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*“Looks Like I Made It
to Heaven!”*



DEATH WAS A SYMPHONIC, SENSORY ASSAULT UNLIKE anything Carolina, Eddie, or Alexander could ever have imagined.

For Carolina, the shock and physical impact of her body slamming the ground was followed by a throaty gurgling akin to air pockets competing with water as a clog clears a large pipe. She felt like she was the last drop of water swirling down the drain of a giant bathtub.

For Eddie, as he lay sprawled in a field, gasping, the final breath left his body like air being expelled from a high-pressure pneumatic gun. And the sound, heard not by his ears but deep inside his fading brain, was that of a child slurping the last glob of Jell-O from a bowl.

For Alexander, lying on his deathbed, he felt his soul being sucked out of the world, accompanied by the high-pitched sound and intense pressure of a hand placed over the hose of a powerful, industrial vacuum cleaner, only to feel the hand quickly release and squealing air rush back down the tube.

In the next instant (or hour or day, for time has no meaning where they were), all three of them found themselves somersaulting in slow motion inside a colorless, soundless, smell-less, gravity-less realm. They were disoriented and barely aware — but strangely, this expanse of nothingness did not make them afraid.

All at once they were pulled into smooth, wide, transparent tubes of gleaming, white-hot brightness. They heard and felt an enormous “whoosh” as they were thrust upward — to where, they did not know. As they sped along, they began to feel an embryonic warmth and peace beyond any human experience. They were uncertain if they were conscious or even breathing. They could see no one, hear no one, but it didn’t matter: they somehow knew they were going home.

Suddenly, the tops of the tubes grew wider as Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie shot upward into an atmosphere of swirling cobalts and azures. One after the other they set down gently on a white, flaky substance that looked like frost, only it wasn’t cold. As their feet settled on the soft ground, they were overwhelmed by deep feelings of unconditional love.

The air was filled with the pleasant and soothing redolence of gardenia, jasmine, rose, and lavender, perfumed and oxygen-rich.

Floating on the gentle breeze were sweet yet triumphant melodies, as if the Vienna Philharmonic was welcoming elite guests in a fancy courtyard outside a lavish, black-tie ball.

As far as the eye could see, beautiful, sparkling, diamond-like sculptures were scattered randomly throughout the white landscape: it looked like Michelangelo and Chihuly had collaborated for an exhibit on the grounds of the Louvre. And in the distance a small, bewildered group of people gathered around another white tube, which had brilliant golden rays shooting from it. The souls by the tube were holding hands and bowing their heads in prayer.

The three new arrivals gazed at their surroundings in wonder.

"Is this Gan Eden?" Alexander marveled.

"Has my mother died? Is she here? Why am *I* here?" Carolina said, confused.

"Looks like I made it to Heaven — awesome!" Eddie celebrated.

As they took in the sights, sounds, and fragrances around them, they all came to the same conclusion: *this* is Heaven, *their* Heaven. This was indeed the reward for all their good deeds on Earth and the start of an eternity of bliss.

They looked to their left and noticed a line of people of all ages, shapes, sizes, and ethnicities. The ribbon of humanity stretched far into the distance, across the soft, white plain. But the statues, smells, and music that soothed them were momentarily forgotten when they saw the line's destination: two awe-inspiring Gates covered with gold, diamonds, pearls, and emeralds, all shining with the radiance of a thousand Northern Lights. That must be the entrance to Heaven itself!

Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie looked at each other. "I suppose the logical thing to do would be to join the others in line," Alexander

said, as he touched his body to see if it all was real. Then he bowed slightly and gestured to Carolina as he added, “Ladies first.”

Carolina blushed and walked over to stand at the end of the line. Eddie grinned and said, “I’m ready for a little heavenly reward! Aren’t you two?” And he took the spot directly after Carolina.

Alexander smiled slightly and got into line behind them. “To tell you the truth, I’m a little surprised at how this looks,” he remarked. “I’m Jewish, even though I was never very observant until my later years. But I vividly remember my mother telling me that Heaven would be like the Garden of Eden. And the angel guarding the Gates, Hadraniel, was supposed to be 3.4 million kilometers tall.” He chuckled. “Can you imagine?”

“Nah, I’ll bet it’s St. Peter up there at the Gates,” Eddie replied with confidence. “He’s gonna look in his big book where all our righteous deeds are recorded and then open that glorious entrance for us. I assume you guys did good on Earth like me to get here, right?” Eddie paused as they nodded in agreement. “I’ll tell you, if the outside of Heaven is this great, how much better do you think it’s gonna be on the other side? I can’t wait!”

Alexander turned to Carolina. “What about you, miss — what do you believe awaits us at the end of this line?”

Carolina smiled nervously. “I don’t know,” she said, looking down at her tattered dress. “Truthfully, I thought it would be a long time before I... died, so it didn’t seem really important to think about God or Heaven. But maybe we’ll see the souls of our loved ones waiting on the other side of the Gates, and they will greet us and escort us to our new home.” Then she added with hope, “No matter what, I hope to hug my *mamãe* soon. She’s been sick for so long and she’s such a devout Christian — she deserves to be in Heaven. I wonder if

she's already here." She turned toward Eddie. "Do you have anyone you'd like to meet?"

Eddie shrugged. "I worked with homeless people in Butte, Montana, for nearly 20 years. I was the 'Homeless Whisperer' — that's what they called me, anyway — and I've witnessed a lot of people pass on." He paused for a minute and said thoughtfully, "It's funny, though: sometimes you see a man who's been living on the streets, he's smelly and dirty, and people walk past him every day. But when you take the time to look in his eyes, you feel that Jesus Himself is gazing back at you. Those are the people I do remember." Then he shook his head and added briskly, "But I never really cared to get to know many of the people I got off the streets. I just focused on the number of homeless I saved, not who they were."

Carolina turned to Alexander. "How about you? Is there anyone waiting for you?" she asked.

He smiled at her — she was so young and his 94 years on Earth had given him a unique perspective. "I was born in Auschwitz, and my life's work was to help Germans and Jews heal the wounds from World War II and the Holocaust," he answered. "I made a difference for many people, but like Eddie, I wasn't that close to my clients. I *would* like to see *meine Mutter*, though, and perhaps the midwife who delivered me in Auschwitz, and the SS officer who allowed me to live. I'd like to thank them for taking care of me."

As he half-listened to Carolina and Alexander, Eddie glanced back, then looked forward with a puzzled expression. He cleared his throat and said, "Hey, guys... I may be imagining this, but I swear that little boy with the short brown hair was behind me in line, and now he's in front of us. And the woman who seems like she was homeless: she was definitely several spots behind us, and she's ahead

of us now. What's going on? I didn't see them cut in front of us, did you?"

Alexander and Carolina looked at the line and, sure enough, most of the souls in the queue kept moving slowly toward the towering, glistening Gates — but the three of them were standing still. And amidst the feelings of love, warmth, and peace that had filled them since they arrived outside the Gates of Heaven, the first tendrils of doubt crept into their minds and hearts.

Why wasn't their moment of salvation getting any nearer?

All at once they heard a new, melodious sound in the air. High over their heads, Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie saw what appeared to be ethereal angels, gracefully floating and flying around the puffy, silver and white clouds suspended delicately in the deep blue sky. The comforting sound of angels' wings filled the air, reverberating through the temperature-less atmosphere. Tiny cherubs fluttered by, cradling baskets of fruit. One even appeared to be softly strumming a harp. The scene reminded Carolina of images she had seen above the altar in the church she had attended at home in Rio de Janeiro.

Without warning, one of the beautiful angels above their heads began to morph into a darker, sinister-looking figure. Its wings slowly turned from snow-white to rust-colored, and the feathers disappeared, revealing bat-like, membranous webbing beneath. The angel's features and body coarsened, transforming into a creature that resembled a cross between an enormous pterodactyl and a fur-covered flying monkey from *The Wizard of Oz*. Only this fearsome beast had curled horns protruding from its skull. Razor-sharp teeth jutted upward from the pronounced underbite of its hideous lower jaw.

As Alexander, Carolina, and Eddie watched in horror, another angel mutated into the same evil form, then another. "This can't be

possible!" Alexander gasped. "My God, no!" Carolina wept. Eddie rubbed his eyes, saying, "Maybe it's just a trick meant to get us to move faster toward the Gates, right? Let's gooo!" And he pulled on the arms of the other two as he urged them forward.

The line was indeed moving faster now, but to the three of them, the radiant, jewel-covered Gates still seemed more than two football fields away. "We're not getting any closer!" Carolina wailed.

Suddenly, one of the rust-colored, fiendish ex-angels hurtled down from the sky and plucked an auburn-haired woman from the line some 50 feet ahead of them. She let out a blood-curdling scream as the beast, whose wingspan reached nearly 40 feet, yanked her into the air, its claws piercing her skin. Her arms flailed as pieces of her long hair were ripped from her scalp and drifted to the ground like tiny, ragged parachutes. The bloodied clumps rained down next to other souls in line.

The woman's legs swung wildly side to side as the monster zig-zagged through the air, its three-inch-long talons embedded deep in her shoulders. Her screams rose higher and higher in pitch as the creature sank its teeth into her arms, legs, torso — any part of her body within reach of its ravenous mouth. Carolina turned and dove toward Alexander, who put a protective arm around her, all the while keeping his eyes focused on the terrifying bloodbath occurring over their heads. In shock, they realized these were no heavenly angels: these were creatures from Hell.

The beast hovered in the air for a moment, then dropped its prey into a giant black hole that had appeared in the meadow's soft, white surface. The sound of the woman's screams slowly faded as she vanished from this plane of blissful existence.

"What the hell is happening?" Eddie protested. "No one else

seems to be freaking out about this. Are we the only ones who can see it?" Indeed, as they looked around, most people in line were completely focused on reaching their heavenly promise. Only a few others, like them, looked upward with expressions of terror at the spectacle of the flying, monstrous creatures scanning the ground for their next victims.

"Screw this, I'm not standing out here in the open," Eddie declared, his eyes darting from side to side. He took off running, away from the line and toward the closest of the crystal trees about a hundred feet away. Just as he reached the base of the sculpture, he was jerked backward by huge talons, like those of a gigantic bird of prey. The claws pierced deep through his skin into the bone of his shoulders.

Eddie started to scream, and once he started, his cries only grew more deafening. He could feel the beast's ice-cold breath on his face, carrying with it the smell of rotting flesh. Excruciating pain shot through him; every second it felt like he was being flayed alive by dull razors. Ribbons of skin peeled away from his body, falling toward the ground, as he was pulled this way and that by the gusts of air produced by the creature's enormous wingspan. "Lord, what have I done to deserve this?" he wailed. The batlike horror roared in triumph and lofted Eddie into the air like he weighed nothing at all, carrying him higher and higher.

Alexander stood looking upward, his arm still around Carolina's shoulders, transfixed by the sight of what had happened to Eddie. Then a long, scaly tentacle clamped itself around Carolina's waist and yanked her away from Alexander's side. She screamed, and Alexander reacted quickly, grabbing both of her arms with his own. "No! You can't have her!" he shouted at the enormous creature, whose face

resembled a rabid vulture, its teeth snapping at the young girl's head.

Carolina sobbed hysterically, holding onto Alexander's hands for dear life as she was being torn between safety and terror. Then the beast sank its teeth into her neck. "Mamãe, help me!" she shrieked and, sobbing in pain and despair, she let go of Alexander and was pulled backward into the monster's scaly, slimy embrace. Her captor shook her like a wolf with its prey, and as she continued to scream, it soared upwards with the girl in its unyielding grasp, vanishing into the clouds with Eddie.

Alexander stood alone, dumbfounded, still not processing what was happening. He looked around and saw that the line of people heading to the sacred Gates now appeared to be miles away. Then he felt himself enveloped from behind in a viselike grip of not one, not two, but four bony, leathery arms, each with small, sharp, scalding barbs that permeated his torso. A diabolic voice laughed cruelly in his ear. "Did you really think you could escape your fate?" it mocked.

Alexander felt himself being dragged upwards into the sky as the beast's red-hot nails buried themselves deeper into his flesh, burning as if they were coated with caustic lye. With each second the fire spread throughout his body, his every cell exploded with excruciating pain. Tears streamed down Alexander's lined face as he screamed his throat raw, praying, "*HaShem*, why have you forsaken me?" But the monster's grip only tightened as its malicious laugh grew louder and louder.

They flew straight up through a cloud bank. Alexander felt the cold, wet mist blanketing him, giving him a fleeting respite from his pain. Then all three captors released their prey at the same instant, and Eddie, Carolina, and Alexander plummeted toward the soft, white plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. For a moment,

the same thought crossed their minds: "I'm free!" But right before they reached what they hoped would be a safe landing, inferno-like gusts of scalding air blasted upwards from black holes that opened up in the white expanse directly beneath them. Each hole had the appearance of a dark, gaping mouth lined with wickedly sharp, serrated teeth.

The terrified trio could see the bottom of these pitch-dark tunnels, but they felt themselves inexorably being sucked into the abyss. Helplessly, they flung their arms wide, reaching out to the others in a last-ditch attempt to save themselves. But it was no use. With the knife-like walls tearing at what remained of their flesh, they plunged headfirst into the inky blackness, their final, desperate cries cut short as the holes closed as abruptly as they had appeared.

It was the start of a permanent journey Eddie, Carolina, or Alexander never thought they would take — into the depths of Hell itself.