

My Hysterical Friend

“Hey Bobby, I’m going to Heaven.”

I’m Bobby, and me and my friend Benjamin were sitting in the cockpit of his boat alongside E dock, the liveaboard section of the old marina.

I had to say something.

“*The Heaven?*” I asked.

“The one and only.”

“I hear it’s nice.”

“You should come.”

“Okay,” I said. “Save me a penthouse suite, not too close to the elevator, with a view of the pool and the patio bar.” I couldn’t resist pressing the sarcasm, it’s my attempt at humour. “Bye the way, Saint Benjamin, there is no such thing as *the* Heaven anymore. It’s out of fashion; outlawed, dead, shutdown and forgotten. Heaven seems to have gone. God only knows where it went, or what’s happened to the landlord, if he or she still exists - but even that’s up for debate.”

I probably shouldn’t have laughed, but I did - I was pushing him. “And what’s more,” I went on carelessly. “Even if there is a magic place up there, floating around in the clouds, with a vacancy just waiting for you – your name on a billboard and your favourite slippers put out - there’d still be only one way to get you up there. You would have to follow a lot of rules.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me.”

“Just saying, I don’t think you’re very good at that.” I shrugged. “The rules thing.”

“I’m not even sure I’d be allowed, even if there is a Heaven.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being serious. I searched his face for a clue.

“You know,” Ben said, slowly, “...I am one of those, you know.”

“Me too.”

“Nope. Sorry, you are most definitely not one of those. You’re one of those others – you know - whether you like it or not.”

“Them, those, you and me – who gives a shit.” I said.

“Too many fucking labels flying around,” he said. “But you’re not getting my point, Bobby.”

“I *was* at your Barmi.” I liked using his slang on him once and awhile.

“So was I.” He grabbed me and slapped my back, hard. “You almost got me rejected.”

“Who knew synagogues had trap doors and attics?” I said.

Ben laughed. “They all do; it’s what makes being a Jewish kid so much fun.”

I thought back to that day when my best friend became a man. “All I can say is that your aunts and uncles did the best they could. It must have been tough without your parents.”

Ben stood up suddenly and slammed the companionway hatch closed. “I’ve had enough of this. Come on, let’s get a coffee.” He got up. “I’ve got to show you something.”

“Not exactly a heavenly offer, but if you’re buying...”

We walked down to the Cuttings Corner Deli and sat at the corner table beside the potted Bamboo sticks. He ordered an Americano with a ton of sugar, and I got a Decaf - you never wanted to be *too* awake around my excitable pal.

“Are you sick?” Benjamin seemed more agitated than usual, and his normally gentle blue eyes were blazing. I could tell he was on edge.

“Just tired out. Tired of trying to think all the time.” Ben said. “Move your crap out of the way while I show you this.” He pulled a large roll of heavy paper out of some hidden place on him and spread it out across the table between us. We put a ketchup and a vinegar bottle on two corners to keep it laid out.

And that’s when my friend showed me his so-called heaven scheme, and it made no sense at all, and that’s what I loved about it. Somehow my pal, the mad scientist and self-proclaimed philosopher, was able to describe the most impossible idea of all time on a piece of paper with some bold pencil strokes and no signs of anything being erased in the process. No corrections. No changes of mind.

“It’s so obvious, Bobby.” He grabbed my hand and planted the tip of one of my fingers in the middle of the sheet. I looked down at what I had landed on. “Now picture this,” he continued. “Close your eyes Bobby, picture it with that clever mind of yours. Or your dreamy mind.”

I looked around. There was one guy at the counter chatting with Graham the owner. They were both pretending to ignore us. After a minute where I seemed to have drifted off, I heard Ben talking again.

“...but the particles, the water, under your...” He was struggling. “It’s like that ocean out there - the billions of gallons of water *supporting* you isn’t moving with you as you ride the waves over it - the ocean body of life is not following you; not going with you. When you reach a beach – the end of your trip – that’s it, you’re done.” He clapped his flying hands together. “Okay, it’s a colossal metaphor, but it works and it is real. Even though you are no longer in it, that entire universe of your own unique life still exists – still contains all the stuff you passed over. Miles deep, but still there.”

I waited silently, then after a very long moment I looked at him imploringly.

Ben clenched his fists and smashed them together.

“You follow?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Well,” Ben said. “I can not – I will not - live without knowing, without knowing where I’m going to end up and how I get there. You mentioned rules. What the fuck are the rules!”

The door opened beside us. Now there was an audience.

“Well,” I said. “I hate to break it to you, but there is still that dying thing. I’m pretty sure you still have to do that.”

“Are you crying?”

He waved me off. “I just can’t stand it, Bob.”

Sometimes when I think of Benjamin my mind travels back to the nights my wife Daaniel and I snuggled under our giant snuggling blanket in the oversized snuggling wicker chair on our wonderfully snuggly-ready old porch - at the old

house. These were the perfect summer evenings. We sipped hot, spiked apple cider and watched the bats as they performed above, just for us, in the delicious, seductive night air under the stars. The little creatures hunted and fed on the hapless bugs floating around in the beams of our flashlights. The bats were quick, like shooting stars; and they were magic, like faeries and sprites blinking from spot to spot instantly, and they were deadly accurate in their quest, totally focused and committed to the hunt.

Daani and I hoped those special evenings would never end, but when they did it was always in a soft bed, happy and in love, drifting off into a deep, dreamy sleep without a word... still snuggled up.

Benjamin was a bat. Ideas, dreams, brilliant thoughts – anything he could catch and digest – his prey never had a chance. He was truly voracious and he was always hungry.

“When I was a kid,” Ben was saying, “There were no doubts about the existence of a heaven. *The Heaven* – the playground for nice dead people. It was as real as my shiny new three-speed bike; the bicycle I know I prayed for. The place of my dreams was shown in glossy, hard-cover books and got on TV a lot. I even saw Heaven on a billboard at a gas station once. But now I’m a lot older, and apparently there isn’t a Heaven anymore. That’s what I’m told - nowhere to go. I’m disappointed; I waited a long time for this. This is no good, or as my bubbe used to say: “This won’t do.”

“I agree with your grandmother. It won’t do,” I chipped in.

My friend Ben lived on his sailboat, one of the few places left where the suffocating rules of the modern day didn’t apply, didn’t reach; a place, aside from everything else, where the free spirits of the world could live, in their version of peace. The water life and the boats were the home for the Benjamins in our lives, they were out of our way but living an existence that we, deep down, envied and secretly applauded. Benjamin and his world were the ‘what if’s’ and the ‘if only’s’ that haunted the rest of us. If he heard me saying this, I know what he would say: “That’s all bullshit garbage, Bobby. Get your head out of your rear. Live your life. Get on with it.” Or something along those lines.

I loved the man. Daani loved him too, although she loved his gal even more – probably because Jenny was a real live angel and we were just mortals lucky enough to have her around. Just like her Benjamin, she possessed a magic soul, and we knew that if we lost either one of them, we'd be crushed instantly into smaller and sadder versions of ourselves. So, we kept our eyes on our two friends, in a self-serving way, to delay what felt like the inevitable.

For some reason, Daani and I always feared the worst.

“Why didn’t you ever get married?” I asked Ben once over a couple of Ales while we sat one afternoon in the cockpit of his boat, Holly, bobbing at the wharf and lobbing random idle thoughts at each other. We’d gotten on to the subject of Holly’s new Diesel motor, a small, shiny, lightweight Japanese Yanmar that Harbour End had finally finished installing. It replaced the Atomic Four, the infamous ‘Atomic Bomb’ that had blown up more than a couple of boats we were familiar with. The older gasoline motor still existed and was still used by sailors, mostly the ones who didn’t want to fork out the cash needed for the upgrade.

The Atomic Bomb lived on, but mostly in that infamous shadow. “The having to die step is one thing,” my friend said. “But roasting alive in a gasoline fed inferno in your own boat is not the way to go, that’s not moving forward, and I will avoid that step at all costs.”

“Are you just avoiding my question or are you avoiding the whole marriage thing?” I prompted

“You’ve asked me that before, you nosy bastard.” Ben spat over the rail into the Pacific Ocean. You could still do that and not go to jail. The water was calm in the marina, so we were able to watch the drool stretch to a foot long and begin its trip out on the evening ebb. “Nobody fit in the V-Berth,” he answered and opened another couple of beers. “Until now.”

“Jenny?”

Ben produced a gappy toothed smile and pulled absently at his half shaven skin. “Years ago, whoever built this boat, built the most gorgeous woman’s heart into it. That someone knew my Jen would be here someday... and need a cozy bunk...with a cozy lover waiting in it.” He flashed a rare grin. “That’s me, Bobby, and the time has finally come.”

Once the Yanmar was up and running, Ben and Jenny were seldom seen alongside their old wharf dock inside Farmers Point. But one day in the late fall we got a call from Jenny asking us to come down and join them for a drink and some ‘beauts’, the monster sized Dungeness Crabs they always brought in from their favourite, and secret spot. Our Ben and Jen never failed us. We always feasted on the best crab when they came back, but they never told us where their secret lay.

It was a perfect afternoon in the harbour. The four of us stretched out on cushions in Holly’s sun-drenched cockpit, sipping our beers and wine, and passing our deepest thoughts and dreams to each other, tenderly, like only true friends can.

This was perhaps the happiest day the four of us ever enjoyed together, that is, until Ben came up from the cabin in his bathing suit. Before any of us could say a word, he struck a he-man pose, handed his beer to me, and cartwheeled over the side.

He was down for a long time. I figured we were in about twelve feet of water – two fathoms? – and bending over the side I could see what looked like mud being stirred up and a bright yellow rear end moving around. When Ben surfaced with a huge gasp, like a whale breaching alongside, I hauled him up and out and he shook like a dog, kneeled before Jenny, and handed her an oyster shell.

Jenny laughed. “Aw, sweetheart, thank you so much. That’s supper, right there.” She spread out her golden arms. “Come here, you hot little fisherman.” Ben got a really good squeeze out of it and Jenny got soaked, and we all laughed again.

“Open it up,” Ben said, and he showed her the oysters halves were loose.

Jenny smiled and opened the shell. A shiny ruby ring fell out into her lap.

“Well.....?”

Jenny said ‘no’.

Daani and I went home early.

The next morning, we went to the Marina to see how our friends were doing, hoping a patched-up pair would greet us. But Holly was gone. The slip was empty. When we returned to the house, Jenny was waiting at our door. She was in tears.

We got her inside and settled her down, as best we could, with a coffee and a fresh baked muffin.

“I was going to tell him, but I never had the courage and last night he wouldn’t listen or talk to me. He asked me to leave, and I went back to my place.”

We knew our part, at this moment, was simply to be with Jenny, and wait. Finally, she spoke. “I have a tumour, in my head, and it’s not getting better.”

“God...” Daani ran to her friend and buried her in her arms.

“It’s never getting better.” The tears were coming and Jenny collapsed against my wife. “I couldn’t say yes to Benjamin.”

All I did, all I could manage, was go to the two women clinging to each other in the middle of my living room floor. I moved them to the couch where they collapsed together. “I simply loved him too much. To do that to him.” Jenny was shaking her head and Daani cupped it in her hand, tried to calm her friend. “And now he’s gone.” I heard through the sobs.

A month after she came to our door, Jenny was admitted to the hospital’s Acute Care unit and Daani and I were moving her things from her cabin to a storage unit.

Three weeks later Ben showed up at our house, late at night. He looked tired and wrecked, and we brought him in. “I heard about her from a guy in Port Bitterbay, for God’s sake.” He didn’t know where to start. “It’s okay,” I told him. “You’re here.”

“What I did to Jenny...I’m pretty sure Heaven is out of the question now.” He forced a bad grin. “Where is she?”

I told him.

“I’ll go in the morning. if she’ll see me,” he said. “No, Jen has to see me.” He tried a laugh. “I had the shell with the ring stuffed in my bathing suit. I figured that looking so well endowed wouldn’t hurt my cause...shit.”

Benjamin stayed for an hour and then left for the dock.

The fire that night in the marina was the worst seen in the harbour since the blaze in 1948. The flames were seen on the other side of the strait, in Port

Kennedy, in another country; and the heat melted the insulation off a mile of local wiring and the whole town went down.

The next morning the entire downtown area, hosed down and dripping – still steaming – smelled like an old barbecue in need of cleaning. Thirteen people had died overnight.

Daani and I arrived at the hospital at the Emergency Ward at ten the next morning and were led in to where they had Ben on a stainless table hooked up to a blinking screen. We sat beside our friend in the cold glare of the overhead bulbs and listened to the roar of the huge generators outside, through the thick concrete walls, fighting to keep the town and its hospital alive.

“It was one of the older boats with the gas engine,” the Doctor said.

“The Atomic Bomb,” I said.

“I guess...he somehow got a mother and her baby off, they’re in the hostel...then he went back for others...”

The chirping from the EKG turned into one unbroken, sick moan and the line became flat as it ran across the screen until the peaks and valleys disappeared and there was nothing. The screen blinked and the line was there, but the blips had vanished - nothing left but the line advancing across the screen, running off the right side of the screen and then starting back at the left.

“He’s gone.” The doctor motioned and a nurse pulled the sheet up and over Ben’s shoulders and then gingerly over his face.

I couldn’t help myself. “I just watched my best friend die!” I heard my own voice cry out, shrill and painful. “He’s dead on a metal slab and I’m sitting here watching a fucking TV. I feel like giving the screen a good smack to get the show back on.” I wiped at my face with a shirtsleeve. “I’m sorry, but I just witnessed a man’s life torched, erased and deleted.”

I felt someone behind me.

I looked up. “What do we do now?” I said.

“I really am so sorry,” the doctor said. “But all the vital signs have disappeared.”

“But it’s not flat.” I put my finger on the screen and ran it straight across below the flat line. “Okay, that’s flat, but it’s not level.”

The nurse walked up. “What’s going on?”

“The line’s not flat.”

I caught the doctor roll his eyes.

“What the....”

Something shattered on the floor behind me; someone had dropped something.

“Get her out of here,” the doctor said over his shoulder.

The black line was moving across the white screen as it should, but as I watched, it was ever so gently angling up, lifting up, like a plane rolling down a runway. Taking off. Every time the screen flashed and refreshed, the line continued upward toward the far corner – ever so gently, but steadily.

The small concrete-block room was silent and cold.

“He’s dead, right?” It sounded painfully crude, but I needed to ask.

The doctor pushed some gauze wrap aside, peeled one of Ben’s eyelids back and shone a small flashlight into the exposed socket. He gripped a wrist.

“Totally gone,” he said.

“There’s nothing wrong with your machine?”

The doctor pulled his mask down. “Why,” he asked in a weary voice.

“That line is going up as it goes across.”

“Sorry, it’s not something the EKG could do, even if we wanted it to. The pixels in the screen can only generate that horizontal line, and the blips and peaks that you were seeing earlier. It is a simple screen, not even close to what your television has in it.

The doctor put a hand on my shoulder. “There is nothing to look for. You are not seeing what you think you are seeing.” The doctor turned the screen face away from my view. “You’re not the first to confuse what is going on during these last moments of a loved one’s life. It’s a form of deep hysteria and it’s perfectly normal.”

The only sound other than the solid death beep coming from the EKG was the sound of glass bits being swept up behind me.

“Can we just stay here for a minute.”

The room emptied – the overhead light dimmed.

I could only see a bit of Ben’s face through the thin sheet and the layers of cloth bandages he’d been wrapped in to keep his skin on.

I turned the monitor back.

“Holy crow Benny, just look at you go - you’re on your way. God speed my friend...you’re soaring.”

“Is there something going on?” Daani was at my back, pressing and kneading my shoulders. I turned to her, and she looked down into my eyes for what seemed like a long time.

“Jenny died.” She said, looking down at her phone.

I felt a sudden shudder run through me. “When?”

“Six minutes ago.”

“Let’s go now. Get a coffee,” I said. “There is something I’ve never told you...he wouldn’t let me.

“Something a hell of a lot stronger than coffee please,” Daani said.

I looked back to the screen and the advancing line. I can’t believe I smiled, but the thought came to me, at that moment, in that awful room. I couldn’t hold it back. “I’m glad you took Jenny along with you, my perfect friend. I hope they’re ready for you up there.”

It’s ten years to the day since Benjamin and Jenny passed and I decided to finally write this all down. Daani and I still live in the old house with our flashlights and bats and cushions. She retired from the library last year, but I still putter around the town cleaning eavestroughs and cutting grass – it’s a better living than you might expect.

We found some family references in Jen's belongings when we cleaned out her cottage, but only an uncle in Sweden responded to our contacts and he was too old and frail to make the trip overseas. Benjamin had no family left – I already knew that.

The young lady with the baby that Ben saved was also very pregnant at the time of the fire, and her young son drops by now, once and awhile, to say hi and help with chores. His name is Benjamin.

Ben's crabbing buddy Garnett took us out to Paradise Island on a beautiful morning last August. As we rounded the point at the Park, our skipper pointed to an outcropping of pink rock coming up. He slowed the boat to a crawl, watching the shoreline intently until bringing us to a stop about a hundred yards off the shore.

“This is it,” Garnett said. “This is their secret spot.” He laughed. “Yes, they did some crabbing here, but we were all pretty sure the fishing was secondary.” Garnett had a face like a worn baseball mitt and his squinty eyes were buried deep in the leather flesh. But I could see the tears that he was wiping away. “They were so in love, I’ll tell you. It would have been embarrassing if it hadn’t been so fucking beautiful.” He wagged his head. “Sorry, I talk awful...”

Daani dropped Jenny’s ashes, and I did the same with Ben’s at the same time, side by side, into the quiet bay water. We watched as they mingled and sank together, down to where the oyster shells waited.

“Better go,” Garnett said. “There’s a chop building up out there and we’re losing the light.”

That made me look up.

The end