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My Hysterical Friend

“Do you ever think about Heaven?”

“I used to.” I said.

“What happened?”

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

Ben was waiting for me to say something.

“*The* Heaven?” I asked.

Ben nodded. “You should come,” he said.

“You mean I should ‘go’, I said. “Huge distinction there. But before any of that, I need help at the Parson’s place.”

“The roof? Again?”

“No. The shed. It fell down.”

“Sure, I’m in; I still owe for the motor.”

“I’ll pick you up. Early.”

“How early?”

“Too early.”

Ben yawned big-time...“Shit,” he said. He liked dramatics. His favourite movie was Pirates of the Caribbean.

“Anyway, there’s is no such thing as Heaven anymore,” I said. “It’s out of fashion. The place is outlawed, dead, shutdown and forgotten. Can’t say the same thing for Hell, though - it still seems to be a hot item.”

My friend wasn’t enjoying the chit-chat anymore. I could always tell when Ben and I should move on from car-wreck topics like this one. But when we got one wheel stuck in the muck, it was as difficult to get out of the quicksand as it was easy sliding into it in the first place. Sometimes we simply had to talk it through to get it over with.

“Are you saying Heaven has been forsaken, banished and whatever uncommunicated is,” he said; and I probably shouldn’t have laughed, but I did - that was my weakness - and I was really pushing my luck this time. “And what’s more,” I went on stupidly. “Even if there is a magic palace floating around up there in the clouds, just waiting for you to check in, there’d still be only one way to get you up there. You would have to follow the rules - like being dead - for example.”

“I’m not even sure I’d be accepted up there.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being serious. I searched his face for a clue. Nothing. Just a twitch appeared in the zipper of stitches at the corner of his mouth. “From my deckhand days,” he’d told me once. “A lot of nasty shit lying around a fishboat at sea. You have to be really careful. I wasn’t.”

“I’m one of those,” Benjamin said. “Do people like me even qualify?”

“I don’t think *I’m* a candidate.” I was trying to keep up.

“Maybe not, but you might be; you’re in the running. You’re qualified...I’m not. That’s the point.”

“What’s your problem, then?”

“I’m a Jew, for Christ’s sake.”

“That’s a funny way of putting it.”

“I know; I figured you’d like that one,” he said.

“I *was* at your Barmi. Remember?” I also 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 hidden trap doors and spooky attics with secret compartments?”

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 there.”

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 since you’re buying...”

We walked down to the Cuttings Corner Deli and sat at the corner table beside the potted Bamboo sticks. Benjamin ordered an Americano with a ton of sugar, and I got a lukewarm decaf for twice the price of his. I tried to stick to low levels of caffeine around my pal; I never wanted too much stimulation around him - there could be serious consequences.

“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 a scheme. It made no sense at all. I loved it. Somehow my pal, the mad scientist and dockside 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. No trap doors.

“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, and think with that clever mind of yours, or your normal one, if you prefer.”

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 trillions of gallons of water around you and beneath you isn’t moving with you as you ride your life like a surfboard over the surface from the beginning - when you’re born fresh - to the very end...and your last breath.” He took a deep breath, not his last, and kept going. “You and I are part of that life-time reservoir, the vast ocean sea, but we are also not, at the same time.” He stopped and scratched at the palm of his right hand as if searching for the source of an agonizing itch. “You’re like a leaf bobbing on a ripple. The depths below you don’t move. As your minutes and days and years pass, you drift across the surface. You wallow in the troughs; you dance on the crests.”

Ben looked at me suddenly, sharply, as if to reinforce how important the last point was. “When you reach a beach, or a rock, or a reef, you’re torn from the sea; ripped from your life. That’s it – the end of your trip - you’re done aging.” He clenched his hands together. I realized at that moment how well I knew my friend; he was trying to settle himself.

“Watch your coffee!”

He jerked an elbow in.

“Okay, it’s still just a theory,” he said. “But I’m betting everything on it.” I nodded. “I get it, go on,” I said, and he continued. “I’m all in - my life and soul are on the table - we only get one spin of the wheel, right? Bobby, if there is an afterlife, I want one. So. Even though we are no longer in it, that entire universe of our unique life still exists and carries on...or something like that...the details are fuzzy.”

Ben was accelerating. I waited quietly.

“It’s all here clear as day on this sheet.” He clenched his fists and brought them down on the table. We lost both the coffees. “You’re not done when you hit the

rocks. The wave crests and breaks and your voyage is done. But it's not all over; only your connection to the ocean is over. That's all. You follow?"

Sometimes I just can't help myself. "Does that mean that bad puns live forever?" I asked, looking around at the gathering throng in the café. The throng was looking back. "We're just talking...right?" I said to my upset friend.

"Yah. Sure," Ben said quickly. "But I'm telling you, my friend, I can't live without it, without knowing where I'm going to next and how I'm going to get there. You talk about rules, Bobby." His hands were spread palms up across the table and his sheet of drawings and figures. "What the fuck are those rules and where's the guy who made them up?"

"*He* could be a gal."

"No, he couldn't. It's a man for sure; a woman wouldn't be so stupid and lazy to let it go to hell like this."

"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."

Benjamin rolled up the paper, pushed his chair back and walked out the door. "I didn't think you'd laugh at me." I heard from outside.

"And I thought you were paying," I said to the empty table. Graham brought me a mop and a rag. "No charge for Benny," he said. "It's okay."

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 snuggle-ready old porch at our very old house. These were the perfect summer evenings. We sipped hot, spiked apple cider and watched the bats as they performed overhead, 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; 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 our soft bed; happy and in love, drifting off into a deep, dreamy

sleep without a word... still snuggled up. I was lucky. I was in love. I had heaven on earth.

Benjamin was an anxious 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,” my friend told me once, “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 prayed for - and got. 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 very disappointed; I waited a long time for this. This is no good, or as my Bubbe used to say: “Oy! This won’t do.”

“I always agree with grandmothers. She’s right, it won’t do,” I said. “But...”

“But what but?...I just wish she was here; that they were all here, Bobby...I really do.”

“Come on, Ben. Tell me. What happened?”

“You know I’m not going to tell you,” he said.

My friend lived alone on a sailboat, one of the few places left where the normal rules didn’t exist; the modern day didn’t apply on the wharves, didn’t encroach. The docks and anchorages and mooring buoys were a place where the remaining free spirits of this world lived in their version of peace. The water life and the boats were the home for the Benjamins in our lives, they were out of sight, out of the way, but living an existence that we, deep down, envied. Benjamin and his world were the ‘what if’s’ and the ‘if only’s’ that haunted the rest of us.

I loved the man. Daani loved him too, although she loved his gal even more - probably because Jenny was a living angel and we were the mortals lucky enough to have her close to us. Just like her Benjamin, she was a magic soul, and we knew that if we lost either one of them, we would lose the magic.

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 Canadians 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 be dead step is one thing,” my friend said. “But my personal incineration is not an option I’m considering, and that’s why I got the little diesel. I’m being careful this time.”

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

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 created Holly built Jenny’s heart right into every plank, stringer, beam - and every inch of rigging.” He patted and stroked the teak rail beside him. “That miracle-worker also knew my Jen would be here someday and need a cozy bunk and a cozy hunk to go with it.” He grinned. “That’s me, Bobby. My time has come.”

“Hunk? Really?”

“I think she might love me, Bobby.” He winked. I’d never seen the man wink, just blink. Benjamin was a blinker.

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 they always brought in from their favourite

and very secret spot. Our Ben and Jen never failed us. We always feasted on the best crabs when they came back to the dock, but they never betrayed their secret.

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 back and forth to each other, nicely, like true friends do. It was poetry.

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 into the harbour.

He was down for a long time. I figured we were in about twelve feet of water, 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 a large oyster.

Jenny laughed. "Aw, sweetheart, thank you so much. That's our happy hour right there." She spread out her golden arms. "Come here, you hot little boat cushion." Ben got a really good squeeze out of it and Jenny got soaked, and we all laughed.

"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 him alone. I went back to my place. I wish I hadn’t.”

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 scooped her up.

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

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. “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 local hospital’s Acute Care unit and Daani and I were moving her things from her cabin to a storage unit.

Three weeks later. Benjamin 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 sour grin. “Where is she?”

I told him.

“I’ll go in the morning. if she’ll see me,” he said. “No, Jenny 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 barbeque in need of cleaning. Six people had died overnight.

Daani and I arrived at the hospital's Emergency Ward at ten the next morning and were led in to where they had Ben on a stainless-steel table hooked up to a blinking screen. We sat beside our friend under the cold glare of the overhead bulbs; battered and stunned by the roar coming through the thick concrete walls from outside - from the huge generators 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 don't understand," I said in a weak, broken voice I didn't recognise. I really couldn't comprehend a thing as the doctor and the nurse fiddled with the sheets and the sudden corpse. They looked at each other, but not at me while they worked. "He's dead on a metal slab," I said, "and I'm sitting here watching TV...and I feel like slamming the god damned screen to get my favourite show back on."

I wiped at my face with a shirtsleeve. "I was never laughing, Ben. You were just scaring me."

I felt someone behind me.

I looked around. "What do we do now?"

"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 angled up, lifting 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, almost imperceptibly onward and upward.

The small concrete-block room was suddenly dead quiet and cold. The generators had cut out.

“That’s it?” 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. “He’s left us.”

“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 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...and cruel.”

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.

I turned the monitor back around.

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

“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 get out of here. I need a coffee,” I said. “There is something I haven’t told you, he wouldn’t let me.”

“I need alcohol,” Daani said.

I looked back to the screen and the advancing line. I can’t believe I smiled. “I’m just glad you came back for your angel,” I said as quietly as I could. “But you did; you took her with you, and I get it now. I just wish you’d mentioned you were passing through Hell to do it.”

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; but he's got a bronze plaque with his name on it now, at the top of the new marina ramp. I had a good head shot of him taken in Holly's cockpit and they etched that into it; and I must say, the Harbour Authority did a nice job on the rendition of my friend...right down to the stitches.

The young lady with the baby that Ben saved drops by from time to time to say hi to us oldsters, and her young boy comes around, when he can, to help with chores and sample Daani's baking. 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 fifty feet off a small, secluded beach.

"This is it," Garnett said, as he killed the motor and we drifted. It was suddenly quiet and peaceful except for the gull perched on the bow, chuckling and muttering, and the early crickets piping up onshore. I relished the perfect moment. The boat began to turn its nose in the tide. "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 leathery flesh, but I could easily 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, and together the remains flowed side by side into the quiet water of the bay. I watched as the faint cloud in the water below us came together and sank slowly to where the crabs and oysters waited. It felt like I was waking from a dream I didn't want to let go of, but I also knew the day had come - Benjamin and Jenny had gone somewhere else.

I felt Garnett's troller gently rising and settling beneath my feet. "Sometimes Madeline, my little boat here, breathes like she's dreaming...I swear." Garnett said.

“Maybe the old girl’s saying goodbye to them. They were friends.” He looked away. “We were friends too.”

After a little while, Garnett cupped his eyes with a hand and looked to the east. “Better go,” he said. “There’s a chop building up out there and we’re losing the light.”

I looked up.