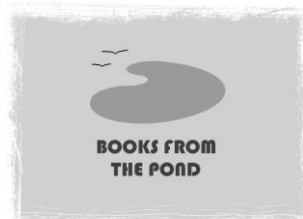




# A War With God

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**Herb Hughes**



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# Chapter 1

He hadn't been dead long. A few minutes at the most, maybe just seconds. He slapped his hands against his chest several times. He felt solid enough.

Although he didn't remember changing them, his clothes were different. He was no longer wearing the light blue hospital gown with tiny flowers sprinkled across it as though he had been sprayed with magic dust by a wandering garden sprite. Instead, he was wearing the suit of his dreams: a silky smooth white suit with a hint of cream and a long-sleeved white dress shirt. No tie. The collar and top two buttons of the shirt were unbuttoned. The sleeves had French cuffs, and the cuff links were brilliant, sparkling diamonds; *very large* brilliant, sparkling diamonds.

Plus the suit had another great benefit. His butt was not on public display like it was with the hospital gown.

The slight contrast in the creamy white of the suit and the white-white of the shirt was exactly how he had seen it in his dreams, his private visions of himself that he had never told anyone about. And he was barefooted, too. How many times had he seen himself in his dreams, his good dreams, barefooted and walking along the beach in that very suit, a beautiful woman by his side, both of them with that 'knowing' smile like the models in the advertisements in magazines? The dreams had started during college, and he knew he could not count all the times he had seen that vision, both when he was sleeping and when he was awake, daydreaming, but it was a lot.

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In real life, back before he died, he could not wear the suit of his dreams. He needed to have a flat stomach for the suit to fit like it did in his visions, and he hadn't had a flat stomach since high school. *When I lose that last twenty pounds*, he told himself so many times, *I will find that suit if I have to go halfway around the world. I'll buy it and walk along the beach in it, barefooted.*

He never quite got around to losing that last twenty pounds before it turned into the last thirty pounds. Then thirty pounds turned into forty. Losing forty pounds was too difficult, especially for a computer programmer who spent his life flying a desk.

But now he was dead, and his stomach was flat, and he was wearing the suit of his dreams.

He was standing... where? He was definitely not on a beach. There was a long, dim hallway in front of him with a bright light at the far end. The hallway felt like a tunnel and triggered a memory. What was it? *Oh, yes! Near-death experiences.* He had read about them. Now he was having one. He had died, and there was some sort of afterlife because here he was, looking down the hallway tunnel so many others had talked about. His stomach was flat, and he was wearing the suit.

What would be waiting at the end of the tunnel? A beach? A beautiful woman? His wife had been beautiful in her youth and looked good even now, but it wouldn't be her. She was still alive, still back on Earth. And she wasn't the beautiful woman in his dreams because the visions had started years before he met his wife.

He thought about it a moment. Those who had told of near-death experiences had not died, at least not permanently. They were only dead for a few seconds or a mere handful of minutes at the most. They came back and told their doctors and friends what they saw. Some wrote magazine articles about it. That's

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why they called it “near” death. The ones who stayed dead did not come back to tell their stories.

Perhaps he was having a near-death experience. Perhaps he might yet go back to his real life or, more accurately, his “former” life, but he hoped not. He did not want to write an article about what was happening to him. He did not want to talk to his doctor or to friends and relatives about it. He did not want people asking him about the suit he was wearing. So what if it was flamboyant? So what if it was out of character for him? He liked it. And, frankly, it was none of their business. Besides, if he went back, he would still be dying of cancer. So the return to life would only be temporary. A “near-life” experience?

No, there was no reason to go back. He did not think he would. That was fine with him. After all, this new existence might be his “real” life. Life on Earth was possibly just some sort of incubation period before the forever life in heaven. He was ready to move forward, to see what heaven was all about.

He started walking, fast so he could get to the end of the tunnel quickly, before he could be snatched back to his deathbed in the hospital. Even though he was pretty sure it was over, that he was not going back, he didn’t want to take a chance.

As he moved forward, the hall walls became jittery, blurry. When he stopped and turned his head to the side to look directly at a wall, it was stable again. He reached out to touch it, but it was beyond his fingertips. Leaning forward, he stretched his arm out, but the wall remained slightly beyond his wiggling fingers. He took a short, casual step toward the wall then stretched out his hand once more. The same thing. It was beyond his reach by the same amount as before. He took another step, a large step, and the same thing happened. *Some sort of endless loop*, he mumbled to himself.

He wanted to investigate further, but he did not have time for endless loops. Investigating the hallway walls meant he was

not moving forward. He was ready to see what the light at the end of the tunnel, heaven it had to be, was all about. So he ignored the jittery walls as he started moving forward again. There was no good reason to waste any more time in the tunnel than necessary.

When he reached the mouth of the tunnel, he slowed to a casual walk then stepped out into the light and stopped. The jittery, blurry walls disappeared altogether. He turned all the way around, and the hall was not behind him. It was gone. Good. He was almost certain he would not go back to his deathbed on Earth. Not now.

At the same time, however, there was no beach, no ocean, and no beautiful woman. He was still wearing the suit, but there was no sand for his bare feet to sink into. There was something for sure, but, frankly, he had no idea what he was looking at.

He was in what he thought was a room, but it was the largest room he had ever seen. Sparkles of light zoomed past him, above him, beside him, in front and behind. They were everywhere, like a slow-motion fireworks display, but they were nothing more than light. There was no bulb or any type of device for emitting light. They were simply little globes of pure light in all the colors of the spectrum. They floated through the air, most above his head, moving in opposite directions but never colliding. They were moving fast, but not so fast he couldn't follow them.

He looked up. The ceiling was fifty or sixty feet above. Very high. He looked around. The room was rectangular, approximately a hundred feet wide and maybe two or three hundred long. He wasn't sure. He had never been good at estimating distances. But it was a long way in every direction, like no room he had ever seen on Earth.

Maybe it was a regular-sized room, and he was smaller? Since he was dead, anything was possible.

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The room was filled with fourteen humongous rectangular boxes, flat black, like big slabs of black concrete standing on their side edge. Except with concrete, you could see the surface. These slabs reflected no light at all. They were as flat as flat could be, so flat they were fuzzy. The surface was almost indiscernible. It was hard to tell exactly where the air ended and the surface began.

The slabs were standing one after the other, down through the room, almost looking like gigantic double-blank dominos standing on their side edges. They touched the wall on the opposite side from where he stood. On his side, they stopped well before the wall, leaving a corridor along the end of the slabs. While the flat black slabs reached almost to the ceiling, they were only about six or eight feet thick, roughly a little thicker than he was tall. If he was still normal size, that is.

The lights traveled along the open corridor where he stood, some near the floor, some near the ceiling, and others at every height in-between. They traveled in both directions past the ends of the huge black boxes, some coming toward him, and some moving away.

The globes of light coming toward him moved along the corridor until they made a curving ninety-degree turn between two of the black boxes. It was not any two specific boxes. Lights were going into and out of all the spaces between the black boxes.

After floating between two boxes for varying distances, some going only a short distance and others going almost all the way to the far side wall, they would make another curving ninety-degree turn, either toward the near box or toward the far box. Then the light floated directly into the box. The indistinct flat black surface swallowed the little globs of light, and the colorful rays disappeared.

Other lights were emerging from the surface of the black boxes. They popped into the air and followed similar paths but

in reverse. These were the ones going away from him. They disappeared around the corner of the last slab at one end of the room, the end where the other lights were coming from. There seemed to be more lights going out than coming in, but there were so many lights he couldn't be sure.

Where were the globes of light going? And where were the approaching lights coming from? He wanted to find out, so he ran toward that end of the room, far enough to see around the last black box. The lights were going to and coming from a large, silver portal, three or four feet in diameter, in the middle of the front wall of the room. Or maybe it was the back wall. No. This had to be the front wall because there was a door in it, a strange and unique door, but a door nonetheless.

The little glowing globes of light were so concentrated at the portal, so many of them in all different colors, that it was difficult to follow a single light. He tried and couldn't. Maybe it was impossible. It was quite a show.

No one was there to greet him, so he stood and watched the light show for several minutes. He remembered reading about near-death experiences. Other people who had died had met an old friend or a relative who took them around and "showed them the ropes" in heaven. He couldn't remember reading anything about floating lights and black boxes, but the colored lights and black boxes were here. And he couldn't remember reading about a near-death experience where the person who died had no one to greet him, but here he was in heaven, and there was no one to greet him.

Perhaps this wasn't heaven. He worried a moment at the thought and took another look around. There were no fires anywhere. It was not hot. The temperature was perfect. And he was comfortable in the suit of his dreams. He felt his head. No horns. Good. This couldn't be hell. Maybe the person who was supposed to greet him had been delayed for some reason. He decided to start walking, have a look around. He was sure his

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designated greeter would be able to find him. After all, this was heaven. All things were possible in heaven. If he only knew how.

As he walked toward the silver portal where the lights came and went, he could see more of the front wall of the room and the door on the other side of the portal. He walked over to the door and looked up. It was about forty feet tall, maybe more. If someone lived in this place, and the opening was sized for them, that person would be a giant. Or perhaps the door only looked big because he was little. In that case, the person who lived in the house might be normal size. He wasn't sure which situation was correct.

But why would he be small? Perhaps people shrank when they died? Maybe souls were not body-sized. Maybe they were small all along. Or maybe they shrank when they no longer had a body to live in. Souls had to be wispy and pliable, didn't they? Sort of smoky and misty? That's the way they were portrayed in movies and books. He felt of himself again. He felt solid, not wispy at all.

Heaven had to have many billions of souls, and that was from Earth alone. In all the incalculable number of planets throughout the universe, there was no doubt that intelligent life existed elsewhere, maybe on millions of planets. Add their souls to the mix, and heaven would be a busy place, indeed. So maybe God had to shrink souls to cut back on the overcrowding. Maybe this room was actual size, and his soul was tiny. But why was he solid and not wispy? Perhaps that was part of the shrinking process? Perhaps when you got small, the wispieness of the soul coalesced into a solid?

He was curious, but there was no way to know the answers to any of his questions without finding someone who could tell him. Since there was no one in this room other than him, he needed to get through the door. He wanted to find out what was



on the other side and, hopefully, find someone who could tell him where he was and what he needed to do.

He studied the door. There were strange geometric lines and curves in interesting but indiscernible shapes and patterns across the entire surface. The spaces between the areas of geometric lines were different colors, many of them a sort of metallic color. No bright colors like the lights. They were 'earthy' tones.

It looked more like art than a door, but it had to be a door because it was in the middle of an opening in the wall. Besides, there was an open space, a gap, along the full length of the bottom, like the doors at home.

He looked up at what he thought was the doorknob. It bumped out from the center of a series of concentric circles etched into the middle of the door's surface, with little radial tick marks randomly around the circles. But it was not shaped like any doorknob he had ever seen. It had six diamond-shaped metal plates sticking out from the center of the concentric circles. The diamond-shaped plates were positioned against each other, flat side to flat side, with the four corners of the diamonds marking up, down, and the two sides. As the plates extended away from the door, each one was slightly larger than the last one, overhanging a little on all sides. The plates were all metallic but were different colors. If that was the knob, how did it work? He didn't have a clue.

Glancing over the rest of the door, there was nothing else that looked anything like a doorknob, so the six multi-colored metal plates stacked face-to-face against each other had to be it. Unless the door worked without a knob. It didn't matter, though. What he thought might be the knob was four or five times as high from the floor as he was. There was no way he could reach it.

He made a slow three-hundred-sixty-degree turn, taking in every detail of the monster-sized room. Other than the moving

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colored lights and the giant flat black boxes, there was not only nothing he could stand on, there was nothing period. No tables, no chairs, no furniture, nothing at all. And there was nothing to eat or drink. Not that he was hungry or thirsty. He wasn't. But he would eventually be. And he was trapped in this huge room with nothing.

Could souls die of starvation? Or thirst? Or perhaps souls did not need food or drink, and that was why he was not hungry or thirsty. Perhaps souls absorbed whatever they needed from the air around them. He wanted to know. He needed to find somebody. Or find God. If he was in heaven, God should be somewhere nearby. God could answer all his questions, if he wasn't too busy with the other billions of souls.

He turned back around to the door and looked it over again, this time stopping when he got to the bottom. Could he slide under it? Perhaps. If he could lie flat enough. He was pretty small.

First, though, a peek. He got on his knees then down flat and looked through the opening at the bottom. The door was thick, but nothing was blocking the shallow opening. He could see through to the next room. What he was looking at, however, was a different matter. The next room had things in it, but he didn't recognize the things. It was, in fact, hard to recognize the next room as a room. It was huge, larger than the room he was now in.

Perhaps it was not a room at all. The floor seemed to disappear on the other side of the door, then reappear on the opposite side of the room, where the wall should have been. He didn't think it was the wall because things were resting on it. But they were resting sideways because it should have been a wall. That was strange.

The unique pieces he could see were... what? Furniture? He wasn't sure. There were several things, and they were all different shapes and colors. It appeared as though he were

looking at the tops of them instead of their faces as he should have been. Maybe they weren't furniture after all, but some sort of 3D art hanging on a wall. So what he was seeing may not have been the tops of furniture at all. He would not know until he could investigate.

Then a strange thought hit him. These pieces of furniture, or whatever they were, were either secured to the wall, or the floor in the next room was vertical to the floor in the black box room, the room he was in. How could that be? Could gravity be different in the next room? If this was heaven, and he was pretty sure it was, anything was possible.

If he crawled under the door, he might be coming out of the ceiling in the next room. He could fall to the floor as soon as the different gravity in that room took him. If he did, it was a long fall. He could be seriously injured. If souls could be injured, that is. He wasn't sure about that, either. But no sense taking a chance until he could find out.

This was a dilemma. Should he go under the door and take a chance in the next room? When he thought about it, he realized there was no choice. It was either stay in this room and starve – or die of boredom if souls couldn't starve – or slide under the door and try to find someone in the next room. God, perhaps? Or his greeter? It appeared that something had gone wrong since the person who was supposed to meet him had not shown up. Or, perhaps, for some reason the tunnel had let him out at the wrong place. His greeter might be waiting for him somewhere else, maybe in the next room, wondering why he hadn't shown up.

He looked around the room he was in once again. The light show continued, colored globes streaming back and forth in the hundreds, perhaps thousands, going in and out of the portal. There was nothing in the room, so there was nothing else to do. He decided to slide under the door and take his chances with gravity in the next room.

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It was tight, but not bad since his soul no longer carried the extra weight his Earthly body had carried. He shimmied under the door with his head turned sideways so he could keep his eyes turned toward the next room.

He poked his head a couple of inches out from under the door but did not slide through. He wanted to look around first.

The room was a sphere. More or less. A humongous sphere. Perhaps somewhat egg-shaped, though that could have been an illusion caused by the various furniture items resting on the floor. Well, floor was a relative term. The entire inside of the sphere was the floor, and there were no walls and no ceiling. And all of it was covered with furniture. Or items of some sort. It did not look like any furniture he had ever seen.

He estimated that the sphere was two or three hundred feet in diameter. It was hard to tell. Additional doors, similar to the first but with different designs, were scattered about on the wall, floor, or whatever it was, here and there. They seemed to be in random relation to each other, so there were no set floor levels on the other sides. He counted six doors, including the one he was under, but there could have been another one or two on his side of the sphere. He did not have a good view of his immediate vicinity.

It was time to go through, to investigate this next room. Holding onto the edge where the floor of the old room turned into the spherical floor in the new room, he quickly slid his body through to the other side. That's when gravity changed.



## Chapter 2

He was standing on... What? He looked down. Nothing. He was standing on nothing. In fact, he was not standing at all. He was floating in the air. Gravity had not just changed; it had ceased to exist. And he was moving, although gently, slowly. But he was moving away from the door, away from the inside surface of the sphere.

He reached out for the stacked metal plates he thought were the doorknob, but he missed. He stretched and reached again, and missed again. It was too far, slightly beyond his reach. He struggled and flailed his arms and legs around in awkward circles, trying to swim in air much like he could swim in water. He had been a pretty good swimmer, the number three man on his high school team. But it did not work. Nothing he did brought him any closer to the door. You couldn't swim in air. He kept drifting slowly away, out into the vast emptiness of the sphere.

At the speed he was moving, it would take a long time to reach the other side of the sphere. If at all. Perhaps gravity pulled to the center. He might go to the center of the spherical room and stay there forever. But that couldn't be. The furniture, or whatever all the things about the room were, was stuck to the inside of the sphere. The pieces were not floating in the air. Why was he?

It made no sense, and his situation seemed helpless. He looked around the room for anything that would help, but there was nothing he could reach. He flailed about again, but, as

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before, it changed nothing. He was too far away to touch anything and getting further away as the moments ticked by.

He settled back for the long trip to the other side of the sphere and wished he had come under the door with a little more push so he would have floated faster.

It was time to survey his surroundings. There was nothing else to do as he gently floated through the room. Immediately beside the door he had crawled under, on the opposite side of the wall from where the silver portal was in the black box room, there was a large silver tube. This tube must have been where the little lights were going to and coming from. But the tube was fully enclosed in this new room, so he could not see the lights anymore. It snaked across the inside of the sphere, in a series of curves and twists, and went all the way to the other side, next to a different door. It was connected to the wall at both ends but had no other support. Nothing else touched it. The bends and curves seemed to be pointless. Why not a straight tube from one connection to another? But, then, nothing else in heaven seemed to make sense either.

It was a large tube, the same diameter as the portal entrance. He thought perhaps four feet, relative to him, of course. But it might have been a half a foot smaller. Or larger. He wasn't sure. No matter. It was off to the side of where he was floating. There was no way to reach it.

There was a table to the right of the door he had crawled under. Right, that is, from his current orientation. Up and down was a mystery in this room. There was an up and down to the door he had come through because the gap was at the bottom, but the other doors he could see were turned in various directions. The up and down varied for each door.

The table, at least he thought it was a table, was black and was almost a cube, except the sides were slightly curved. On the top, there were fine, closely-spaced straight lines running at a forty-five-degree angle to the sides. When he looked closer, he

could tell that each line was the edge of a plane that was slightly above the prior plane. There were hundreds of lines, perhaps a few thousand, so one corner of the table was considerably higher than the opposite corner. Because of the height variation of each succeeding line, nothing would rest on the table evenly. Maybe it was not a table after all. But what was it? He would take a closer look when he got back to that side of the sphere, the side where he had entered. If he got back.

Because of the angle at which he was floating, he was almost directly above the table that wasn't a table. He reached out to touch it but couldn't. His fingers were several inches away. A soft purple glow radiated through the piece when his fingers got close, brighter where his fingers almost touched, fading slowly back to black when he pulled his fingers a few inches further away. When his fingers were near the piece, and the glow started, a low, soft sound emanated from somewhere inside it, much like the sound of a bell. No, it was more like playing the rim of a wine glass, a bad habit of his when washing them. He loved to do it. The sound drove his wife nuts.

He pulled his hand back, and the purple glow began to fade again, as did the sound. So he tried to touch the little table a third time. The purple glow and soft sound came back as his fingers got close. He wondered what would happen if he touched it. Would it light up all over? Would the sound become an ear-splitting crescendo? Would it explode? But, try as he might, he was too far away to reach the surface of the black table or musical instrument or machine or whatever this thing was. And he was gradually getting further away.

He turned his head and looked at the opposite side of the spherical room. At the rate he was moving, it would take days to reach the other side. Maybe weeks. If souls needed to eat and drink, he would starve. Or, rather, die of thirst.

Turning his head back around, he looked at the next piece, the one to the left of the strange black thing. He decided to quit

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calling it a table because it could not have been a table. ‘Thing’ was the best he could do.

The next piece was shaped even more strangely. It meandered up from the floor in small geometric sections, all harsh corners and hard edges. On the top, there were a series of concentric tubes of brightly-colored light, stacked in a cone, each successively smaller as the stack went higher. It reminded him of a child’s toy, but these tubes were made of glowing, pulsing light, not plastic. At the top of the cone, there was a black sphere, but it was filled with light. He shook his head a moment. Black but lighted? It wasn’t purple like a black-light on Earth. It was literally black light. He had never seen anything like it. There were three other tubular light cones on top of this piece of furniture, or whatever it was, in seemingly random locations. And they were all different sizes, none as large as the first one. He reached out unconsciously but, of course, was too far away to touch it.

“Hello.”

His heart pounded as the sound of a human voice startled him. His body jumped in reflex, arms and legs moving about, but his motion continued inexorably toward the other side of the sphere at its slower than snail pace.

The voice was soft, feminine. He looked about the sphere. It was a large place.

“Here. I’m over here.”

He looked to his left side and down slightly, in the direction from where he thought the voice had come. A woman was standing there, waving at him and saying, “Here. Do you see me?”

“Yes. Hello. Ah, who are you?”

“I was wondering the same about you.”

“I died and came to this place.”

“Me, too.”



While he continued to float in the air, he looked down at this young lady. She was not the beautiful woman he had walked along the beach with in his visions, but she was quite attractive, easy to look at. More importantly, she was standing on the floor, the inside surface of the sphere. “How are you doing that?” he asked.

“Doing what? I’m just standing here.”

“Yes. Exactly. How are you standing there? I’m, ah, floating. I can’t seem to get down.”

“It’s the door...” she said, but she hesitated then stopped as she stared at him hanging in the air. “Here, I’ll try to help.” She walked over to another piece of furniture, a round mound with bumps sticking up over the entire surface. The bumps were either red or yellow or orange. The mound itself was a swirl of black and green all intertwined together. She pushed one of the bumps, and a long tether shot out of the end. It twisted about in the air but was too far away for him to reach.

“Whoops. Wrong one.” She pushed the same bump, and the tether retracted. “I’ll try again.” She looked up at him, trying to gauge the direction. Then she pushed another bump, and a different long black tether shot out.

This one was closer, but he still couldn’t reach it. “It’s too far away,” he said.

“Wait a moment. They twist around. Maybe you can reach it when it gets closer.” She looked at the mound then back at him and said, “I think this is going to be our best chance. The others look like they would be further away.”

He eyed the satin-smooth black tether and watched it rotate. After a few seconds, he realized it was coming closer, rotating toward his position as he floated in the air. He reached and missed. It continued to come closer, but he could see that it was almost as close as it would get. If it continued to rotate the way it was doing, it would be going away from him in a few

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short moments. His timing had to be good. He waited... waited...

At what he thought was the perfect moment, he lunged toward the tether. The lunging did no good whatsoever, but the satin black rope, thing, whatever it was, had come close enough. He was able to wrap his fingers around it.

It felt strange. The surface was slick smooth but easy to hold, as though it were textured. It was a perfect satin black with no imperfections at all. Even more strangely, it pulsed in his hands, like a steady, rhythmic heartbeat. It was a tiny pulse, but an unmistakable one.

“Hold on,” she said. She pushed the bump again, and the tether began to retract, pulling him toward the floor.

It seemed to be going, perhaps, a little too fast. He could see himself crashing into the floor, breaking his nose, or worse. But he was afraid to let go. He didn’t want to start floating again. The tether zipped into the bump, and he crashed into the mound. It was soft, pliable. He sunk in several inches then rolled off, onto the floor.

“Can you stand up, or do you need help?”

“I’m afraid to move. I don’t want to float off again.”

“Oh, that’s only at the doors. You can stand on the floor. Watch out for the doors, though. No gravity there.”

He lifted himself to a sitting position and tapped his feet on the floor. Sure enough, gravity seemed to work fine. “What if I jump?” he asked.

“Hmmm. I suppose it depends on how high you can jump,” she said. “I haven’t tried it. Don’t think I will.”

“Did you... I mean, when you died, where did you come out?”

“The room with the large black boxes and colored lights going back and forth.”

“Me, too. Did you, ah, float, when you came through the door? Like I did?”

“No. I think I came through more slowly than you. I did not feel any gravity at the door, so I reached around and found that there was gravity on the floor. I was worried and tentative, but I managed to roll to the side as soon as I came through.”

He looked up at her. She was standing there without holding on to anything, so he decided to try standing. He rolled to his side then hesitated a moment. The lesson here was that this place was strange, not like Earth. Do everything slowly.

He lifted to his knees then, carefully, held onto the tether cushion while he pulled himself to his feet. He was rewarded with the normal feel of gravity keeping him firmly rooted to the floor. He stood still, directly in front of this attractive young lady.

“But that was a long time ago,” she said.

“What was?”

“When I came through the door.”

“Oh. How long have you been here in... Heaven, isn't it?”

“Heaven? I don't know. Not much like the heaven the priests used to talk about. Maybe it is. I've been here for a very long time. I've lost track. I died on the first of September in 1939.”

“1939? Are you sure? I died almost a century after that.” For some reason, the date of her death rang a bell in his mind. What was it?

“A century?” her hand went to her mouth. “Has it been that long?”

“Let's see...” He did some quick math in his head. “It's been eighty-nine years. How did you die?”

“We were invaded. My peaceful little country. The bombs and shells exploded all around us. We could do nothing but cower in our homes and pray. Our soldiers tried to defend us, but they were not enough to stand up to the Germans. I was killed in an artillery explosion.”

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“Germans? The invasion of Poland! I remember it from history class. That’s why that date sounded familiar.”

“Yes, yes. I am Polish. My name is Liliana Nosek. And you are?”

“Darren Foster from America. Pleased to meet you.” He held out his fist for a bump. “I died of cancer.”

She backed away from his fist with an apprehensive look on her face. Darren realized that if she died in 1939, she had no idea what a fist bump was. He immediately opened his hand for a shake.

Liliana smiled slightly then took his hand and shook it as she asked, “What year?”

“Just now. It’s August 2028. If time means anything here.”

“2028? Oh, my. I have been here for a long time.”

“You’ve been in this room all this time?”

“Oh, no. I don’t come in here much. It was, well, something to do.”

Darren took a few steps to make sure everything was okay, keeping his hands to his sides but ready to grab something if he started floating again. While the room curved up in front of him and behind him, he could walk fine. Gravity was always toward the floor, the inner surface of the sphere. Or the egg. Whichever. If it was egg-shaped, it was so close to a sphere that it didn’t matter.

“How did you know about this thing, this retriever?” Darren asked as he pointed toward the soft mound where the tethers had come from.

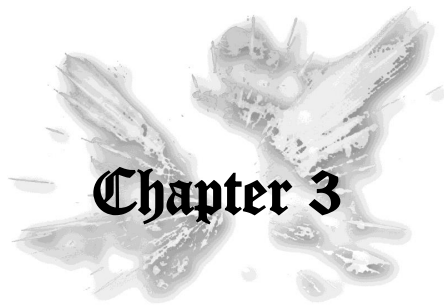
“The first time I came into this room, I wandered around for a long time. When I got tired, I sat on the mound to rest. I must have sat on one of the bumps. The tentacle shot out and carried me with it. I was able to grab it quickly, before it got away from me. Then I used it to climb back down to the floor.”

“Wow. That must have been quite an experience. But tell me this, how...” He stopped in mid-sentence. There was a low

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hum then a melodic tingling sound in the air. He looked up, toward where the sound had come from. A door on the other side of the sphere was opening. The entire door floated away from the opening and moved to the side.

“Oh, no!” she said. Her hand rushed to her mouth. “The big guy’s coming.”



## Chapter 3

A golden glow appeared in the opening.

“Get down,” Liliana said. “We don’t want him to see us.”

“Him?” Darren stared at the wavering golden glow as it became brighter, illuminating the door opening more and more. He turned back to Liliana and said, “Is that God? Why are we hiding from him? I want to talk to him.”

“Get down!” She whispered loudly. “Now!” She jerked his arm, pulling his head toward where she knelt behind the thing with the brightly colored cones of light. “I don’t want to lose you this soon.”

“Lose me?” he echoed as he lowered himself into a squat beside her, surprised that he could do it with no discomfort. For the first time in decades, his knees did not bother him. There was not even a twinge of pain when he squatted. He leaned toward her as he peered between the colored tubes and whispered in her ear. “But if that’s God, he’ll know we’re here, won’t he?”

“Yes, he knows. But if he doesn’t see us, he ignores us.”

“What? Why do you want God to ignore you? I want to ask him about this place, about heaven. And about Earth. I’ve got a thousand questions.”

“Shhhhh.”

The glow in the doorway moved through the opening and entered the egg-shaped room, lighting all four sides of the jamb and the inner surface of the room immediately around the door opening as the thing causing the glow began to emerge. At first,

there was a tiny arc of glowing yellow-orange, but as the object grew, Darren could see that it was egg-shaped, but only the top half. The bottom half of the glowing egg was hidden, disappearing into an oddly-shaped mechanical device with knobs, tubes, holes, and strange geometric shapes. Some of the tubes and knobs were rigid, and some were dangling about. Interspersed around these, there were numerous gently glowing lights in many shapes and colors. The lights looked remotely like buttons and dials on a piece of electronic equipment.

Perhaps the glowing, yellow-orange egg was whole, but there was no way to tell. The bottom half, if it existed, was inside the mechanical device. What Darren presumed were arms dangled out of the mechanical box, one on each side. These were also yellow-orange and glowing, but far less brightly than the egg part.

The half egg that was visible had to be the head, Darren thought. It couldn't be the tail because the creature came through with the egg-shape slightly ahead of the cart. All creatures led with their head. Why would God be any different? If, indeed, this was God. Darren stared at the strange being for several seconds. Yes, this had to be God. There was no other reasonable explanation. But God was not what Darren expected at all.

God's face, like other creatures, had two eyes. At least, Darren thought they were eyes. They were slanted ovals, the small openings white with dark pupils. It was hard to tell what color the pupils were because of the bright glow of the skin. The eyes were more or less in the location where eyes should be, but unlike normal eyes, every once in a while, there was a glint of red light that sparked inside them. That was strange. Even stranger, there was no nose and no mouth in God's face.

Ripples of energy rolled across the skin of the egg-shape, spitting and spraying tiny sparks in all directions while emitting a faint hum. The sparks circled around until they finally flowed

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downward to be absorbed into the tubes and ports and holes on the mechanical contraption where the egg rested.

As the being cleared the door, Darren could see two thin tentacles or legs or fins, he wasn't sure which, extending from the bottom of the mechanical device. They were smooth and pinkish-gray and flared out at the ends. They did not glow at all.

Why were the tentacles, or fins, flared at the ends? After looking at them, he decided they were not legs. They did not appear to be strong enough to hold the creature up. Whatever they were, they trailed in the air beneath the mechanical device as it drifted into the room.

"Is that God?" Darren whispered.

"I guess so," Liliana answered. She put her finger to her lips to once again let him know he should keep his voice down.

"Guess so?" Darren turned and stared at her. "You've been here for eighty-nine years, and you don't know?"

Liliana shrugged. "That seems like the best explanation, but I don't know for sure."

"If it is God, he already knows we're here," Darren said again, his voice rising as he spoke. "There's no need hiding from him. Or from her. Whichever."

"Shhhhh," Liliana said, putting her index finger in front of her lips again. "God or not, he doesn't bother us if we hide from him."

"That's odd, but what's wrong with him noticing you?"

"It depends on his mood. Mostly he ignores us, but sometimes he pulls a gun out of one of his tubes and shoots at us. And sometimes he talks to us. When he's in a good mood, I guess. It's not too often."

"What? Shoots at you? With a gun?"

"Please. Not so loud. It's kind of like a gun. But it doesn't use bullets. There's a light that shoots out of the barrel. It flashes in jagged lines like a small lightning bolt. If he hits you with it, you break up into pieces. The pieces get smaller and



smaller until they dissolve into nothing. But it takes a direct hit.”

“Good moods? Bad moods? Dissolves people with a gun? That doesn’t sound like the God I grew up with.”

“Me, either,” Liliana agreed. “I don’t think he’s the Catholic God. I guess we were taught wrong.”

Darren watched as the egg-shaped being, God he had to assume, floated across the egg-shaped room. The door God had come through floated back over the opening then into the jam, clicking into a closed position.

“This doesn’t seem right at all,” Darren whispered. “Not anything like the heaven my preacher talked about. How do you know he’s God?”

“Like I said, I don’t. He doesn’t claim to be God, but he says we can consider him our God if we want. Lobsang thinks he is.”

“Lobsang? Who’s Lobsang?”

“One of the Earth people. He’s from Tibet. He died a few centuries before I did.”

“How many people are here?”

“A few dozen, maybe?”

“That’s all? I thought heaven would be crowded,” Darren said, his voice rising again.

“Shhhhh,” Liliana held her index finger to her lips. “There might be more. I’m not sure.”

“You don’t know? If that’s all there is, why not take a quick census of everyone so you’d know how many of you there are? A few dozen wouldn’t be too difficult.”

“I guess nobody wants to know. Maybe nobody cares. We don’t all live together. Different groups keep to themselves. Sometimes they don’t even talk to each other. Most of the people here usually keep to their own groups, people maybe a little like them. For instance, you and I have little in common with ancient Egyptians, people who died thousands of years

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ago, so we would not visit them, let alone live with them. A few of the people are loners. They stick to themselves. And a few of them are not quite right if you know what I mean. Especially the people from early history, the people who have been here for millennia.”

“You don’t even talk to each other? That doesn’t make sense. You should know how many people are here.”

“It changes. We lost one a while back. Maybe a few weeks ago. Or maybe it was only days. Time is so uncertain here. God found us and shot one of our ladies. She came apart right before our eyes. She broke up into pieces that were twirling around and dwindling into nothing. I mean, literally nothing. There was nothing left of her. It was so strange watching her eyes while she dissolved into nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing. Every great once in a while we get somebody new, like you, so the number of people changes. I think it’s growing, although God seems to shoot at us more than he used to, so I’m not sure.”

Darren turned back and peeked over the top of the strange piece they were hiding behind and looked at the being floating through the room. “That’s not the loving God I learned about.” He used his normal voice, and Liliana hushed him again.

The glowing yellow-orange egg stopped. It turned toward them as one of its arms reached into the mechanical cart and pulled something out.

“He heard you!” Liliana said. “Run! Follow me!”

She pointed across the room toward one of the larger pieces, a dimpled swirl of orange and brown like a gigantic piece of homemade candy. The next moment she was running toward it. Darren looked up to see God aiming something at him. He hesitated for only a fraction of a second then he was off, chasing after Liliana while he continued to watch God. At that same moment, God fired the weapon in his hand.

There was a loud buzz that crackled and hissed. Darren ducked his head and ran faster. As Darren dodged between the different things in the room, he glanced back to see a jagged white light thunder into the floor exactly where he had been standing a mere moment before. Jagged edges of white energy splashed all around, almost hitting his legs as he pushed them to carry him faster. Bits of furniture cracked and broke loose and spun off but magically twirled around and fell back into place, adhering in their original position as though the piece had never received a sparkling, hissing, thunderous bolt of pure energy.

Looking back as he ran, Darren could see that the gun was still in God's yellow-orange hand. God was trying to aim at him, the barrel rotating to follow his movements. Then God pulled the trigger a second time. There was a burst of jagged white light almost the same instant that Darren heard the loud, popping, static-laced buzz. Sheer will pushed his legs even faster. He was sure he did not have the ability to run as fast as he was running.

The white light crashed into something immediately behind him. Darren did not turn around to see. It would have slowed him a fraction of a second, and that might make the difference between existing and not existing. He felt heat on the back of his legs, a few degrees warmer, but nothing worse. Once again, God had missed. That seemed odd in itself. How could God miss? But the shots were getting closer. The next shot would likely be a direct hit.

"In here," Liliana shouted as she pulled open an oval slab on the side of the orange and brown swirl. Darren had not seen a seam that would indicate there was a door on the front of the furniture, or piece, whatever it was. Liliana must have known about it ahead of time. Running faster than his legs could carry him, Darren waited till the last second to slow down. He thudded hard against the inside back wall of the piece as his

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momentum carried him inside. Liliana jumped in behind him, closing the door as she did.

It was dark and crowded on the inside. He could not see as they huddled in the tiny space, mashed against each other because the hollowed inside was barely large enough for the two of them.

“That was too close,” Liliana said.

“Are you sure he was trying to hurt us? I mean, everything he hit healed itself. It broke up but went back together.”

“That only works for things that are not alive. I guess he doesn’t want to destroy his home. I promise you, if he hits you, you won’t go back together. You will break up into pieces and disappear. You won’t exist anymore.”

“But we’re sitting ducks here. All he has to do is float over here and open the door then shoot us.”

“He doesn’t chase us. If he gets a shot, he takes it. Well, not always, but usually. If he doesn’t have a shot, he goes back to what he was doing. It’s like we are buzzing flies to him. If he gets a chance, he’ll squash us. But he won’t go out of his way to do it. He won’t chase us around.”

“God is trying to kill us, but he has trouble hitting a moving target. And he won’t go to the trouble to chase us around? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever...” There was another loud crackling buzz, and Darren’s body tensed. The next moment, the top of the swirl they were hiding in broke into hundreds of pieces in a flash of white, hot, roiling energy. Darren started to stand up, but Liliana jerked his arm, pulling him back down. The broken pieces of the top of the thing they were hiding in flew into the air and swirled around then came back down, reforming the top into a whole again. There were no cracks or seams to show where the pieces were rejoined. Before the last pieces were in place, however, they could see God turning away and putting his weapon back up. It was over.

“I can’t believe God missed us,” Darren said, pointing up as he did so. “Didn’t he make this universe? The solar systems and planets and atoms and, well, everything. You’d think God would hit his target dead on every time.”

Darren felt something moving along his thigh. It was Liliana’s hand. For a moment, he wondered what was going on, but her hand left his thigh and found his arm. Then she took his hand and held it. It was too dark to see her shrug, but they were pressed so close together he could feel it. “Yes, but fortunately for us, he does miss.” With her other hand, she held her index finger to her lips. Once again, he could only tell by feeling her movements. It was too dark inside the piece to see. “Listen. We can hear the door close when he goes through. Then it will be safe to go out.”

She remained rigidly still and totally silent, so Darren did the same. He couldn’t help but notice that she gave off a pleasant aroma. The woman smelled good.

“*ANOTHER TIME, DARREN FOSTER,*” echoed through Darren’s mind in a deep, pulsing voice. Had the sound traveled through the air in the room, or was it only inside his head? He wasn’t sure. He started to wiggle his hand, but Liliana squeezed it and held him steady as she continued to press the index finger of her other hand to her lips.

They heard the swoosh of a door opening. God made little sound when he floated through the air in his mechanical box, and they heard nothing from inside the large swirl, so they were not sure whether God had left the room or not after they heard the second swoosh and the click to indicate that the door had closed. Darren could no longer hear the light electrical hum of the sparks traversing God’s body, but that might have been because he and Liliana were inside the brown and orange piece with the opening closed. The hum was faint enough that it might not penetrate their safe place.

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“He pulled a gun on us and tried to kill us,” Darren whispered as they remained inside, unmoving.

“Dissolve us.”

“Same thing. He pulled a weapon and fired on us. The Bible says that God is a loving God. He shouldn’t be trying to kill us.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Did you study the Bible? He gets pretty mad in the Bible sometimes.”

Darren had no reply for that, but he was beginning to have his doubts about this glowing egg-shaped creature being the one and only all-powerful God he had prayed to in church. At the same time, however, the voice in his head had called his name.

“Did you hear anything?” Darren asked. “Like God calling my name.”

“He called mine and said ‘another time.’”

“I heard that, too, except it was my name.”

“He does that. He talks inside your head, but you hear your own name. He knows who we are. He knows everything about us, everything about our life on Earth.”

“Then, he must be God. But he does not treat us like we’re in heaven.”

“Maybe we’re supposed to be in Hell,” Liliana said. “Maybe something went wrong, and we ended up in heaven when we shouldn’t have. And maybe when he dissolves us, we reassemble in Hell with Satan.”

Even though he could not see her in the dark, Darren looked at Liliana. He thought a few moments before speaking. “Maybe. I don’t think so, though. I mean, there are so few people here, and he’s trying to send us to Hell? That doesn’t add up. This place should be crowded beyond belief. Even if only one in a thousand was good enough to go to Heaven, there would be many, many times more people than this.”

“Perhaps. But maybe this *is* Hell.”

“No. Same principle applies, but in reverse. Something is screwy. I don’t understand this at all.”

“I’ve heard nothing since the door closed. I think he’s gone now. I’ll check.”

As Liliana opened the door, the light pouring in was bright but welcome. She glanced around the room, smiled, then motioned for Darren to follow. They wedged their way out of the tight space and stood up. Darren felt better not being so cramped, being able to stretch his arms and legs, but there was something lost as well. He was no longer huddled with Liliana. Being pressed against this attractive young lady was not an altogether unpleasant experience.

“This can’t be heaven,” Darren said after looking around the room. “Heaven is supposed to be paradise. Like I said, there ought to be millions of people here. Maybe billions. Besides, God isn’t supposed to kill the souls who found their way to heaven. Or dissolve them. Hmmm... Maybe this is purgatory. You have to get through this to get to heaven. Maybe the Catholics were right after all.”

“Perhaps. But none of this fits the Catholic teachings about purgatory that I learned. I was a good Catholic girl when I died. I don’t know what I am now, but I’m not Catholic anymore.”

Darren stared at Liliana. “I could be dreaming,” he finally said. “Maybe I’m not dead after all. Not yet. Perhaps I’m having one last dream before the cancer kills me.”

“Then I’d be dreaming with you,” Liliana said. “Because I’m real. But I wasn’t sick or dying in bed. A bomb hit our house. I don’t think you dream in the middle of an explosion. It happens too quickly.”

“You could be nothing more than a dream person, an imagined part of my dream.”

Liliana stuck her hand out and touched Darren on the shoulder. “Do you feel that?”

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“Yes. But it could still be a dream. I could dream the feeling of you touching me.”

“You’ve held my hand, and your body was against mine while we hid inside that... thing. You know I’m real. Do you want me to pinch you?”

Darren stared into her eyes. “You felt solid enough. But that could be part of the dream, too. I think.”

Liliana pinched him on the shoulder, hard.

“Ow!” Darren backed up. “Why did you do that?”

“To show you I’m real. Do you believe me now?”

“Yep. Dream people don’t hurt like that. You don’t need to prove that again.”

“I’m sorry. But you need to know that I’m real. I’m not part of your dream imagination. I lived my life on Earth, and I’ve lived here for a long time. My life before you arrived would not be part of your dream.”

Darren pulled his collar out and looked at the skin on his shoulder. “You’re real, all right. There’s a bruise already. Still hurts, too. Damn, you’ve got strong fingers!”

Liliana covered her mouth with her hand and giggled.

“So what do you do all day?” Darren asked. “Besides hide from God. And pinch people.”

“Not much,” Liliana sighed. “It’s pretty boring here. Sometimes my best friend and I wander around. Her name is Imani Otieno. We talk, mostly about our lives back when we were living on Earth. She’s interesting. She’s got so many stories. Oh, I don’t usually pinch people. In fact, you may be my first since I’ve been here.”

“There’s something to be proud of,” Darren laughed. The laugh stopped quickly. “Where is everybody else?”

“Different places. Some are scattered about in different rooms. There are rooms in this house where God doesn’t even go. Most of the people live in rooms like that so they’ll be safe. And I’ve heard that a lot of people go outside, away from God’s



house altogether. I don't know if they're still alive. I've never met anyone who has been outside."

"Perhaps God dissolves them when they try to escape?"

"Maybe. I've never seen God go outside to shoot somebody, but maybe he does.

"Or maybe he's got automatic weapons on the roof."

"Could be. Or maybe it's so wonderful on the outside the people who get away don't want to come back. All these years in this place have become so tiring. Maybe I'll go outside soon."

"Hmmm," Darren thought. "I'm not so sure it's a good idea. If the people who leave never return, it could be dangerous to try. Quite possibly deadly. Seems like one of them would have come back over the years. If nothing else, to tell everyone what it's like on the outside."

Liliana shrugged. "You'd think so. That's why I've never gone outside. If people don't come back, well, you're right. It could be because they die when they leave."

"We need to know. Does anyone around here have any answers? What about this guy named Lobsang?"

"He knows about as much as anybody, I think."

"Could you take me to him?"

"Yes. He stays in the willow room. I can show you."

"The willow room? What's in there?" Darren asked.

"It's, well, I'll have to show you. You'll understand when you see it. It's through that door." Liliana pointed toward one of the doors on the other side of the egg-shaped room then began walking. She seemed to be walking away from the door she had pointed toward, but Darren looked at the path and realized the arc along the floor would eventually bring her to it.

He started walking behind her, but his heart jumped in his chest. His whole body jerked as he stopped walking and stared at Liliana. His hands started shaking. He could see the things in the room that were behind her. Barely, but he was sure he could

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see them as she moved along while the objects remained still.  
She was semi-transparent, like a ghost!



## Chapter 4

Liliana turned around and looked at Darren, showing more curiosity than concern. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You... your body. I can see through you. When you started walking, I saw the stuff in the room behind you. Are you a ghost? Am I a ghost?” Darren looked down at his hand and held it over the closest strange piece of furniture in the spherical room, trying to discover if he could see things behind his own body.

“You don’t need to do that,” Liliana said. “You’re like everyone else. Nobody can see through you.”

“But you...”

“I don’t know why I’m this way. But I feel solid. See?”

She walked back and held out her arm for Darren to touch. He did. He let his hand slide up her arm to her shoulder. She felt as solid as any person he had ever touched, but when he wiggled his fingers behind her shoulder, he could see them move, although faintly. “Wow,” he said. “That’s amazing. You feel so real.”

“I am real!” she said, her facial expression changing to a frown.

“I’m sorry. I meant, it doesn’t feel like I should be able to see through you, but I can.”

“I’ve always been that way. I don’t know why. It’s like I got shot by God’s gun a tiny bit and partly dissolved. But he’s never come as close to hitting me as he did to hitting you today, so that can’t be it.”

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“What about the others?” Darren asked. “Are any of them transparent?”

“I’m the only one like this,” she said. “That I know of. If there’s another one, they’re hiding in a place I don’t know about. Or they went outside before I got here.”

“You’ve been here almost ninety years. How could there be places you don’t know about?”

“God’s house,” Liliana said, “It goes on and on. Strange room after strange room. Like I said, there are rooms where even God never goes. That’s where people stay. Most of us avoid him.”

“Avoid God?” Darren mumbled. He shook his head then said aloud, “I’m okay now. Let’s go find Lobsang. I need to make sense of this. I need to understand why people have to avoid God.”

“Okay,” Liliana said as she started walking again. “It will be good to see Lobsang. I haven’t been to the willow room in a long time.”

Darren caught up to Liliana and walked beside her, occasionally having to shift to the side to avoid the odd piece of furniture or machinery or whatever the things in the spherical room were. “How long is a long time?”

“I’m not sure. There are no days and nights here, not inside the house. Time doesn’t seem to mean much. It goes on and on. The light is always the same. Well, some rooms are darker than others. But they stay that way. They don’t change.”

Something clicked in Darren’s head, and he stopped walking. Liliana continued for another couple of steps then stopped and turned around. Darren was staring at her with an odd look on his face.

“What is the matter this time?” she asked.

“This *is* a dream. It has to be.”

“Do you want me to pinch you again?”

“No,” Darren said as he reached up and felt the bruise on his shoulder. He backed up a step then looked her straight in the eyes. “Your English is good. Way too good. Like it would be in my dreams. It’s virtually impossible that a young lady in 1939 Poland could speak English at all, much less fluently. You don’t even have an accent.”

“I don’t speak English. I only speak Polish.”

“What? Polish? What do you mean? You’re talking to me in perfect, unaccented English right now. That shouldn’t be possible.”

Liliana smiled and held out her hand. Darren stood and stared at it without moving.

“Come on,” she said. Her smile was warm and inviting. “I won’t pinch you. Promise. But you must hold my hand. You must know I am real and not a dream.” She stretched her arm out further.

Reluctantly, Darren took a step toward her. He reached out, and their fingers touched. Slowly, he let her slide her hand into his. Her skin was smooth and warm and felt solid even though he could see his fingertips behind her hand.

“Hold my hand while we walk,” she said. “I like holding hands. I haven’t held hands with anyone in... well, longer than I can remember.”

“Okay.” It was not an unpleasant thing to do. They began walking again.

“I am speaking Polish,” she repeated. “It is the only language I know. You hear it as English. That’s the way it is here. Everybody in heaven hears everybody else in their native tongue, even though we speak different languages.”

“So I speak English, but you hear Polish?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible?”

Liliana shrugged and smiled.

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“I suppose there has to be some benefit to being in heaven,” Darren said. He laughed to himself.

“There’s another benefit to being here.”

“Getting shot at by God?”

“No, silly. You... Well, you change when you get here.”

“Change? In what way?”

“Look at yourself. Is that the way you looked when you died?”

“Ah...” Darren hesitated. “Not exactly.”

“I am different, too. I was *not* a young Polish girl when the bomb hit our house.”

“You were a boy?”

“NO!” She squeezed his hand. “When I died, I was... An older Polish girl.”

“How old?”

“Seventy-eight.”

Darren dropped her hand and backed up a step. Then he caught himself and looked her up and down. She was attractive and shapely, even if a little transparent. And she was quite firm, as he had discovered when they were in the candy swirl thing hiding from God. “You don’t look like you’re seventy-eight.”

He glanced down toward the extra forty pounds that no longer clung to his waist, assuring himself that it was not there. Looking back at Liliana, he reached out and took her hand again. It felt good in his, warm and smooth. Somehow, without looking in a mirror, he knew he no longer had gray hair and wrinkles around his eyes and a sag beginning along his jaws. “I don’t look fifty-eight, either, do I?”

“No.”

“I guess you get younger when you die.”

“Everyone does. We are all in our prime.”

“That much sounds like heaven.”

“There are a few exceptions, but it’s almost everybody.”

They fell silent as they started walking hand-in-hand again.

She squeezed his hand gently. It stirred something inside him. What was this? He shouldn't be doing this. He was married. Still, her touch started an urge building inside him. He shouldn't... But, then, his wife was way back on Earth. Still alive. He was dead, sort of dead, and in heaven. Well, maybe this wasn't heaven. He was not sure one way or the other, but he was somewhere dead people went. His wife was alive and not in this world at all. What the hell? He squeezed back.

"It's this door," Lilitana said when they reached the other side of the sphere. "Be careful. Gravity changes near the door. Hold on to the edge firmly until you squeeze under the door and move far enough inside for gravity to pull toward the floor in the next room. We don't want to go drifting around again."

"No. Once was enough." He watched as Lilitana reached over the seam and pushed against the bottom of the door to steady herself. She eased into the space between the door and the floor then motioned for him to follow as she slid through. He followed. Within moments, they were on the other side.

Darren was not prepared for what he saw in the next room, but, with everything he'd seen so far, he was at least prepared not to be prepared.

His eyes swiveled around, taking in everything. It was so strange, like something out of an abstract movie, an animated short film with no people in it. The place was huge, about the same height as the black box room but twice as wide and twice as long. The far wall was maybe two football fields away. Maybe more... Or maybe less. He wasn't sure.

To their right, there were red and purple tubes extending out from the wall, like huge fingers or, perhaps more appropriately, like the tube people that twist and turn as a fan blows through them, the ad props they use at gas stations and convenience stores. Except there were no faces painted on the ends of them, and they did not have arms. They were only colored tubes.

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The wall on the left was smooth and had a series of black lines, each a few inches wide, in an abstract pattern. Many of the lines were parallel to the floor, but some skewed at different angles, crossing through other lines. Then he realized the lines were changing, slowly redrawing themselves by going off in different random directions. It was strange and somewhat confusing.

The light gray ceiling high above rose and fell with a rhythmic motion, like ocean waves rippling across the room but only above them. It was stippled with little domed pods of what looked like syrup or motor oil or some other dark, viscous fluid. Whatever was inside the upside-down domes was liquid and sloshed about, but did so slowly. What was their purpose? He looked closer and saw tiny drops of fluid falling from the pods. They did not fall straight down. No matter where the pods were, the drops fell toward a series of strange shapes going down the center of the room. The shapes included spheres and cylinders and cubes in all sorts of metallic colors, lined up down the center and floating freely. There were no supports. Each of these was rotating, but the rotations were at random speeds and in random directions. No two shapes appeared to be moving at the same speed and in the same direction. The little drops of liquid fell onto these rotating shapes and were absorbed, disappearing inside them.

Every ten or twelve seconds, one of the red and purple tubes on the right wall would straighten out to a perfect right angle from the wall, quit moving about, and shoot a glob of light, an amorphous blob that glowed bright yellow, at the rotating shapes in the center of the room. The shapes absorbed the wiggly globs of light, speeding up their rotation.

Where Darren and Liliana's feet were, obviously the floor since gravity pulled that way, was smooth. There was a yellow-green glow around where the bottoms of their bare feet touched. Darren lifted his right foot and the glow on the floor quickly



dissipated. He set his foot down a step ahead, and another glow surrounded it. This glow didn't seem quite as green as the glow around his left foot, but the difference was so subtle he could have been mistaken.

“Watch out for those red and purple things,” Liliana said as she pointed toward the right wall. “They're not hard, but if they touch you, it gives you a strange pain. It doesn't leave a mark, but it stings and burns. We did not have electric wires in our house when I was killed, but some of the others who know more about it tell me those things give you an electric shock.”

Darren wondered if a dead person could be electrocuted and die again. Maybe so, if people could be dissolved into nothing, but at the very least, the pain would not be fun. “I'll keep my distance.”

“And don't go near one of those blobs of light that they shoot out. I've never seen it happen because everybody stays clear of them, but I've heard that they will dissolve any part of you they touch. Not all of you, like God's guns, only the part of you the light touches. That part disappears. We'll walk down the left side of the room where it's safe.”

“What is this room? What are all these things supposed to be doing?”

Liliana shrugged, emphasizing the shrug with a downward curl of her lips. “Who knows? We know little about the strange things in God's house. We've learned the hard way what is okay and what to avoid.”

Darren lifted his hand and swung it about to indicate the entire room. “There has to be a purpose for all this. I doubt God would make a weird room for the sake of making a weird room.”

“A purpose? I'm sure there is, but his science is far beyond the science of Earth. It is doubtful we could ever know. The greatest scientist on Earth might not understand this even if God tried to explain it to him.”

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Darren looked about the room again, shook his head then said, “Where is the willow room?”

“It’s the next room,” she said as she pointed toward the back wall. There is no door. We have to go through an opening around a big cylinder that goes through the wall.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“You can’t see it from here because of the spinning shapes going down the middle of the room. We’ll have to get there to see it. The big cylinder comes out of the shapes and goes into the willow room.”

Darren took another couple of steps forward. This time he was sure the glow around his foot had changed colors. There was no green at all. In fact, he could see a hint of orange in the yellow.

“Don’t get any closer,” Liliana said. “We have to walk to the left. It’s safer over there.”

“The floor glows where we touch it. The color is changing.”

“It’s a warning. It turns orange if you are in danger then red when you are in extreme danger.”

“Like on Earth.”

“On Earth? You mean traffic lights? I have heard about those. There were no traffic lights in our small town. Few people had an automobile.”

Darren remembered that Liliana was from a small town in 1939 Poland. Perhaps there were no standardized warning codes in use in Poland at that time. He decided not to try to explain. The traffic light example was close enough.

“It’s safe on the left,” Liliana continued. “The floor glows green there.” She reached for his hand, and he took hers as she led him around to the left of the rotating shapes, well clear of the large red and purple things twisting and turning on the right wall and clear of the wobbling yellow light they shot toward the shapes. The glow around where their feet touched went back to

yellow, then yellow-green, and finally green when they approached the left side wall.

When they got to the left wall, Liliana turned and led him toward the end of the room. The glow around their feet turned to yellow-green again, but nothing worse as they stayed near the left wall all the way to the end, away from all the moving parts in the room.

Looking about as they walked along, Darren marveled at the precision of everything, even though he had no idea what that precision was accomplishing.

The cylinder Liliana was talking about was a huge gray rod, about ten to twelve feet in diameter, that extended from the last shape, crossed the space at the end of the room, and then went through the wall. It was spinning at a fairly fast pace, but slow enough so that Darren could see that it was going clockwise as he faced the wall.

There was a gap between the spinning rod and the stationary wall with about two feet of clearance all the way around. Looking through the gap, Darren could see the next room, the willow room. Some white things vibrated rhythmically on the inside, but he could not tell what they were.

“We climb through here,” Liliana said as she pointed toward the gap. “Be careful. Don’t touch the cylinder.”

With that, she turned and leaned over as she stepped under the spinning rod. Her arms reached into the gap at the bottom, and she pulled herself into it. Once she was in the willow room, she turned around and motioned for Darren to follow.

As he was sliding through, Liliana said, “The gravity in this room pulls gently toward the center. If you don’t hold on, you will slowly fall that way when you go through. But there are things... ropes, perhaps, that grow out of the walls. If you grab one, you can climb in either direction. Lobsang lives in the middle of the room. It is easier to climb in that direction since gravity pulls that way.”

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Before he could ask questions, she turned and was gone. He slid his arms through the gap as he had seen her do. When his hands reached the wall on the other side, he pulled against it and slid the rest of his body through. The wall was about a foot thick and had a smooth surface. The circular gap met the wall surface of each room at a ninety-degree angle. While it was not sharp enough to cut, it was sharp enough to hurt if you weren't careful.

Without the experience of having done this before, his slide was less graceful than he would have liked. He banged his shin on the hard angle of the corner where the surface of the gap met the willow room wall, but he made it through. Darren bent his leg up and pulled it toward his chest, massaging the pain.

Once he was in the willow room, he had not held on to anything. He was drifting through the room, being pulled by a slight but growing force.

Drifting parallel to the huge rod that continued toward the center of the room, he forgot the pain in his leg as he jerked his head back and forth, looking for something to grab, something to hold onto. The willow room, like every other room, was huge. It appeared to be spherical. There was no straight wall that he could see, but he could not see much of the room.

There were long, gently swaying things, what Liliana had called 'ropes', extending from the spherical walls all the way around. They pointed more or less toward the center of the room, waving gently like tens of thousands of tentacles on some ancient ocean beast. Little pure white heart-shaped disks grew out of the cream-colored tentacles much like leaves growing out of a vine. Apparently, this was the reason she called it the willow room. The ropes and heart-shaped disks were a little like flexible willow tree limbs.

He reached out and touched one of the white leaves. It was soft, pliable, velvety, and much thicker than a typical green leaf

on Earth. A bed lined with these little white leaves would be quite comfy.

“You can float to the center if you want,” Liliana said from ahead of him, “But it would be quicker to grab a rope and pull your way along. Besides, you don’t want to touch the ball in the middle. It’s dangerous.”

Darren reached out and grabbed the closest tentacle or rope or whatever it was. The surface felt smooth but not slick. It was easy to hold and pull yourself along. Liliana was not rushing so he caught up with her quickly.

“There,” Liliana pointed ahead. “Hanging by his toes. That’s Lobsang.”

Darren looked where Liliana was pointing. A silver-green ball about three times his height in diameter floated in the center of the huge room. The gray rod from the room they had left, the room with the spinning shapes, extended all the way to the center of the willow room and appeared to connect to the silver-green ball. He couldn’t be sure, but that’s what it looked like from behind hundreds of white tentacles. It was difficult to see. While the white ropes or tentacles were spaced far apart on the wall, the inner surface of this spherical room, they naturally became closer and closer together as they approached the center where the silver-green ball was located.

The ball pulsed with light, going from a soft, warm glow to a dim glow to almost no glow at all then back again every four or five seconds. The hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cream-colored tentacles from every three-dimensional direction inside the spherical room pointed toward the ball but ended twelve to fifteen feet short of touching it.

A man was extended from two of the tentacles, one tied around each of his feet. He did not hang toward what Darren had thought would be the bottom of the spherical room, considering where gravity had been in the previous room. But that gravity did not extend into this room. Instead, Lobsang’s

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body pointed almost sideways, toward the silver-green ball. His arms were over his head, and his hands were held together in a prayer position. His fingers were the closest thing to the ball.

Darren realized that he had let go of his vines and was drifting toward the ball, starting to move faster. Gravity pulled toward the pulsing ball no matter what part of the room you were in.

“Grab a rope,” Liliana said. “You don’t want to be pulled into the ball.”

“Why? What would happen?”

“I don’t know. Lobsang said only one person has fallen into the ball. There was a brilliant light with lots of sparkles. That person was never seen again.”

“What? We’re already dead. How can we die again... other than being shot by God?”

“It’s like being on Earth. You can die from an accident. We’ve even had people kill other people before. As far as anyone can tell, though, if you die here, that’s it. You don’t live anywhere else.”

Darren reached out and grabbed a tentacle and held tightly. “This is crazy. We can die twice but only twice. Why not nine lives like a cat?”

Liliana shrugged. “That’s our best guess. No way to know for sure.”

“I suppose not. We didn’t know about this life when we were back on Earth. But why does Lobsang stay in this room if it’s so dangerous?”

“You’ll have to ask him. We can work our way over to where he is.”

As they neared the center of the room, it became easier to swing from tentacle to tentacle since the tentacles were closer together. It was fun traveling on them, a little like child’s play, grabbing one tentacle ahead of you and letting go of the one behind so you could reach ahead again. While gravity pulled

toward the center of the room, it was light, maybe a tenth of normal gravity, or even less, making travel through the room easy. It didn't take long to make their way to Lobsang.

The plump Asian man never moved. His eyes were closed, and he appeared to be in a deep sleep, except his hands moved from time-to-time, though they never separated. They stayed in a prayer position even when they wobbled around.

"Tie the end of the tentacle around your waist," Liliana said. "You won't have to worry about losing your grip."

Darren watched Liliana then tied himself to the neighboring tentacle in the same manner.

With each foot tied to a tentacle, Lobsang was closer to the silver-green ball than they were, but he was still near enough for conversation.

Besides being Asian, Lobsang had a potbelly, *much like a Buddha figure*, Darren thought. It did not appear that he had lost any weight when he died. Or, perhaps, he had been much fatter on Earth. Or, and this seemed much more likely once Darren thought of it, you arrived in heaven the way you wanted to look. Lobsang may well have wanted to look like Buddha, potbelly and all.

"Lobsang," Liliana called out softly.

"Hello, Liliana. Who is your friend? I do not recognize him." Lobsang's eyes had remained closed the entire time.

"Darren Foster. He has only just now died. I hope you are well, Lobsang."

"I am, indeed, as are we all since no one gets sick in heaven." His eyes opened, and he began to study Liliana and Darren. Even with the extra weight, the man was flexible and nimble as he curled over and gripped another tentacle then pulled himself back away from the silver-green ball so he would be even with his guests.

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As he hung there, he slid his hands slowly along the tentacle as though caressing a pet, a favored animal. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Darren has some questions that I cannot answer. I thought you might be able to help us.”

“Of course.” The man looked into Darren’s eyes. A calm smile never left his lips. There was something comforting about Lobsang’s expression. “I will help in whatever way I am able.”

Liliana nodded toward Darren.

“Ah,” Darren began. Now that he was here, he wasn’t sure where to start. “I was wondering about God.” He hesitated.

“Yes?” Lobsang encouraged, the smile never leaving his face.

“He’s not like the God I learned about in church. And Liliana says he shoots people and dissolves them. That... None of this makes sense to me. I would appreciate some sort of explanation. If you have one.”

“It is, indeed, a difficult question. I have studied God for many years, for centuries.”

“Centuries?” Darren echoed. “When did you die?”

“I believe your Christian calendar was in the year 1371 at the time of my death. I had become old and weak and passed away quietly only to awaken young and strong here in God’s house.”

“So you’re not a Christian?”

“Not in the stricter sense of the term, no. I am a Buddhist monk.”

“God is Buddhist?” Darren asked. “If that’s true, my religion was wrong.”

“No religion that is reverent to God is wrong. God is the God of all religions.” As he talked, Lobsang ran his fingers gently back and forth along the feathery feel of the cream-colored tentacle he was holding. He smiled and nodded at Darren and Liliana at the same time. Then his smile faded as he



continued, “But he is not well. In my centuries of observation, I have come to believe that God has lost his karma, that he is adrift in the heavens with no destination and no desire to end one journey so that he might embark upon another.”

“God has lost his karma? How is that possible?”

“I cannot say what the means of the loss were because it appears to have happened before I came to heaven. But I am trying to help through meditation.” Lobsang’s smile returned. He turned his head and looked at the tentacle he was touching then continued, “I find that I concentrate quite well when I am connected to God’s ropes. I extend my body toward the attraction of the sphere in the middle of this great prayer room. It is a wonderful way to meditate. I think great thoughts for God, in hopes that I might help him find his way once again.”

“What do you know about him? Liliana told me sometimes people talk to him. Directly. And he talks back.”

“On rare occasions, he will discuss things with one of us. I, myself, have had a conversation with God. It was, perhaps, two or three centuries ago.”

“What did he say?” Darren asked eagerly.

“It was strange, difficult to interpret. He said that he is not the only God, that there are many of them though less than there used to be. He explained that each God lives in his own universe.” Lobsang momentarily stopped caressing the tentacle then turned back around and looked at them. He tilted his head slightly to the side as he continued, “He said that he, and all of his kind, had become insensitive over millions of years. That they felt no emotions, no pain, and no pleasure. He indicated that was the price of evolving such a high intellectual capacity. He said that he could live and has lived essentially forever, but his life was monotonous, boring, and meaningless.”

“God bored? You’ve got to be kidding.” Darren was shocked.

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“No, I am not making jest. I merely relate the words that God spoke. It is difficult for me to understand, as well. God said he could feel emotions and the exhilaration of life only through us, but we were not real. That was the end of the conversation. It is, perhaps, a riddle of some sort. I do not know.”

“We’re not real?” Darren patted himself on his chest. “I feel pretty real.” He reached out and took Liliana’s hand. “Liliana feels real.” He couldn’t help but notice his fingertips through Liliana’s partially transparent hands, so he turned and looked at the cream-colored tentacles instead. “These ropes feel real. Everything I’ve seen here so far looked and felt real. If I didn’t exist, how could I see them or experience them? Is it possible you misunderstood what God said?”

“No. You hear God in your head. His words are clear even if his meaning is sometimes elusive. I did not misunderstand. And, I must add, I am deeply concerned for God. I am meditating as hard as I can for him, every possible second.”

“Why are you worried?” Darren asked. “He’s God. What could ever happen to Him?”

“When you get close to God, you can sense his complete lack of emotion, lack of feelings. I have been close enough to realize this. I am concerned that, if his existence is as empty as he says, and as empty as it appears to be, that God might...” Lobsang stopped and took the edge of his robe and wiped both eyes then said, “He might take his own life.”