to think for *himself*."

"He *does* think for himself," Karen flared.

"No, darling," Tilly smiled, arch. "He thinks like *you*...cynical, doubting, *atheist*..."

"Hey, just because he's not brainwashed..."

"But he *is* brainwashed..."

"Ladies," Bob sighed, ineffectual, as Tilly resumed her advance: "...you liberals always think you're so open-minded until you come across an idea you don't like..."

"Okay, hold on...number one, I'm *Republican*..."

"You are?" Bob asked, surprised.

"*Moderate* Republican, slash Libertarian," Karen stipulated. "And I work for Lockheed Martin, so I'm about as *liberal* as G. Gordon Liddy, but that doesn't mean I just toe some party line. Pete's a lawyer and I'm a scientist, so believe me, we don't accept or reject *anything* lightly..."

"Except God."

Karen sighed. "No, Tilly. I was raised Baptist, Pete is still Catholic...but after a lifetime of education and experience and...and *common sense*, we just don't believe in the Bible as literal *fact*."

"And that's what you've conveyed to your child, that God is a *myth*..."

"Petey is very open-minded..."

"He's *five*," Tilly exclaimed. "A very *smart* five-year-old, yes, but he's still just a little boy, and you're his *mother*. He's going to *believe* whatever *you* believe, and if you say there's no God..."

"We never taught him that," Karen argued. "We told him some people believe in God and some people think it's a myth..."

"And *naturally* he agrees with his *parents*!"

"We've never told him what to think!"

"Haven't you?" Tilly sighed, infuriatingly serene. "Petey trusts you and loves you. Whatever you say is *gospel*..."

"He didn't believe us about Santa," Karen volleyed back. "We gave him the whole song and dance and he called bullshit on Kringle..."

"Please, there's no reason for that kind of language..."

"It's just a word," Karen started, then: "Okay. Sorry."

“That’s all right, dear,” Tilly said, patting her daughter-in-law’s arm in a gesture of harmony neither of them believed. “But what *I’m* saying is, my life in Christ is very important to me, and it’s something I’d like to be able to share with my grandson...”

Karen’s first impulse was to say, “*I told you, I don’t want you brainwashing my son with that crap,*” until she realized any such response would only reinforce Tilly’s theories about her alleged liberal hypocrisy, so instead she merely smiled, “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Pulling out of the rest area, Pete was pleasantly surprised by the peaceable mood that had somehow settled over his family while he and Pete Jr. were in the men’s room. Meeting eyes with Bob in the rearview mirror, he was relieved to see a slight nod from his father, a code between them meaning not to worry, things had been resolved.

Karen spotted the silent exchange as she studied Bob in the mirror of her passenger-side visor, watching as the older man turned his eyes to the rolling coastline outside his window. She was glad Pete had inherited his sharp features from his mother and his soft demeanor from his father, instead of vice versa. Her father-in-law was not a handsome man – slightly cockeyed, with a Roman fuzz of silver hair and the round, placid features of a tortoise – yet she was exceedingly fond of his gentle manner, droll wit and low, soothing Virginia accent. He’d barely registered the first time they met, at the rehearsal dinner for her wedding, and she’d mistakenly assumed then what most people thought when they met him: that he was a henpecked, friendless milquetoast chained to a shrill golddigger who’d only married him for a share of the Old Money prestige of his family’s Richmond estate...

...all of which might well have been true at one point, but Karen had learned over time that Bob drew advantage and a strange kind of pride from being underestimated, using anonymity to camouflage his true feelings and stratagems. That he possessed secrets, Karen had no doubt, although what they were she could only speculate.

But she was certain of two things at least after several years of quiet observation: the first being that, no matter what the dynamic at the start of their relationship, Tilly had clearly grown to rely on Bob’s quiet strength and companionship, seeming to need him a lot more than he needed her. As for the second thing...

“Petey, sweetie, can I ask you something?” Tilly squeaked, launching a fresh campaign against her grandson’s skepticism. “You know so much about dinosaurs, I was just wondering if you could tell me where they came from?”

“Sure!” the boy replied brightly. “They evolved from single-celled organisms in the primordial soup millions of years ago.”

Atta boy, Petey, Karen smiled, proud.

Tilly let the reference to evolution pass, depriving Karen the satisfaction of her reaction as she continued, “Okay...and what came before that?”

“I don’t know,” Pete Jr. shrugged, idly flipping the pages of his dinosaur book.

“Well, let’s think...was the Earth here before the dinosaurs?”

“Why, yes, of course,” the boy replied in a sing-song chirrup of amusement.

“So where did the Earth come from?”

“Hmm,” Pete Jr. said, head cocked to the side in a pantomime of deep thought. “Let me see...oh, yes, I remember now. It was formed in the Big Bang.”

At that, Karen and Pete exchanged blushing smiles in a moment of shared pride for the little professor they’d created. My God, she thought...had they ever been so smart?

BA (The Heart)

“Pete?”

It’s Karen’s voice. *It’s Karen’s voice.* Where am I?

“PETE!”

I’m standing in the garden behind my house...wait...

...I’m *standing*...

“Oh, thank God...thank God...thank God...”

Karen runs towards me, throws her arms around me...she’s crying...I’m crying...we embrace for hours, maybe days. It doesn’t matter. We’re both free of time and we know it. The full measure of despair in my soul has transformed itself into joy and doubled, tripled, exploding exponentially into joy and relief.

“Where’s Petey? Where’s Pete, Jr.?”

Karen turns around and he’s there, our boy, smiling innocently...then, with a giddy shriek of delight, he launches into the air, disappearing like a rocket up, up, up into the perfect blue sky.

“PETEY!” Karen yelps, alarmed.

It’s a startling sight, until I realize what I’m seeing: it’s Petey’s heaven, too, the weightless, jungle-gym paradise of a 5-year-old boy. “He’s fine,” I laugh, taking Karen into my arms...

...arms...

I’m standing, I’m talking, I’m holding my wife...no heaven could be sweeter, when suddenly I realize...

“...this is *your* heaven.”

“What?” Karen says, nervously eyeing the sky for signs of Petey.

“I’m still alive,” I say, piecing it together, as much for myself as for Karen. “I didn’t consciously choose to visit...*you* summoned me. I’m part of *your* heaven...”

“I...I don’t understand,” Karen replies, disoriented. “I was in the car...you, me, Petey, your parents...I remember the crash...”

“And then?”

“And then I was *here*,” she says, looking around at our surroundings, a simulacrum of the house we shared, the garden she tended, the life we’d loved.

“And do you know where *here* is?” I ask, gently.

Karen nods slowly, scanning the yard and garden around us. On closer inspection, it’s not *exactly* the house we lived in (seconds ago in her memory, years ago in mine), but has the shifting inconsistencies of dream architecture: the trees are incandescent with the red-orange autumnal foliage of my wife’s New England childhood, but the garden is bursting with the lush vitality of California’s endless summer...the house is exactly the shade of blue Karen always preferred (before I covered it over with aluminum siding) and the above-ground pool my wife had settled for is now the inground pool she always wanted.

“None of this is real,” Karen says, uncertain.

“It’s as real as anything is real,” I explain. “It’s your vision of Heaven, the place where you’re happiest...”

“So, we really are dead,” she marvels, confirming aloud what she already knew instinctively.

“*You* are,” I say quietly. “You and Petey, my folks...”

“But not you.”

“No. Not yet.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Near as I can figure, you summoned me...you wanted me here and I’m here. Heaven is whatever you want it to be.”

“So you’re not *really* here?” Karen says, confused. “You’re just a figment of my imagination?”

“No, it’s really me.”

“But you’re not dead?”

“I gave myself the ability to visit.”

“Huh?”

I explain about the wishes. Karen is suitably impressed.

...boom...

We both turn abruptly towards the sound, which seems to issue from the forest behind the house...

...boom...

“What is that?” Karen asks nervously, eyes widening as the sound grows louder and closer. “I hate thunder...”

“I don’t think it’s thunder,” I reply, uneasily scanning the woods for the source of the...

...boom...

“I don’t like this,” Karen exclaims, gripping my arm. “If this is my own private heaven, why am I scared?”

“It’s not private,” I say, just as Petey emerges from the forest, knocking trees aside like splintering curtains...

...at least I assume it’s Petey...

“Jesus CHRIST!” Karen screams.

...Petey was going through a dinosaur phase at the time of the accident...

“WHAT THE FUCK IS IT?”

...and I can easily see how a 5-year-old, empowered to fashion his own paradise, untethered by the concept of restraint, might transform himself into a 500-foot Tyrannosaurus Rex, just for the fun of it. After all, what are the quiet pleasures of home to an imaginative, frenetic child, especially when compared to the joy of sheer destruction?

“PETEY, NO!” I cry, too late. Karen shrieks as a monstrous foot STOMPS down, crushing our beloved home into tindersticks.

And then, another unexpected development...fighter planes: Nazi Messerschmitts in tight formation, arcing high overhead, then circling back, diving, swooping low in a disciplined bombing run....

BOOM! The T-Rex screams in pain and surprise as the missiles strike, and now Karen recognizes the cry: “PETEY!”

The monster falls in broken agony, howling pathetically as bombs rain down and flames rage up, charring our little patch of Heaven into the blackest pit of Hell. I shriek as my skin burns, Karen begs for help, pleading to God, to Christ, to me...

...and I wish it away, I wish it all away.

SEKHU (The Remains)

“Heaven.”

“Yes,” Herlinger cackled the next morning, happier than Ray had ever seen him.

“You went to Heaven. Last night.”

“Yes!”

“And now you’re back.”

“Well...yes.”

Ray laughed, he couldn’t help it. Shaking his head as he fluffed Herlinger’s pillow, all he could say was, “Man, I dunno what the doctor’s been slippin’ into your I.V., but save me a little next time, okay?”

Herlinger fixed his milky gaze on Ray and said, “It was the wishes...”

“The wishes...right...”

“In fact, it was you who reminded me I held the power of salvation in my grasp.” The invalid smiled. “That’s one of the reasons I came back...to thank you.”

“Well...you’re welcome.”

Herlinger continued, explaining how he’d used two of his wishes to fashion and then refashion a Heaven where none existed before. “Maybe there is no Meaning to Life, no God, no higher purpose...but that doesn’t matter now. I realized if I wanted to see my family again, the only way to reclaim them from oblivion was to fashion my own eternity...and not just for them, but for everyone. *Everyone* goes to Heaven now, *everyone* lives forever.”

“Everyone?” Ray asked, playing along with his least favorite patient, enjoying himself for once.

“Hitler? Judas? Tricky Dick? You’re tellin’ me they all get a free ride?”

“Who am I to judge?” Herlinger replied, peaceful. “Naturally, there were some problems in the first version...”

“Wait, wait...the *first* version?”

“My first version of Heaven,” Herlinger nodded, head bobbing on a paralyzed body. “To be honest, it was a bit of a botch...”

He closed his eyes and sighed, bemused. “But I did better with the second one...”

Ray stood listening, captivated. He’d never realized insanity could be so entertaining. “You’re saying you’re on Heaven Mach Two already? Since last night?”

Herlinger cocked his head to one side in his own paralyzed version of a shrug. “Not much else to do around here...besides, it doesn’t take long to wish. You just have to be *very careful* with your wording.”

“So what’d you wish? How’d you fix it?”

“I simply arranged it so that all who die, have died or ever will die shall pass into a paradise of their own making, as gods of their own realm, with total freedom to satisfy the desires of their own soul, yet no power to harm or control a sovereign spirit outside their own consciousness who does not desire to be harmed or controlled, the entirety of said domain to be commonly known as Heaven and which I may visit at will prior to my own death, amen.”

“Wow.” Ray blinked in amazement. “What are you, a lawyer or something?”

“And a law professor...used to be, anyway.”

“So, uh...how’d that work out for you? Heaven Mach Two?”

“It’s beautiful,” Herlinger gasped, eyes suddenly wet with emotion.

Drawn by unexpected impulse, Ray placed a hand on the invalid’s shoulder. “I’ll bet it is, man...”

“I’m heading back tonight,” Herlinger whispered now, smiling. “My last wish.”

All at once, Ray felt something give inside, a surge of emotion so unexpected and strong he backed away from Herlinger’s bed, embarrassed.

But the invalid just continued to smile, and Ray felt his voice crack as he nodded back at his new favorite patient and said, “Don’t waste it.”

REN (*The Secret Name*)

"I'm heading back tonight," I say. "My last wish."

"Don't waste it," the black orderly says, nodding to me as he leaves the room.

Ray. His name is Ray. He's not a bad man. He's done his best to keep me comfortable in my infirmity, even though I sense he doesn't like me very much. I can only imagine how he sees me, these pathetic earthly remains. I look forward to meeting him again in Heaven, in my *true* form. I look forward to easing the transition when *his* time eventually comes to an end.

As my time has ended.

The overhead lights flicker. I smile a farewell...

...and then, slowly, unexpectedly, the smile fades and I realize: I'm nervous. I've seen Heaven, I'm eager to return, but still...I've never really died before.

The feeling, if not the circumstance, is familiar. I've always been a nervous traveler. In my old life, before the accident, I could barely leave my house without completing certain obsessive rituals: closing windows against rain and burglars, unplugging unattended appliances, checking and double-checking that locked doors really were locked and, finally, muttered prayers in precise, exact language: "Dear God, please keep my family and my house and the contents of the house safe while I'm away from them, thank you, amen."

Forgetting any part of my neurotic routine was usually enough to force me back to check – were the burners completely off? was the house filling with deadly gas? – lest I worry across the entire span of my absence.

Leaving life is the same. Is there any last minute business to complete? Everyone I really cared about is gone, but there are still people who know me...former colleagues and distant relatives I might want to contact one last time...

...or not. From what the doctors tell me, no one's been to visit in years – and besides, I have nothing in particular to say to Cousin Betty in Virginia or Aunt Lurancy in Connecticut or Dr. Philbrook, my old department chair at Pepperdine. If they want me, they can find me in Heaven.

Yet what of my obligation to humanity in general? Not that I crave fame or praise for my actions, but surely it would soothe the world's anxiety to know, once and for all, that death is not the end...

...but then again, who would believe me? Ray certainly didn't. The world, after all, contains no shortage of holy men with glowing reports of paradise. My feeble voice would soon be lost in the great miasma with no particular effect on the ultimate, unchangeable reality that *everybody dies, and everybody goes to Heaven*.

So why this anxiety?

Perhaps it stems from nothing more than writer's block, or the paralysis of possibility which strikes any artist when faced with a blank canvas. Should I plan my paradise ahead of time or just make it up as I go along? How shall I design it, what should I include? And then, a sudden realization: *how do I protect my Heaven?* After all, as my previous experiences have shown, there will certainly be those in the afterlife who glory in chaos and destruction. True, they'll have no *real* power to harm me, but a sudden chill of instinct cautions me on the brink of my uncertain journey, reminding me how little I know of the complexities ahead, the Pandora's Box I have thrown wide. For, while Heaven may well be my creation, its inhabitants are not.

I lie awake for hours, considering the implications of my previous wish, my blueprint for eternity, pondering the design, probing for loopholes or disastrous flaws of conception. *I still have one last wish*, I think. I could save it, store it away in case of emergency. That would, of course, be the responsible thing to do, the prudent course of action. *I'll eventually die anyway*, I think. No need to waste the power of my final wish to hasten such an inevitable process...

...but, in the end, impatience trumps prudence and I wish for an end to my long confinement, my loneliness, my regret and sorrow. I wish away the monotony of seclusion, the humiliation of bedpans and catheters. I wish for arms and legs, I wish for Karen and Petey. I wish for Heaven.

I wish I was dead.

SEKHU (*The Remains*)

The drama hit at 2AM.

Alone in his room, Herlinger's eyes rolled back in his head and the heart monitor flatlined.

"Oh dear," Fat Mary cried, jumping up from her lonely post at the night desk. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear..."

A pair of residents, Chicano and Jamaican, barreled into Herlinger's room with a crash cart, firing up the paddles. The Jamaican tried CPR, then the Chicano zapped the invalid's heart: "CLEAR!"

KHU (The Guardian Angel)

Utopia is waiting.

And, with a thought, I am there, leaving my pain behind. No floating above my hospital bed, no tunnel, no bright light. I merely wish for death, and I am dead, back in my heaven, soaring through cerulean skies, looking down on my wife in her paradise, the home we shared, the life we lived. She waves from the garden she loves, then smiles as our son, the Tyrannosaurus, stomps and snarls and does no harm.

I'm flying. I don't remember any conscious decision to fly, or indeed to return to Karen's paradise, for that matter. I was thinking of her, naturally, how I couldn't wait to see her and Petey again. And, I suppose, I had some preconceived notions about spirits flying around the afterlife – indeed, I saw Pete Jr. blast straight up into the sky on my first visit.

Yet my last conscious thought was only this: *I wish I was dead.*

I am troubled and cannot say why. I should be ecstatic, turning blissful loop-de-loops in the air, but I'm not...and the mere existence of my anxiety only *deepens* my anxiety, for how is it possible to reconcile this creeping disquiet with the eternal bliss of Heaven?

Something is wrong, something I didn't anticipate in my conception of paradise. I feel it, yet cannot explain it consciously. But...

...wait...

...*consciously*...yes, of course...the answer to the first part of the equation reveals itself with a lightning flash of clarity. My desire to return here to Karen was subconscious, as was my impulse to fly. I wanted both things, but I did not deliberately *will* them.

When I visited Karen before, I was still alive and it was *she* who brought me into her own private nirvana. I had been planning to return after my death, of course, yet I'd assumed there would be an interim point, a blank slate where I could determine my own preferences for the afterlife, and...

...my *God*...what's happening?

All at once, I am plunged into...*nothing*, a void, limitless and total, akin to some cosmic blackout, except I find myself not in darkness but rather an indescribable absence of light and substance which is somehow infinitely more terrifying. Were it not for the fact of my own consciousness, basic principles, *I think therefore I am*, I would assume that I had merely hallucinated my visions of heaven...that it had never existed, there was no afterlife and my soul had been annihilated...

...but I'm still thinking, I'm still here, I am...

...think...

...and then I realize: it's happened *again*.

I was thinking how I'd *expected* a void, an entry point upon which I could build my eternity, and now here I am. *I wanted this*.

Remarkable – and intimidating – for it seems in this heaven of mine, reality can be shaped and reshaped by subliminal whim as readily as conscious design, a circumstance I had neither imagined nor predicted.

Clearly, I must be cautious and precise in my thoughts moving forward, alert to my own feelings and the unexpected vicissitudes of this realm, for already this heaven of mine is not the state of bliss I was expecting.

There's anxiety here. I've felt it. I'm feeling it now.

There's also fear, panic, confusion, and if these emotions are possible, then...

PETER

...a familiar summons, not exactly a voice, but clearly recognizable...

...my father, requesting my presence and...

...by the merest thought I am with him.

“Dad...!”

Except that it's not. Not exactly.

“...Dad?”

We're standing by the marble columns of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon estate, overlooking not the Pacific but rather the Atlantic City boardwalk, circa 1950. And everyone is naked. Naked *men*, as far as the eye can see, all with perfect bodies and giant cocks, surfing and swimming, sucking and fucking, laughing and dancing and strolling the boardwalk.

Everyone is naked *except*, thankfully, Dad and me. I'm in the L.L. Bean plaid and khaki I wore to San Simeon that last day with my family, the same outfit paramedics sheared from my body to “save” me all those years ago.

Dad, however, is *not* wearing the same thing he wore at San Simeon. Dad is wearing a sparkling red gown, tiara, 6-inch heels and a Miss America sash across a voluptuous hourglass figure – disconcerting, but gorgeous.

“Hello, Peter,” he (she?) says in a husky contralto. “It's good to see you again.”

“It's good to see you, too, Dad.”

“Actually, I prefer Racquel.”

“Racquel. Sure,” I say, grinning now the initial shock has worn off. After all, tits or no, Dad is still Dad. I recognize him, despite the startling exterior, the outward shell. There's a logic to it, a certain inevitability.

Racquel suits him.

“*Fuck me! Yeah, boy, git it...git it...fuck me hard!*”

Startled, I glance over at an orgy of giant black men and tiny white rednecks behind us, on and around an elegant Venetian fountain. “Forgive me,” Dad blushes, grasping my arm with satin-gloved fingers. “I've been indulging my own predilections for so long now it seems that my sense of decorum has just atrophied completely...”

The phrasing strikes me odd: *for so long now?* Then, before I can finish my thought, Dad says, “Come, we'll talk in my palazzo.”

In the flash of a word, I find myself perched on the balcony of a Tuscan villa, basking in the spectacle of an impossibly beautiful view of the Mediterranean with icebergs and pyramids on the distant horizon,

illuminated by disco globes and comets. “So,” my father says, in a more familiar voice. “Is this easier for you?”

I turn and see the man I remember: short, homely, unflappable. I realize, all in a rush, how little I appreciated him in life, how much I’ve missed him. “Dad...”

We embrace for a long time, and it feels good. “Welcome home,” Dad says. “Can I fix you a plate?”

Strangely, I do feel hungry. “But we don’t really need to eat here.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” Dad replies, leading me within the palazzo to a mahogany table laden with fish and fowl and cakes of all description. “Some never do, especially the Ancients. Personally, I still enjoy the sensations of tasting and swallowing, even if the hunger is Delusional.”

He watches me as he says this. I’ve just devoured an éclair – the creamiest, most delicious éclair in the history of the world, as far as I’m concerned – and I’m feeling a little less hungry when his words suddenly register: “The hunger is delusional.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Why would you be?”

I stare back at my father’s watchful gaze, his patient expression. He’s teaching me, in the manner he employed when I was a child: never lecturing, but rather positing observations, then waiting for me to draw some conclusion.

“I’m hungry because I expect to be,” I reason. “I’m used to it. Just like I’m used to seeing you as I remember...” I indicate his appearance with a flourish. “...when in reality, you’re...what? A busy redhead?”

My father laughs, his voice husky again as his exterior shimmers and shifts to the voluptuous curves of Racquel. “Does it bother you?”

“No,” I say, honest if bemused. “But, so, then...what? You were a woman trapped in a man’s body all along?”

“Something like that,” she says, running a hand through my hair. “I always loved you, of course...and your mother, in my way. But the rest...the rest was always a lie...”

“It must have been hard for you, all those years.”

Dad shrugs. “I grew up in a different era. Repression was our birthright. We all deceived ourselves constantly, pretending away our differences. So ridiculous...it’s hard for your generation to understand.”

“And what about Mom? Does she...”

“Understand?” Dad offers a sad little smile, a sigh, a shake of the head. “No, of course not. She’s a simple, God-fearing woman. She doesn’t want to understand. Not yet, anyway. Maybe in time, and there’s plenty of that.”

“I should go see her.”

“You should. But Peter...” Dad grips my arm again, locking me into the quiet resolve of her rain-colored gaze. “...you can’t fix everything. Remember that.”

I nod, uneasy. Dad smiles again, embraces me, invites me to come back soon. “Sinatra’s doing a set with Billie Holiday at the Tropicana later tonight, if you’re interested. I’ll save you a dance.”

“I’d like that,” I say, bracing myself for the trip to Mom’s.

One impulse and I’m with her, crushed within the twisted steel frame of the accident that claimed her mortal life, drenched in blood, surrounded by corpses: my father, my son, my wife, my own pulverized body. I step outside the grim tableau as she prays to Jesus and screams in perpetual agony.

“MOM!” I cry. “NO! STOP! You can make it *STOP!*”

But she refuses to listen, clinging to her unshakeable convictions, waiting for Christ to end her suffering and transport her to a Heaven where my father remains what they’d agreed to pretend, sanctified in the surety of her superior moral values, safe in the knowledge that sin has been punished and all the queers and deviants were roasting forever in Hell.

It’s almost more than I can bear. “MOM, *PLEASE!*” I scream, but I don’t know how to help her if she’d rather cling to her last moment of earthly pain than admit the universe is different than she imagined...if she chooses suffering over acceptance.

I consider dragging her from the wreck, forcing her out of her delusion, until I remember the strictures of my afterlife design: that none should have power to harm *or control* a sovereign spirit outside their own consciousness who did not desire to be harmed or controlled. "You can't fix everything," my father said...

...yet surely I can't leave my own mother in Hell, not even a Hell of her own making. Knowledge of her suffering would always spoil any paradise I might create for myself, just as my father's Heaven transformed hers into damnation.

Then I realize the alternative: oblivion. No choices, no pain, no feeling at all. There would never be a suitable Heaven for everyone...some would always suffer by the pleasure of others...

...is that why there was no afterlife? Had there been a God and a reason all along?

I have no wishes left.

Good Christ, what have I done?

SEKHU (*The Remains*)

“It wasn’t my fault!” Fat Mary said, for at least the dozenth time in as many hours since Herlinger flatlined. First, she’d said it, unbidden, to the Chicano and Jamaican residents who responded to the patient’s heart monitor alarm while she’d flustered in a panic at the night desk, knowing there was nothing she could do to help but determined to make clear that she’d done nothing wrong. Later, she’d reconfirmed her innocence to the residents, to Skinny Mary, to Dr. Ku and to anyone else who would listen.

Now she was repeating her tale of blamelessness to Ray in the employee cafeteria, yet remained unable to shake the feeling that Herlinger’s death was, indeed, in some way, her fault. “I’d been checking his vitals at regular intervals, same as always...I’d just been in his room twenty minutes earlier and he was fine.”

“I’m sure he was,” Ray said, knowing she was upset, trying to calm her down.

“Maybe I missed something, but I really don’t think so...”

Ray placed a hand on her shoulder, looking straight into her eyes, the way he did with Baby Joyce whenever she needed a solid dose of reassurance. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know! That’s what I keep saying to everyone!”

“Sometimes people just die around here,” Ray continued. “Everybody knows that. Nobody blames you... ‘sides, I’m pretty sure ol’ Herlinger *wanted* to go. He was at peace with it.”

But even as Fat Mary nodded in agreement, she couldn’t shake an irrational sense of failure, a habitual self-loathing all too easily exploited by Skinny Mary in her own quest for someone to hold accountable for the death. The head nurse was several yards away, talking with Dr. Ku by the elevators, and Fat Mary cringed every time her supervisor shot accusing eyes in her direction.

“Ms. Barnes blames me,” Fat Mary said, miserable.

“Nurse Ratched blames the world for being born,” Ray scoffed. “Don’t let her mess with you. People like her get ahead by always pointing they fingers at somebody else. Herlinger was a big deal ‘cuz he was unusual. Folks wanted to study him and ask him questions, and now all they got is an autopsy...”

“The autopsy says he died of ‘natural causes,’” Fat Mary acknowledged quickly. “Which means they don’t really *know* what happened...”

“Exactly,” Ray smiled, patting her chubby arm. “So chill. You done all you could for the man.”

“I guess,” Fat Mary yawned, gathering napkins and dirty silverware onto her tray as she rose to depart. “Anyway, I should probably get outta here before Nurse Barnes asks me to work another double shift. I’m so tired I can barely see straight.”

“Yeah, go rest,” Ray said, rising with her. “And don’t worry ‘bout Herlinger or Nurse Ratched...you just need a good night’s sleep, s’all.”

“A good afternoon’s sleep, you mean,” Fat Mary laughed, trying to be cheerful. “I’m back on the floor at midnight.”

“Jesus,” Ray said, taking her tray. “I don’t know how y’all do it.”

Fat Mary shrugged. “I just do it.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

The bald guy from Operation Rescue was out front as usual when Fat Mary left work for the day, clutching his poster-sized blow-ups of bloody fetuses and calling, “Mommy, please don’t kill me!” to any young woman he saw heading towards the entrance of Cedars-Sinai, whether she was there for an abortion or not. When he saw Fat Mary in her nurse’s uniform, he screamed, “MURDERER!”

When he’d first appeared on the sidewalk in front of the hospital several weeks earlier, Fat Mary had taken one of his pamphlets and talked with him for several minutes, explaining that she herself was a pro-life Catholic, to which he’d replied “Hypocrite! You call yourself a Christian and work in a concentration camp, perpetuating the Holocaust of the Unborn!”

His words had scorched her, because it was an issue she’d wrestled with: although she had nothing to do with abortions, personally, she nevertheless worked in a place where they were performed with sickening regularity, just six floors below her. “I understand how you feel,” she’d conceded. “I thought about that when I first took the job here, but then I figured, you know, I had to consider all the babies who *were* born, and grew up and got sick and needed help...and even though the hospital does this one thing I don’t approve of, they’re still *saving* a lot of people...”

“Oh, so you’re a *good* German,” the Operation Rescue man had sneered in disgust. “*You’re* not a murderer, you just *work* for murderers and turn a blind eye to the Holocaust right under your nose...”

“I’m not a murderer!” Fat Mary had snapped back defensively.

“Tell that to God when he casts you into the Lake of Fire!” the bald man had snarled in response. “Try rationalizing your sin when demons are tearing out your tongue by the root!”

“You’re just ridiculous,” Fat Mary had said before walking away, exasperated. “People like you are an embarrassment to the whole pro-life movement.”

“MURDERER!” the bald man had shouted that day – and every day thereafter – as Fat Mary did her best to ignore him. Unfortunately, she couldn’t avoid him completely, since her bus stopped across the street from his encampment and Fat Mary refused to give her nemesis the satisfaction of forcing her to switch routes.

She’d thought about buying a car, which would enable her to enter and exit the hospital undetected through the basement garage, but had vetoed the idea for a number of reasons. For one thing, she’d always been a nervous driver, especially in the endless street fight of L.A. traffic, and worried she’d wind up like Herlinger one day if she got behind the wheel (especially after one of her all-too-frequent double shifts at the hospital). Plus, she didn’t mind the bus: the long commute from Cedars to her one-bedroom condo in Pacoima gave her a chance to catch up on her sleep or her reading and even, occasionally, to strike up a conversation with her fellow passengers.

But the other reason, the secret reason she didn’t buy a car was financial. Not that she didn’t have enough money to afford a decent vehicle, but rather that she was saving every penny for her child.

So far, she hadn’t told anyone about her impending motherhood – and, indeed, she wasn’t even pregnant yet – but she had vowed to herself as early as adolescence (and with increasing despair and resolve throughout her lonely twenties) that if she wasn’t married by her thirtieth birthday then she would somehow find a way to raise a child by herself, since motherhood had always been the one, unswerving ambition of Fat Mary’s life.

Now, at 31, she’d overshot her goal by a year and knew it was time to get serious. Originally, she had planned to adopt, but after months of frustration, the obstacles facing single women in her tax bracket came to seem too daunting, and so instead she began to investigate sperm banks, plopping down fifteen hundred dollars for a trio of inseminations that had yet to produce a single day of morning sickness.

Nevertheless, Fat Mary remained optimistic. As the doctors at the San Fernando Valley Reproduction Center in Tarzana had reminded her time and again, it didn’t always happen the first (or second or even third) time, no matter what the nuns at Saint Elizabeth’s Parish School had told her.

Elphaba was nursing her daughters Emiko and Escalflowne when Fat Mary came through the door of her tidy, cramped condo with a cheerful, “Hello!” The tiny brown deagle pups scampered over to her, nails clicking on the hardwood floor, then hurried back to their mother, torn between conflicting desires for love and nutrition.

Fat Mary had napped on the bus and was still feeling drowsy as she peeled off her brilliant white nurse’s uniform and switched into the comfy cotton Winnie the Pooh pajamas her sister Cathy had given her for Christmas. The single window in the bedroom was blacked out with fabric to accommodate Fat Mary’s third shift daylight sleeping habits, making the blinking red light of her answering machine that much more noticeable. Clicking play, she heard an electronic announcement of a single waiting message, followed by Ray’s voice saying, “Hey, Mare, it’s me...I don’t know if you care, but Dr. Ku was just telling us how ol’ Herlinger ain’t got much in the way of close relations anymore, so the hospital chaplain’s gonna hold a service for him at the Interfaith Chapel tomorrow at nine. I’m off tomorrow, but I thought I might swing by with Baby Joyce...if you’re interested, maybe I’ll see you there. A’ight, peace!”

“Oh, that poor man,” Fat Mary said aloud, for the benefit of the dogs, sitting down heavily on her bed. At the sound of her voice, Emiko and Escalflowne rushed into the room, then circled immediately back to their prone, lactating mother in one continuous lap.

Fat Mary laughed at the sight of them, and it was only then she realized she was crying. “Poor, poor Mr. Herlinger.”

Wiping her eyes, she left a message for Ray that she would definitely meet him at the chapel in the morning, and would bring homemade cookies for Baby Joyce if she was allowed to have sweets. Then, sliding down to her knees, she clasped her hands and bowed her head, squeezing her eyes shut as she had before bedtime ever since she was a little girl, and prayed for her family and her friends and Elphaba and the pups, finally ending with: “And dear Jesus, please bless poor, poor Mr. Herlinger...he was a sad and lonely man, so I

hope you have accepted him into your Heavenly Kingdom and will grant him love and peace forever and ever...”

...but before she could say “amen,” the earthquake hit like a tidal wave, collapsing the foundations of her cheaply constructed building and the five stories above, crushing Fat Mary flat.

KHU (The Guardian Angel)

I feel it before I hear it, a seismic disturbance in the very molecules around us, a tingling in the fibers of my being...*a presence*...

Then I hear the trumpets, high and glorious, blending and expanding into the infinite voices of what can only be a heavenly choir.

And finally, *light*...a supernova, so bright I no longer see the darkness of night, the highway, the corpses or the twisted steel of the accident that claimed my family. All I see now is Mom, fallen forward on her knees, gazing heavenward in joy and astonishment.

Following her gaze, I see the Light and the Way incarnate, and cry aloud at the sight of the Word Made Flesh, Christ the Messiah descending from the clouds, arms wide, purple robe fluttering. His Voice is gentle, yet pulses through my being like electroshock voltage: "Arise and sing, my child...for thine is the Kingdom of Heaven..."

"Oh, my Lord," Tilly weeps, rising from the mangled frame of my crumpled Ford Focus straight into the air to kiss the hem of the Nazarene's vestment. "Sweet Jesus, take me..."

"In my Father's house are many mansions," Jesus smiles. "There is one prepared for you now, Tilly, for you have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

"Yes, Lord, yes!" Tilly cries, following Christ through the air towards a whirl of clouds, vortexing open to reveal a massive pearlescent gate. I follow, too, fascinated and curious yet vaguely skeptical, as it occurs to me that what I'm seeing, for all its divine majesty, is just a little too theatrical, sort of like...in fact, *exactly* like...a Sunday school depiction of Heaven.

Mom's version of Heaven.

I smile in dawning comprehension as Jesus glances back at me and winks, steering Mom's angelic form towards the golden kiosk of a kindly, white-bearded gatekeeper who can only be St. Peter. "Matilda Thompson Herlinger," he greets her, reaching out to guide her descent as she touches down on a ledge of cloud like dense cotton candy. "Rejoice, for thy name is recorded in the Book of Life."

I land beside and behind my mother as St. Peter withdraws a dark, leather-bound tome from the folds of his long white vestments, opening it to display Tilly's name, etched on vellum in the illuminated calligraphy of a medieval manuscript. Below her name, there are others: my father, my wife, my son, myself.

Tilly smiles, relieved, as her finger traces down the page, then she turns and smiles, tears still glistening in her wide, joyful eyes. "God is merciful," she says to someone behind me, in a tone I recognize from a thousand earthly arguments, the tone of a woman who has proven her case but was raised not to say, "I told you so."

Though I guess right away who the comment is intended for, I am nevertheless startled when I glance back and see Karen, Pete Junior and my father all standing behind me, beaming beatifically. "God *is* merciful," my wife replies in a humbled, awestruck voice that shocks and disorients me with the sudden certain knowledge that the Karen-esque figure uttering the words cannot possibly be my wife. The woman I married would never give Tilly the satisfaction of admitting that God's mercy was the only thing saving her from the fiery pits of Hell, not even here on Heaven's threshold...or, as I find myself beginning to suspect, Tilly's *mental image* of Heaven's threshold.

Besides, I've just left Karen back in *our* little corner of Heaven...haven't I? Petey was there, too, rampaging around, and my father was in his palazzo...yet at the same time, here they are, standing with Mom and me and Jesus and St. Peter, all reading their names in the Book of Life beside the Pearly Gates...

...it's confusing, but I think I'm beginning to understand...

Then, with a trill like rain on bells, the Pearly Gates swing inward to reveal a glorious firestorm sunrise of light across an infinite horizon, reflected in the endless crystal prism of a glistening sea of glass.

"...*beautiful*..." escapes my mother's lips in a single, orgasmic burst, tears streaming from her eyes as her "family" gathers around her in eerie tableau, frozen in blissful, perpetual adoration of the Lord.

Unnervingly, I see a simulacrum of myself beside her motionless form, while Jesus gently tugs me backwards away from the scene and into the surrounding fog of white, fluffy clouds until we hang suspended in the middle of endless blank nothing, the only distinct figures in a limitless void.

"She'll be alright now," Jesus says in Dad's voice as an instant, fluid transformation remakes the Messiah into the buxom redhead of my father's inner preference.

“What...what just happened?” I say, though I suspect at least part of the answer. “Why did Mom stop moving like that?”

“Time is relative,” Dad shrugs. “Along with everything else...like most things here, it’s simple and confusing at the same time, but I’ll do my best. As I said earlier, your mother is and always has been – and, one expects, always will be – a simple, shallow woman. I apologize if that sounds harsh or blunt...”

“No,” I say, because I see no reason to pretend otherwise.

“There’s a term here of fairly common currency...*Delusional*. It means essentially what you’d expect, except that we tend to use the noun form, as in: your mother is a Delusional. And by ‘we’ I mean those of us who consider ourselves Realists...although, again, such terms are simple and confusing, since delusion and reality are so inextricably twined, as any Realist will tell you.”

Now there are two images in the white void before me, like comedy/tragedy masks: my mother, at the moment of her death, screaming in perpetual agony, and Tilly in bliss, staring endlessly through the Pearly Gates at the moment of her faith’s confirmation. “You see the similarities, no doubt. When she died, Tilly’s consciousness entered this astonishing realm of limitless possibility...and, like so, so many, she instantly and completely rejected it, choosing instead to exist in the agony of her last earthly moment of ‘certainty’ forever.”

“But this place, this ‘Heaven,’ can be anything for anyone,” I say, uneasily defensive of my creation. “If Mom thought she was a good Christian, which I can only imagine she did, why didn’t Jesus come for her the second she died? I mean, I’m guessing He’s not exactly the Jerry Falwell version...”

“Not exactly.”

“...but the actual, historical Jesus *IS* up here somewhere...right?”

“We’ll get to that later,” Dad says with cryptic placidity. “The point is, like most quote-unquote *reasonable* people...myself included...you put too much stock in *reason*. Your mother’s entire belief system was based on clashing realities which could not possibly co-exist in any rational configuration of existence. She could not, for example, love me as the dutiful, Christian husband I was and simultaneously hate me as the sinful, deviant transsexual I also was...so she merely rejected the piece of the puzzle that didn’t fit, believing me to be a regular, heterosexual male despite all evidence to the contrary. For the sake of tranquility, I did my best to aid and abet her Delusional version of ‘reality,’ playing my part in the fiction of our marriage as, just now, I played my role in our little Sunday school pageant of Tilly’s ultimate salvation. Deep down, I can only imagine she realizes the artifice of it all, but it’s what she needs, and so I provided it, because...and this is what I was getting at...she simply can’t and couldn’t do it for herself. Not yet, anyway. Maybe someday. Who knows? But until then, until she can imagine what comes next, what she actually *wants*...well, I guess she’s happy enough just believing she was *right*...”

I stare at the twin images of Mom before me, digesting my father’s words. “But this place, this afterlife...as far as I can tell, it operates on subconscious desires as well as conscious. If Mom was expecting Jesus to come for her when she died...why didn’t He?”

“Because most of what happens here, whether consciously or subconsciously, is nevertheless an act of creation. Of *choice*. Once again, it’s simple and confusing, because it’s so difficult to pinpoint the source of that creative impulse...symphonies poured from Mozart’s quill, though he did not consciously summon them, nor could he deny them. He might have refused to acknowledge the music in his soul, he might have lain down his pen and refused to commit the notes to the staff, but the genius of the symphonies would nevertheless continue to *exist*, if only subconsciously, in memory or regret of what might have been. In my own case, I was physically a man but subconsciously a woman...Racquel, my ultimate creation...*myself*...and though I spent most of my life trying to deny that creation, it would not die, it would not be subsumed into the preferred reality of my wife, my community, the times I lived in.” Dad smiles, proud and bashful, delicate hands running up and down womanly curves. “And so, when I died, I found myself inhabiting the creation I had tried so hard to erase from existence.”

My father’s masculine form momentarily replaces Racquel’s hourglass symmetry as he says, “But consciously or unconsciously, I can only create myself and my surroundings to the limits of my own imagination and will. So, for example, since I never saw *Casablanca*...”

“You never saw *Casablanca*?” I gasp, as shocked by this revelation as anything I’ve experienced since the whole foray began.

“Never got around to it,” Dad shrugs. “Still haven’t. And *since* I haven’t, I can only conjure a version of the movie based on the bits and pieces I *have* experienced over the years...hearing about it, flipping past a scene on television, that sort of thing ...”

And suddenly, we are standing in a smoky, sepia-tinged black and white approximation of Rick’s Café American where, three paces to my left, Rick himself is lighting a cigarette and telling his piano player to “Play it again, Sam.”

“He doesn’t actually say that,” I comment to Dad, who – unable to resist the sleek forties fashions – has morphed back to his feminine form again, if only to wear Ingmar Bergman’s hat. “In the movie, I mean...Bogart never actually says that line.”

“Really?” my father drawls, lounging back against Sam’s piano. “Well, there you go, then...my point exactly. I never saw *Casablanca*, so my version is just that...*MY* version of something I’m only guessing at.”

“Yes,” I say, taking a scotch on the rocks from the tray of a passing waiter. “But there *IS* a real version of *Casablanca* out there...you could watch it if you wanted to. Are you saying there’s no *real* Jesus to come meet Tilly?”

“The *real* Jesus would have terrified her,” Dad replies. “But the point is, Tilly was unprepared to imagine her *own* version of paradise and she was hazy on what she was *supposed* to think Heaven was like...she’s a woman who always thought and believed whatever society told her...so from the moment she died ‘til now, she’s essentially been waiting for instructions. And she’s *still* waiting.”

“But,” I say, afraid of the answer, “...is she happy?”

“Oh, sure,” Dad says with a reassuring smile. “Ecstatic.”

“She’s happy just staring through the Pearly Gates at a bright light?”

“Not just *any* bright light...God. Or, rather, the anticipation of God, which for Tilly is more or less the same thing.”

“So Mom’s surrounded by facsimiles of her family...”

“...which are real to her...”

“...trapped in one endless, continuous moment, waiting to see God...and she’s *happy*?”

“Well, she’s not *trapped*...she can do anything she wants, anytime she wants...but for now, she’s savoring the moment, soaking in it. There are souls I’ve encountered who seem willing to remain in a single moment of bliss forever...and, of course, there are those who choose the other extreme...”

Dad fixes me with his feline eyes, waiting to see if I understand.

“They choose pain,” I say.

“Consciously or unconsciously,” Dad nods, rising, his slinky white gown tinged red in the firelight suddenly visible through the sepia windows and doorways of our imaginary Moroccan saloon. “Burdened with ultimate freedom, not *everyone* chooses Heaven...”

There is nothing but flame and darkness outside the windows now, and the heat plasters my clothes to my skin with oozing perspiration. I hear screams through the open door, mingled with the scent of charred meat, scorched hair and sulfur.

“Look,” my father says, pointing through the doorway. “Watch. But please don’t cross this threshold...there are too many things you don’t understand yet.”

The heat isn’t real.

I will myself cooler, but the *illusion* of heat is nearly overpowering. The stench is nauseating, the screams are terrifying.

My fear is real.

I stand. Rick’s Café is empty save for myself and my father now. I don’t want to see what he’s about to show me.

Hell. It can only be some fire-and-brimstone version of Hell, as bogus as Tilly’s Heaven, but no less real for the poor, wretched souls within, self-condemned to unspeakable torment for their sins, true or imagined.

Dad beckons again, angel wings like twin feathery harps sprouting from his back. Step by step I move towards him, fighting a deep, primal urge to flee. And slowly, the Inferno comes into view through the doorway, a strangely familiar vista of jagged cliffs and molten rivers, geysers of indigo flame shooting up towards a dark ceiling of stalactite fangs drenched in blood. Howling naked sinners of all shapes and sizes writhe on glowing hot coals and bob in streams of lava, like extras in some lurid, Technicolor vision of

damnation. I feel my anxiety recede: the scene is diabolically uninspired, a nightmare not my own, a bad Ken Russell movie.

But the cries of agony and regret are heartbreaking. While the hellish imagery seems borrowed, common, the sinners themselves are distinct, each face a matchless galaxy of hurt. And then, to my alarm, a face I recognize: one of the nurses from my confinement at Cedars-Sinai, the fat, nearsighted one, her plump naked body chained to a tilted flat rock, legs spread wide as a bald, muscular demon stabs her splayed vagina with a white-hot sword, again and again, plunging the blade deep into her womb.

“MURDERER!” the demon snarls. “DID YOU REALLY THINK GOD WOULD FORGIVE YOU?”

“I’M SORRY!” the fat nurse shrieks, her voice an awful, shredded rasp. “OH, GOD, FORGIVE ME! FORGIVE ME!”

“THERE’S NO MERCY FOR *THIS*...” the demon responds, driving his sword even deeper, to the hilt. “...FOR THOSE WHO SLAUGHTER CHILDREN IN THE WOMB!”

“IT WASN’T ME! OH, CHRIST, PLEASE...”

“SAVE YOUR PRAYERS...” the demon cries, clawed fingers tearing out the poor woman’s tongue by the root. “...YOUR WORTHLESS PRAYERS...*MURDERER!*”

I feel a warm breeze as my father’s massive wings flap to life, propelling him through the doorway into Hell. “MARY...” he calls in a thunderous voice neither masculine nor feminine, hovering above the bloody stone table. “...DOST YE REPENT THY SINS?”

“...oh, yes, Lord...” the fat nurse whimpers, a fresh tongue sprouting in her mouth. “...please forgive this worthless sinner...”

“THEN TAKE MY HAND,” Dad smiles, beatific, slender white fingers outstretched, “AND RISE.”

A beautiful flicker of hope illuminates the features of the nurse called Mary as she reaches for the outstretched, angelic hand...only to find her wrist still bound to the rock. “I...I can’t move!” she wails as the demon leaps up to straddle her, breathing hot poison in her face.

“YOU STUPID FAT CUNT!” the demon roars. “DID YOU REALLY THINK WE’D LET YOU GO? YOU’RE SO FUCKING *GULLIBLE!*”

“Oh, God, please...” Mary begins as the demon once again yanks out her tongue, which instantly grows back in time for a prolonged howl of despair.

“MARY, I’M RIGHT HERE,” my father calls, to no avail. The demon blinds and deafens his victim, puncturing her eyes and eardrums with long, greasy nails, then swats at the hovering angel like a pesky moth, sneering, “FUCK OFF, SHE’S MINE.”

All at once, the door to Rick’s Café SLAMS in my face, blocking the awful scene as my father, wings retracted, sighs behind me. Turning to face him, I see we’re back in his faux-Tuscan palazzo. “I’m sorry,” he says. “That didn’t go as planned...although I suppose it was no less instructive.”

“I knew that woman,” I say.

“Yes, I know...she died just recently.”

“And went straight to Hell.”

“Her own version of it, yes...”

“Like Mom.”

“Not *exactly* like Tilly,” Dad says, pouring himself a glass of some nineteenth century Muscatel. “For one thing, Tilly wasn’t punishing herself...she simply wasn’t ready to move on. And her particular purgatory was unique to her, whereas that Hell just now was a Common terrain, shared by many souls with the same essential vision of damnation.”

“So why couldn’t you help that poor woman the way you helped Mom?”

“Well, as I said, Tilly perished with no particular inner demons, whereas that poor woman chained to the rock believed...like so, so many...that she *deserved* her punishment. Which always makes it harder.” Dad fixes me with his emerald gaze, urging me to pay special attention. “Plus, I had competition this time.”

“I don’t understand,” I say, lost. “Competition?”

“That demon wasn’t a figment of Mary’s guilty conscience,” Dad explains, conjuring an image of the bald demon in the air between us, “but rather a conscious soul, like you or I, tormenting that poor woman for spite or revenge or some terrible misguided sense of *duty*...”

“No,” I protest, once more defensive. “No soul may be harmed here...”

“...*who does not desire to be harmed or controlled*,” my father says, quoting my own wish back at me. “Which obviously creates a rather unpleasant loophole for those who wish to do harm and those who believe they *deserve* harm.”

My head is swimming, and I feel the need to sit, coming to rest in a large wicker chair that may or may not have been in existence before the very moment I felt the need to sit in it. “That poor woman...” is all I can manage.

“Oh, don’t worry...I have an idea how to save her from herself.”

“But there must be others,” I say, horrified, “suffering untold agonies because of *ME*...”

“You have *nothing* to do with their suffering, Peter,” my father says, laying a hand on my shoulder.

“I have *everything* to do with it!” I say, pulling away. “My *arrogance*, thinking I had the wisdom to decide what heaven should be *for all of humanity*...”

“Well, I suppose there *is* a certain arrogance to believing you single-handedly reordered the great mysteries of the universe to your own particular specifications,” Dad smiles, “but under the circumstances, it’s actually more charming than anything...”

His statement triggers a dizzy flush of vertigo, and my next words and the pride and foolishness they embody are now, all at once, so embarrassing I can barely pronounce them: “So...you’re saying...”

“...*I didn’t wish all this?*”

Before my father can answer, I find myself laughing, imaginary tears blurring my vision...the helpless, cleansing laughter of last breaths and miraculous rescues. “No...no, of course not, unless...” And suddenly, another lurch of nausea. “...unless all *this*...”

I grip what feels in every way like the wicker arms of the chair where I sit, for the first time less than certain of my sanity. Across from me, a red-haired woman...now a cock-eyed man...both my father, stare back at me. “...how do I believe *any* of this? You say you’re my father and I *want* to believe your soul is still alive and here with me now...but how do I know you’re not just my own voice, talking back to myself in some coma dream hallucination? Or, if you *are* real and I *am* dead, how do I know you’re not just some angel or devil *pretending* to be my father, the way you pretended to be Jesus for Mom back in that make-believe Heaven?”

“How do you ever know anything?” Dad reasons. “You observe and conclude, then observe and reassess, over and over and over again, with no ultimate, absolute verification one way or another. It’s a problem, I’ll admit...one my friends and I wrestle with constantly. But for what it’s worth, a handy definition of reality is *that which does not cease to exist when you stop believing in it*.”

“Philip K. Dick.”

My father smiles. “Ah...so you’ve heard that one before.”

“Karen was a fan...but even if I accept the statement, how does it help me? I mean, if I stopped believing *consciously* that I was actually dead and here with you in this afterlife, I might remain here because *subconsciously* I want to believe it...even if the *reality* is that I’m still in the coma ward at Cedars-Sinai, hallucinating all this.”

“And what if you are?”

“What?”

“In a coma. What if everything you’re experiencing is false, a fabrication of your mind? How would you behave differently?”

“Well...I suppose I’d do my best to wake up from this...this *dream* and return to reality.”

Dad spreads his palms in benediction. “Then be my guest. If you’re in a dream...”

...WAKE UP!”

KHAIBIT (*The Shadow*)

They reached San Simeon slightly after one and checked into the local Marriott, then continued on to Hearst Castle, the day's big event. Riding up to the estate with the 4:15 tour group on a wheezing shuttle bus suffused with tinny jazz recordings from the 1920s, Karen noticed that Tilly's missionary zeal was beginning to flag. "And Grandma," little Petey was saying, as part of an ongoing rebuttal, "how could God have created the world six *thousand* years ago if there are trilobite fossils that are *500 million* years old?"

"Well, God created those, too."

"But you said..."

"Oh, look!" Tilly exclaimed, pointing abruptly out the window. "Peacocks!"

"Wow!" Pete Jr. said, momentarily distracted, then: "Did you know scientists think some *birds* evolved from dinosaurs?"

Later, while Tilly strolled the perimeter of the colossal Neptune Pool on the grounds of the Hearst estate with her son and grandchild, Karen sat with Bob at a distance, watching them from a marble bench overlooking the grey-green Pacific. "So... how do you put up with it?"

"Hmm?" Bob mumbled, roused from his own peaceful contemplation of sea and coastline.

"All that Born Again crap," Karen said, nodding in Tilly's direction.

"What makes you think it's crap?" Bob purred, fixing her with his good eye while the other rolled towards her in its own sweet time.

"Oh, come on," Karen laughed. "You're a Ph.D., for God's sake."

"*For God's sake...*" he drawled, serene, "...I was Born Again in the Blood of the Lamb."

"You're kidding," Karen gasped, never quite sure when he was.

"It was simpler than arguing with Tilly," Bob sighed, cutting to the chase.

"But you don't really *believe* all that stuff...right?" Karen asked, strangely uncertain.

Bob didn't answer right away, savoring the rich, salty air for a moment before exhaling, "Have you ever noticed how atheists tend to be just as dogmatic as true believers?"

"I...listen," Karen sputtered, defensive. "The Bible was written by *human beings*...it's *fiction*. But the rest of the universe, that's *non-fiction*, which means it can be measured and explained..."

"Except the part about *what it's for* and *where it came from*," Bob interposed. "So until we know *for certain* there's no higher intelligence, no grand design, then atheism is just a matter of *faith*."

"Well," his daughter-in-law conceded, "to be honest, I've always been more agnostic than hardcore atheist..."

"Personally, in the absence of solid evidence to the contrary, I prefer to believe there *is* a reason for all this," Bob smiled, waving a lazy hand through the air, "and a God who cares about me...and if I'm wrong, well, *love thy neighbor* ain't such a bad little philosophy."

"Yeah, right...you think Jerry Falwell and all those other Christian extremists care about *love*?" Karen argued, embarrassed by her angry passion in the face of Bob's tranquility.

"I *have* noticed they spend an *awful* lot of time on Hell and Revelations," Bob replied, diplomatic as ever. "Myself, I prefer the Book of Matthew: blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers...judge not lest ye be judged..."

Karen thought, but couldn't be sure, that she detected a particular emphasis on these last words, a polite request to put aside controversy for the time being and simply enjoy the beauty of the California sun shining down, the peacocks strutting the neatly manicured grounds and all the baronial splendor of the historic William Randolph Hearst estate.

"Hey! We're heading up to the Casa del Sol," Pete called from the Neptune Pool, pointing over towards one of several mission-style villas terraced above them on the slope leading up to Hearst's central mansion, the Casa Grande.

Karen waved that she and Bob would catch up with them as her father-in-law measured the distance from the pool to the surrounding villas with his cockeyed gaze. "That was Chaplin's cottage," he said, pointing to one of them. "Casa del Mar...he was a regular guest here until the incident with Thomas Ince."

"Who?" Karen asked, rising to give Bob a hand up from the bench where they'd been sitting.

“Well, you know Marion Davies, of course,” Bob said by way of explanation. “Hearst’s mistress...so according to legend, Davies was slipping around with Charlie Chaplin, until one night on his yacht, in a fit of jealous rage, Hearst accidentally killed this man Ince, mistaking him for Chaplin...”

“Susan?”

Karen’s head snapped towards the voice in shock as Bob continued, oblivious, lost in the history of their surroundings: “The whole thing was covered up, of course, and things were never the same between Hearst and Marion after that...but just *imagine* what it must have been like, *right here*, the times they had...Chaplin by the pool, swapping jokes with Douglas Fairbanks and Louella Parsons...”

“Susan! Is that you?”

This time, the voice was more insistent, and Bob turned in curiosity towards the darkly handsome Mexican now disentangling himself from a group of tourists at the bottom of the stairway leading to the Casa del Mar.

“Why is that man calling you Susan?” Bob said, his words trailing into a sharp breath of surprise at the sudden, violent rush of color to Karen’s face and the instant, queasy realization of its meaning.

“I...I don’t know,” Karen stammered, helpless and ashamed, glancing quickly towards the Casa del Sol for reassurance that Pete and Tilly and Pete Jr. were safely out of sight.

“Hi, I’m Rafael,” the handsome Mexican said now, extending a hand to Bob as he sauntered to Karen’s side, damningly familiar, before introducing himself as “a friend of Susan’s.”

“Excuse me,” Karen said, conspicuously avoiding Bob’s eye as she grabbed Rafael, dragging him quickly out of sight behind a gleaming marble cabana flanking the southwest corner of Hearst’s Neptune Pool.

And as Bob watched his daughter-in-law and the Mexican disappearing from view, his own words returned to him, both taunt and reminder...

...lest ye be judged...

KA (The Double)

Morning. I'm still here. Intravenous feeding time. The fat white nurse adjusts the feeding tube without a glance in my direction. The overhead fluorescent lights are still flickering...flickering...*flickering*...
...ignore it, ignore it, *think*...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.

I can't move. Okay.
...hello?

...*HELLO?*

...I can't speak...

...what's happening? What happened? Okay, *think*...

...hospital room. Private room. The fat white nurse, the tall black orderly...Ray. His name is Ray...tall, average build, close-cropped hair, maybe thirty. I've seen him twice...three times. Maybe more. And before that...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.
Dancing, digital, yes...

...*I remember*...

...*Heaven.*

My father walks through the door of the hospital room in his masculine form, settling his solid, stocky frame into the chair beside my bed. "Well? Did you believe you had emerged from your 'coma'?"

"Yes, for a moment," I sigh.

"So, you created this," Dad says, gesturing around at the grim beige walls, the flickering lights. "From memory and desire. But you didn't ultimately believe in it."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"No," my father scowls. "But consider this...let's say you doubt the reality before you, suspecting it's a lie...perhaps a fantasy you've lied to yourself. You poke and prod it, searching for the seams that will confirm your distrust, yet find nothing. On faith, then, you attempt to *will* yourself past the perceived illusion, only to land in another illusion. You can't wake up and you're not even sure if there's anything to wake up *from*...so now what?"

"I don't know," I say wearily. "Tell me."

"I can't *tell* you anything, I can merely *suggest*."

"Go on, then."

My father leans closer, elucidating on his fingers. "Well, by my reckoning, there are three options for grappling with this existence of ours...you can either stop, like your mother, and wait for ultimate Truth...you can surrender to Delusion, accepting whatever the latest 'reality' may be, without question...or you take the Given for what it's worth and keep moving, keep doubting, keep searching, even unto eternity."

I close my eyes, savoring the simple darkness. "And, of course, the fourth option...oblivion. No decisions, no perceptions...only *sleep*. I see the appeal of that now. I didn't before."

"Before...?"

"When I was lying here...well, not *here*," I say, glancing around the illusory hospital room I've apparently conjured from memory. "Or maybe here, or...well, at any rate, I believed I had these wishes, and I wished to know where you and Mom and Karen and Pete, Jr. had gone after the accident, and what I saw was *nothing*. That's when I wished for Heaven..."

“Or rather, you wished for something you had already seen. Today was not the first time you died, after all.”

More ambiguity, more confusion. “Excuse me?”

Dad indicates the suspended hospital television hanging from the ceiling across from my bed. On the screen, I see the crumpled wreck of my sensible old Ford Focus, bright in the flashbulb strobe of ambulance lights. My broken form, slick with blood, is being worked over by paramedics. Eventually, I die on the pavement, a corona of shattered, glistening windshield glass round my head like a comic book halo.

“In that moment, you glimpsed beyond the visible world, however briefly,” Dad explains. I see the paramedics with their defibrillator paddles, shocking me back to “life,” stabilizing my vital signs, loading me into their ambulance. “Later, when consciousness returned, you merely remembered what you saw, in dreams that felt like wishes...and now, at last, you’re here, in Heaven, or Valhalla or whatever you want to call it.”

“What do YOU call it?”

“Usually just *this place*...though I suppose technically it’s more a dimension than a location.”

“Some sort of afterlife...” I hesitate, the words melancholy on my tongue, “...but not really paradise.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Dad shrugs. “It *can* be...I’m fairly happy, and your mother has certainly achieved her own nirvana...”

“So you say,” I counter, skeptical. “And before that, she was in *agony*...I saw her, suspended at the moment of her death...for how long? *Five years*?” All at once, I regard my father with a hot rush of anger. “Why did you wait so long to help her?”

“Your mother felt no pain or yoke of time,” Dad replies, his gaze fixed to mine, earnest yet unapologetic. “What you reckon in years, she experienced as fractions of a moment.”

“But she obviously couldn’t find her way to Heaven by herself.”

“No.”

“So why save her now? Why not five years ago?”

“Because I wanted you to be here...I wanted you to see your mother, to help you understand...”

“Understand?”

“What I do,” Dad says. “You see, I’ve found a calling of sorts in the five years since I came to this place...helping souls like your mother find their way, doing my best to protect the vulnerable ones like Mary...I believe it’s important work. *God’s* work.”

“And you’re speaking...*literally*?” I ask, in nervous anticipation of the answer.

Dad flashes his mysterious grin. “I believe so, yes.”

“But you don’t *know*,” I counter. “You don’t *know* there’s a God, even here, even now...”

“There are *many* gods here...all Delusions, as far as I can tell. And there are never-ending theories about the one *true* God and the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence...but no answers to speak of, just our endless potential to question.”

It’s too much, I realize with a definitive click of some mental switch flipping off like a circuit breaker. I simply can’t process anymore. I need to digest all that I’ve heard and experienced before continuing further. Reality has stretched beyond my ability to recognize it, and I feel a sudden, desperate need for certainty, for my wife and son, for the simple comfort of their love.

Overhead, I see wispy clouds and a twilight moon where the ceiling used to be. My hospital bed wraps itself into a hammock, rocking gently in suburban breezes lightly scented with mown grass and barbecue. My father stands beside me in the yard between the Heavenly version of my old house and its freshly imagined inground pool while Karen rounds the corner, smiling. “So I see you found your father...hey, Bob!”

But strangely, my father pays no heed, ignoring her completely. “As a Realist,” he continues, insistent, “I believe this realm is not so much an afterlife as the next stage in our greater existence, a spiritual adolescence...*a test*...”

Karen gives me a look, curious about our conversation, yet uncertain whether to interrupt. Then Pete, Jr. soars overhead, a pterodactyl. Still, my father ignores them, stepping closer, filling my vision, expanding. “In our first life, the soul is forged in the obdurate channels of a rigidly defined physical universe, while here the challenges are wholly spiritual. Do you understand?”

“Pete?” I hear Karen’s voice from somewhere behind my father’s increasing form, accompanied by a plaintive cry of “Daddy?” from Pete, Jr.

“The key to salvation is absolute faith in *truth*,” my father preaches, relentless. “*Faith*, because the only confirmation of *truth* is your own *disciplined, unyielding* perception of *reality...do you understand what I'm saying?*”

I shut my eyes, I close my ears, I block my thoughts and feelings.
Because in that moment I do understand, and the knowledge scalds.

KHAIBIT (The Shadow)

SEND TO:	DoctorLove@LAWeekly.com
SUBJECT:	[No Subject]

Dear Dr. Love:

I am a bad, terrible person. I cheated on my husband. Not once, but four times since our marriage began nine years ago, with three different men.

It gets worse. I'll probably do it again.

Worst of all, my husband is the sweetest guy you'd ever want to meet. He's smart, hard-working, successful, and he treats me better than any man I've ever known in my life. He's also a fantastic father (yes, that's right, we have a wonderful five-year-old child – I told you I was a terrible person).

So what's wrong with me? And how can I stop?

A little background might help: you see, growing up, I was always a type-A, overachieving "goody-two-shoes"—except, that is, when it came to sex. I know it's a horrible cliché, and I'm embarrassed even to be typing these words, but the truth is: ever since I became interested in boys, I've always wanted the BAD boys, the cowboys, the bikers, the punks and the thugs. I lost my virginity at 14 to a high school dropout who wound up in prison a few years later, and my taste in men didn't improve much for the next decade or so. Though I consider myself a strong, self-assured feminist, I've managed to hook up with some real Neanderthals along the way: macho, arrogant, knuckle-dragging assholes...but hot. Oh, yes. The sex was great, the relationships were terrible, sometimes borderline abusive.

And then I met my current husband (let's call him Zeke). I had just emerged from a particularly horrible relationship and was ready to swear off men for good (fat chance) when I ran into Zeke at a work-related event. While not exactly love at first sight, we had a kind of effortless chemistry right from the start, AND he was gentle, respectful, affectionate...all the things I told myself I was looking for in a man.

I was wrong.

In hindsight, I realize I was vulnerable when I met him, and just wanted someone to be nice to me for a while...NOT the rest of my life, since what I really NEED (I know now) is a happy medium, a worthy adversary, a partner in crime, a man's man, neither domineering nor dominated. And that's just not Zeke.

As I stated earlier, my husband is the sweetest, nicest guy on Earth, yet over the years I've come to think of him more as a brother and a friend than a lover...which is fine most of the time and should be enough, I know, especially since he's so good with our son. I tell myself I'm lucky to be married to a guy like Zeke. I tell myself sex isn't the most important thing in a marriage, and I'm too smart and too old to keep getting bossed around by my libido anyway. I tell myself no relationship is perfect and you can't always get what you want and don't it always seem to go you don't know a good thing 'til it's gone...

...but none of that seems to work. Emotion trumps rationality every time. I don't love Zeke as much as he loves me and I resent him for trusting me so blindly, for not suspecting my infidelities, my need for more than he can give me. I resent how guilty I feel resenting my husband for the guilt I feel when I cheat, how the resentment feeds the guilt and the guilt feeds the resentment, insatiable, pushing me further and farther away from Zeke until the next infidelity looms, inevitable. And the next.

I've already met the next man. His name is Rafael. He thinks my name is Susan.

We haven't slept together yet, but I'm sure it will happen because I want it to happen.

My parents divorced when I was young and I don't want to put my child through that uncertainty and chaos. And despite what you may think, I do love Zeke, and would never want him to suffer.

But every now and then, I need something for myself...a taste...a reminder of the possibilities I surrendered for my child and marriage.

I won't surrender everything.

Life's too short.

Thank you, Doctor, I've answered my own question.

Are you sure you want to delete?

Karen sighed and hit YES, shutting down her laptop before heading up to bed. She didn't really feel all that tired, but her in-laws were flying in the next morning and she figured she ought to get some rest. It was going to be a long day.

KA (The Double)

There are no secrets in Heaven. Anything from the past is knowable, everything else is perceivable.

This, Dad explains, is the motto of the Realists.

All along, my father has been teaching me to doubt...

...and now I recall my first dream of Karen, in this place that isn't paradise, how glad she was to see me, how proudly I explained my creation, how obediently she listened when I told her where she was.

"It's your vision of Heaven, the place where you're happiest."

By my side, in our home, awaiting my arrival.

Lies. My capacity for self-deception is vast.

Yes, father, I understand.

I thought I deserved Karen, as the fat nurse craved her own damnation. But it's been five years, and our wedding vows, after all, were only *'til death do us part*.

There was always that part of my wife I would never, could never possess. How romantic to think it wouldn't matter here. But of course.

"Pete! What's wrong?" It's the voice of the woman I love, animated by memories...how I'd expect her to act in any given situation. How I'd *want* her to act.

"It's not Karen," I say to my father.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Not Karen says, angry now, just as I'd expect her to be. "What do you mean, *it's not Karen?* I'm standing right here! *Pete!*"

Just then, I feel a tug on my leg...and a different sting, infinitely more painful. "Daddy?"

I fall to my knees and grasp my son in my arms, tears blurring my vision.

Or the illusion of tears in what passes for vision.

"Is it him?" I cry to my father, already knowing the answer. "Is it really my boy?"

"I can't tell you," my father says quietly.

But of course not. I haven't seen my son in five years, since his fifth year of life. Who would I be to him now, a barely formed memory?

I close my eyes, inhaling the sweet, familiar scent of Petey's hair, the vanilla of Karen's perfume.

I wanted them as they were, but they've both moved on without me.

I understand my father's lesson, and I hate him for it.

I open my eyes and my illusions are gone.

I am alone.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Douglas. The Salmon of Doubt. Ed. Peter Guzzardi. New York: Harmony Books, 2002. Adams had a major early impact on my philosophy and writing style with his five-volume *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* "trilogy," which offered fanciful (yet coherent) explanations for the ultimate meaning of "life, the universe and everything" – for example, the notion that the ultimate answer to the mysteries of human existence is "42," but it's up to us to figure out the question. *The Salmon of Doubt*, a collection of fiction and essays written before his untimely death in 2001, provides insight into the mind of a confirmed atheist who came to realize that God, like money, is a paradox which may not be technically "real," yet still wields considerable power.
- Albom, Mitch. The Five People You Meet In Heaven. New York: Hyperion, 2003. Although this "inspirational" novella was a beloved bestseller, I had a difficult time connecting with Albom's vision of Heaven as a place where peace is achieved by having five random people explain one's life. While I'd like to know the answers to some metaphysical questions about God and the meaning of existence in general, I feel like I've got a pretty good handle on the broad strokes of my own day-to-day life, although I suppose it's possible to read the work as a parable about the importance of self-awareness.
- Alighieri, Dante. The Inferno of Dante. Trans. Robert Pinsky. New York: The Noonday Press, 1994.
- - -. The Portable Dante. Trans. Laurence Binyon and D.G. Rossetti. Ed. Paolo Milano. New York: Penguin Books, 1978. Dante's masterpiece is one of those creations that permeates the culture; even those who've never read the epic poem are probably familiar with the Inferno's categorical circles of damnation and the exhortation to abandon all hope at the gates of hell. Like Douglas Adams' conception of God as simultaneously unreal and powerful, many of Dante's vivid imaginings have lodged in the collective unconsciousness as the definitive representation of the Abyss. This grey area between fact and imagination is one of the major elements in *Building Heaven*, where fictions can easily become "reality" for those who truly believe in them. Like most people, I was less familiar with Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, both of which were distinctly anti-climactic after the impassioned nastiness of the *Inferno*. That the final two poems of *The Divine Comedy* are markedly shorter might indicate there is simply less to say about the rarified state of virtue, as opposed to the common, multifarious nature of vice. Likewise, the imagery of damnation is considerably more detailed and vivid than Dante's rather boring descriptions of heavenly bliss (although I was interested by his depiction of Purgatory as a grimly hopeful waystation, thematically similar to those in several other works I encountered).
- Brockmeier, Kevin. The Brief History of the Dead. New York: Pantheon Books, 2006. In this moving novel, the recent dead inhabit a mysterious city as long as there is a single living person on Earth who remembers them. In clear, simple prose, Brockmeier makes a powerful statement about the interconnectedness of human lives and the only sure immortality we can expect: to be remembered. This book is an example of fiction which makes effective use of an afterlife setting to view life from a fresh, unsettling perspective.
- Burroughs, William S. The Western Lands. New York: Viking, 1987. While death permeated much of Burroughs' writing (and life), this book examines the subject in depth, riffing on the correlation between the human psyche and the ancient Egyptian concept of the seven souls Ren, Sekem, Khu, Ba, Ka, Khaibit and Sekhu, each with different needs and objectives. I find the book interesting in the way it depicts the multiple identities within a singular consciousness, as well as the disorienting nature of Burroughs' prose, mirroring the alien landscape of memory, dreams and death.
- Byron, George Gordon Lord. The Works of Lord Byron. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966.
- - -. Don Juan. New York: The Modern Library, 1949. I was familiar with numerous contemporary works concerned with the afterlife, but in researching older texts, these two Byron pieces seemed promising. As it turned out, *Don Juan* had only a brief

reference to the spurious “ghost” of the Black Friar, but *Cain* was a real find. Byron’s play, which explores Cain’s motives for the murder of Abel, is a perfect thematic companion piece to *Paradise Lost*. As discussed at length in my introduction, Byron’s writing gave me a new insight into the true loss of innocence engendered by humanity’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden, symbolic of the difficult freedoms we accept in the transition from childhood to maturity.

The Children’s Bible. New York: Golden Press, 1965. A handy reference guide to Biblical imagery and references (without all the “begats”).

Ferry, David. Gilgamesh. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992. A reference to Sumerian mythology in my research led me to Ferry’s “new rendering in English verse” of the tale of the warrior Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu, who becomes trapped in the Nether World while trying to retrieve a Drum and Drumstick. In addition to confirming the ways in which cultural myths and stories reinforce societal values, the rhythmic, repetitive verse structure is a reminder of the oral storytelling tradition and the way our most fundamental beliefs often stem from a rich bouillabaisse of fact, fiction and wishful thinking handed down through countless generations.

Gaiman, Neil. The Sandman: The Doll’s House. New York: DC Comics, 1995.

- - -. The Sandman: Dream Country. New York: DC Comics, 1995.

- - -. The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes. New York: DC Comics, 1995. These three books collect the first dozen or so issues of Gaiman’s influential *Sandman* comic book series, which reimagined (and popularized!) Death as a young, attractive Goth girl. Far from a fearsome Grim Reaper, Gaiman’s modern personification of Death is powerful, yet also kind and sympathetic to humanity. While Hell exists in Gaiman’s mythology, Death and Sleep are (literally) related, with both offering a healthy, necessary respite from the hardships of life.

Hawking, Stephen W. A Brief History of Time. New York: Bantam Books, 1988. This book attempts to bridge the unnecessary gap between science and religion, which Hawking presents as two sides of the same coin. To understand the purpose and meaning of the universe (and our place in it) is the ultimate goal of science, Hawking writes, because to do so is to “know the mind of God” (175). While I’m not scientifically-minded and could barely comprehend some of the theories discussed in the book, one actually brought me comfort (assuming I understood it correctly): the possibility that our perception of the forward movement of time is an illusion, and that in “reality,” we don’t merely pass through our lives, but rather exist in every individual moment simultaneously and forever.

Joyce, James. The Dead. Ed. William T. Moynihan. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965. In discussing the narrative shifts between third and first person in *Building Heaven* (a device I use to distinguish the accepted reality of life from the protagonist’s uncertainty about his ever-shifting perceptions in the afterlife), Professor O’Grady offered several examples from Joyce to illustrate some of the ways point of view functions in literature. This prompted me to revisit *The Dead*, since it dramatizes a major shift in the protagonist’s perception of his marriage in a way that is thematically (if not structurally) similar to the experience of the protagonist in *Building Heaven*.

McCombs, Terry. Afterlife: Encyclopedia of Afterlife Mythology in Different Cultures.
<http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Afterlife_-_Life_After_Death/id/46800> This

compendium of afterlife mythology was a useful guide to the eschatology of a wide range of cultures.

Milton, John. Complete Poems and Major Prose. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957. Like Dante’s *Inferno*, *Paradise Lost* has been absorbed by Western culture such that I was familiar with some of the work’s ideas and quotations long before I actually read the poem. *Paradise Regained*, framed as a conversation between Satan

and Jesus in the desert, lacks the tragic drama of *Paradise Lost* but continues to explore the same provocative theme: is obedience (to God, the ruling class, the status quo, conventional wisdom, etc.) the healthiest course and/or the highest human virtue? Are humans even capable of obedience, given our doubting and rebellious nature? In *Building Heaven*, I've attempted to reframe the question as a matter of perception: if we refuse allegiance (i.e., obedience) to any belief system and doubt everything, do we ultimately reject sanity and/or existence itself? This is a question I will continue to explore moving forward with the project, but my feeling is that moderation is the key (as with most things): total belief and total doubt are equally harmful, and so we must somehow do both simultaneously, accepting the reality of our beliefs and perceptions while continuously probing and challenging them for signs of change or weakness.

- O'Brien, Flann. *The Third Policeman*. London: Picador/Pan Books Ltd., 1974. Professor O'Grady suggested this Irish tale of the afterlife, which reflects Dante's circles of Hell in the way the murderous protagonist finds himself trapped in an endless, repetitive cycle of absurdity. Like *The Western Lands*, the prose captures the feeling of helpless disorientation one experiences in a nightmare, where the soul is cognizant but unfocused and diffuse. Taken together, the work of Burroughs and O'Brien serve as reminders of the unnerving otherness and surreal freedom of imagery which I hope to bring to my own descriptions of the afterlife.
- Roach, Mary. *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. This light-hearted review of current scientific thinking about the nature of death did little to assuage my fears that life is simply a meaningless accident with no higher purpose and my "soul" is nothing more than a random bunch of electrochemical reactions with delusions of grandeur. However, on a more positive note, science also cannot thus far *disprove* the existence of God and/or an afterlife. For example, one of Roach's subjects optimistically views human consciousness in terms of information content which can be measured in bits of information as part of what he calls "the (obligatory) negative entropy (i.e., energy/weight equivalent) that is necessary to allow for the nonequilibrium meta-stable physical 'quasi-steady-state' of a living/conscious biological system" (97), a.k.a., a soul, a.k.a. a tiny bit of energy which may escape the body at death. So there's hope!
- Sebold, Alice. *The Lovely Bones*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002. This book was a compulsive page-turner, strong on plot and character, though ultimately unsatisfying due to an ending that felt a bit too emotionally tidy. In addition, Sebold's treatment of the afterlife struck me as bland, lacking the power, wonder and mysterious strangeness present in some other works of supernatural fiction.
- Strindberg, August. *Six Plays of Strindberg*. Trans. Elizabeth Sprigge. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955. This play seems to unfold somewhere between life and death, in a "reality" guided by dream logic. The rules of Strindberg's world are ambiguous, but there is clearly some higher force which allows the Mummy to check the Old Man's earthly power and bring him to heel, perhaps symbolizing death's leveling effect on humanity (even without the prospect of divine judgment).
- Terkel, Studs. *Will The Circle Be Unbroken?* New York: Ballantine Books, 2002. In this oral history collection, Terkel interviews a wide spectrum of Americans (including church leaders, atheists, policemen, paramedics, veterans, a death row inmate and a Hiroshima survivor, among others) about their experiences with and perceptions of death. The cumulative effect is moving in its depiction of ordinary people soldiering through their lives despite the inescapable certainty of death. At the same time, some of the interviews are downright painful in their poignant vulnerability, like this statement by a musician which perfectly captures my own feelings on the subject: "Knowing you won't be there...it's terrifying. Just the other night I woke up at about two in the morning...And I just had this feeling of...I looked around my bedroom which is nothing special – I've got a little one-bedroom apartment. There's my little computer, my little brand-new bookcase which I put together myself...And just this terrible, terrible sinking feeling: *I don't ever want to leave this*. I'm given so much comfort by this strange little room which is nothing special whatsoever. But it's me. I can't imagine leaving it behind" (299).

Virgil. The Aeneid. Trans. C.H. Sisson. Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1986. Reading this in conjunction with *The Divine Comedy* enriched my experience of both works, highlighting the contrasts and similarities of theme and imagery. The comparison also framed questions in my mind about pantheism versus monotheism which I may explore later in *Building Heaven*, specifically the cultural effects of belief in one all-powerful, infallible deity versus the acceptance of fickle, fallible gods which may better reflect the uncertain, unpredictable, moral confusion of human behavior.

Wilder, Thornton. Our Town: A Play In Three Acts. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. This classic American play charts the cycle of life and death in the small New England town of Grover's Corners. While the first two acts are focused on the seemingly mundane details of mortal life, particularly the courtship of young lovers Emily and George, the final act focuses on the inevitable reality of death. Emily, having died in childbirth shortly after her marriage to George, is advised (like Susie in *The Lovely Bones*) to surrender her earthly life, her memory and her identity until only the "eternal part" (88) remains. This concept of the malleable nature of identity is another important aspect of afterlife mythology, raising as it does the question: what, if anything, comprises the eternal part of the soul? In other words, if I lose knowledge of myself and the circumstances of my existence, either by reincarnation into a new identity or through something as common and tragic as earthly senility, does this consciousness I currently know as myself simply vanish, even if some animating force or energy continues?

ANNOTATED FILMOGRAPHY

After Life. Dir. Hirokazu Koreeda. Perf. Arata. TV Man Union, 1998. In this Japanese depiction of the afterlife, souls arrive at a quaint, slightly ramshackle waystation where each is required to choose a single blissful memory from their life, a personal moment of nirvana they will inhabit for the rest of eternity. Those who cannot decide on a memory are forced to remain at the waystation as counselors, helping other souls to achieve nirvana. One such counselor, Takashi Mochizuki (played by an actor named Arata) reveals that he was unable to choose a memory because he could not think of a single blissful moment in his entire mortal life. Love ultimately frees him when he comes to understand his bliss as the happiness which he provided to others.

Defending Your Life. Dir. Albert Brooks. Perf. Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep. Warner Bros., 1991. In Brooks' new age, pop psychology take on the afterlife (clearly influenced by the director's life in Los Angeles), recently deceased souls are judged on the basis of courage (rather than adherence to any particular moral code). Those who lived their lives bravely are allowed to progress to a new (and presumably superior) level of existence, while those who were hindered by fear and neuroses are reincarnated back to Earth (again and again, if necessary) until they finally achieve a sufficient degree of self-actualized empowerment. In the case of Brooks' character, Daniel Miller, this inner resolve finally surfaces in his determination to stay with Julia (Meryl Streep), a woman he meets in a waystation known as Judgment City. Ultimately, for the sake of love, Daniel evolves into a stronger, more capable soul and is allowed to progress to the next stage of human existence, represented in the film by waystation counselors like Bob Diamond (Rip Torn), who use forty-eight percent of their mental capacity (as opposed to us poor, ignorant, earthbound mortals, who only use three).

Heaven Can Wait. Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. Perf. Don Ameche and Laird Cregar. 20th Century Fox, 1943. In this film, an example of the moral relativism common to modern depictions of the afterlife, a womanizing playboy (Don Ameche) tells his life story to a devilish bureaucrat (Laird Cregar) in Hell's waiting room, fully expecting to be condemned for his sinful ways. Instead, he is granted a surprise reprieve when it turns out that his good deeds outweighed his transgressions in life and, further, that he is much beloved by friends and family in Heaven, which becomes his ultimate destination.

Heaven Can Wait. Dir. Warren Beatty and Buck Henry. Perf. Warren Beatty and Buck Henry.

Paramount Pictures, 1978. In this movie, a remake of the 1941 Alexander Hall film *Waiting For Mr. Jordan*, football player Joe Pendleton (Beatty) is mistakenly transported to another heavenly waystation (this one sporting an era-appropriate Concorde jet for its recently deceased passengers) by a bumbling spirit guide (Henry). To correct the mistake, Pendleton's soul returns to Earth, taking up temporary residence in the body of a recently murdered tycoon until something better comes along. In his new identity as the tycoon, Joe remembers his previous life, friends and hobbies, but when he is ultimately transferred to a third and final identity, he takes on the memories and circumstances of the third person's earthly life, with only hints of the ephemeral, "eternal part" of his soul to remind his old friends of the Joe they used to know. This fanciful conception of souls jumping from body to body combines the egocentric, individualistic western notion of one's *specific* personality existing forever in paradise, earthly memories and relationships intact, with the eastern notion of the life force as energy, transferring from one interchangeable vessel to another through reincarnation until finally reaching the ultimate enlightenment and eternal bliss of nirvana.

What Dreams May Come. Dir. Vincent Ward. Perf. Robin Williams and Annabella Sciorra.

Polgram, 1998. I've always envisioned the ideal afterlife as a realm that could be shaped by the desires of its inhabitants, and this movie is a very close representation of that concept. I worried that it would bear *too* close a resemblance to my concept for *Building Heaven*; however, while there are some obvious similarities (principally the notion of a paradise shaped by imagination, including the possibility of a self-created hell), Ward's movie is relatively limited in the scope of its ambitions, using the supernatural elements in service of a traditional love story rather than exploring the issues of identity, morality, human nature and the search for meaning which I hope to address more fully in my novel.