

## In Heaven Everything is Fine

John was a normal man. He had a normal pencil-pushing job. There was no family to live with, only his dog Millie. John felt no contempt with God because of his death or of his short life. He felt no remorse with the life he had lived. He was just someone who died, and that was okay with him.

John had seen the light at the end of the tunnel the moment he died, the pearly gates. As he walks forward he can see a skinny man with glasses behind a podium with a large leather bound book on top of it.

“Name.”

“Uhm, John Seely?”

“Enter”

The golden gates open for John and he walks in. Inside is bright, very bright as if the rays of the sun are mere miles away. A man is waiting inside for John. This man is the only other being there. The area is empty and in a constant mist.

“John,” says the man, happy to see him. “Sit.”

John looks behind him questioningly and there stands a Renaissance gothic styled chair where just moments before he had walked. John takes his seat and waits for the man to speak, not knowing what will come next.

“So, John. Please consider me your guide here in heaven...”

“Oh, that’s what this place is. I wondered why it’s so white,” John jokes with a short nervous giggle.

“Yes... anyway. Consider me your guide here. I will show you how to make this place a home for yourself to spend the rest of your eternity. I’m sure soon you will no longer need me at all. Why, you’ll just be able to jump right in.”

John nods questioningly, realizing there isn’t anything else to do at this point.

“Consider this place yours, but ever-growing. Now, everyone is given the same common places to begin with, but before you know it, your heaven will be an entire world for yourself, John.”

John simply nods, as he would in his old life. Simply accepting any information on a new place he knows nothing of.

“Well, come on then.”

The two of them leave and disappear into a mist that seems to be never ending. They follow this lack of path until John notices the ground beneath his feet is wet, as if he is walking into a puddle. His guide continues to walk on further as if nothing has changed. John continues to walk into the water that is now up to his knees and he notices he is now a foot shorter than his guide.

“Uhm, Guide?”

John’s guide looks down at John, who has gone a foot or so deeper into the water. With a puzzled and disappointed look, the guide realizes the problem.

“I completely forgot,” the guide begins. “I guess we can think of this as your first lesson.”

John looks puzzled and decides to go along with whatever the guide is going to say, as long as it gets him out of the water.

“Okay, so the first thing to know about heaven is that it is yours. What I mean by that is every action, bit of scenery, weather, time of day, season, anything you want is controlled by you. Now like I said before, everyone gets the same starters, so unfortunately the Big Man determines on the placement of the water. However, you can choose how to approach it.”

John thinks for a moment, not exactly sure what to go to next. He stares at his guides’ feet wondering if he could mimic what he saw. He takes a step forward, lifting his foot above the water as best he can and tries to step on it, but his foot just sinks down.

“You’re thinking too much about the physical world,” explains the guide,” you can do anything here. Take hold of the inner child we both know you have and use his imagination to get you where you want to go.”

John tries once more. He lifts his foot up above the water and steps down on the surface. Excited, John flashes a smile and goes for the other foot. It’s worked but now John feels something strange beneath his feet.

“Chocolate pudding?” John asks.

“A little too into your inner child there, aren’t you?” responds the guide.

They trek forward on, John slickly picking up his shoes against the pudding floor and the guide walks along just as he did before. They walk on in silence into the thick-misted floor for quite some time, John feels dread at the thought that this is what Heaven is: a thick endless mist to get lost in. But as they walk forward, he can feel brilliant warmth on his skin that makes it feel new.

John and his guide pick up their pace to get to this new place which John is excited to see and the guide is excited to show. They’ve picked up speed. John stops

focusing on the floor being pudding, it becomes solid floor for the first time since he's stood on it.

They can see people now, but John recognizes none of them. His excitement drops and confusion begins to rise once more.

“Where are we?”

“This is the first common place of Heaven. Here you will find those who've been here for a while. I can see that you don't recognize anyone. I must admit I was hoping you'd at least recognize one of them.”

“Wait, so I'm supposed to know who these people are?”

“Well, I sure hope so. They are your relatives.”

“Oh!” John says looking them all over, people of all ages sitting around like they would be at a park: some staring off, some playing chess. “Well, this should be a good time, then. I don't really know much about my ancestors.”

“Well feel free to spend as much time here as you would like. I'll be around so when you're ready to venture on just let me know.”

John is genuinely excited. He doesn't know much about his family because he is adopted. They all shared some sort of physical resemblance, so they must be his birth family's ancestors. They have the same dark thick wavy hair that John keeps clean and short, the same thick brow that hovers over dark green eyes. Their olive skin reflects on the bright sun to make them look pale. John is excited to see the people that he came from, people who left John a secret legacy to follow. He wants to know everything about them, hoping they were successful and good people. He often thought of his birth family

on Earth, hard working and nice people that put others over themselves. Good and wholesome.

John looks them over. Two older women hold hands and stare off into what they must see as a clear day, a few younger boys, who look like they died in the 1930s run around playing some kind of touch football in vintage uniforms, a few older gentlemen play chess. He notices one of the men is playing chess alone and decides to sit with him. The chess man resembles an old bulldog, jowls and all. John realizes this is definitely what he'd look like if he had gotten to live to grow old. They share the serious look that John had while working in his old life. The resemblance is quite striking.

“H—Hi, I’m John”

“Hello John, I’m Chester,” the chess man says without breaking his pensive stare at the board.

“It seems as if I’m related to you... I’ve never known anyone from my family and now they’re all here, the dead ones anyway,” John says with a nervous giggle.

“Well, are you going to make your move or what?”

“Oh, uhm, sure.” John sits across from Chester and gives the board a once over with the same pensive look Chester has on his face. John hesitantly picks up his rook then smiles as he finalizes his move on the board that looks about five or six moves in.

“HA! Rookie move, boy, rookie move.” Chester violently knocks John’s rook with his queenside castle. It makes John smile to see that they have the same competitive sense of humor.

“Do you mind me asking what your life was like?”

Chester looks annoyed at this question. John regrets even asking, but he wants to know.

Chester folds his arms and begins with a sigh. “Hmmm, well I was born in Europe in the late 1800s. I was very ill as a child, kept getting influenza. Teenage years were good to me, I guess. Got a lot of women in those days. Mainly because I was off to war the day I turned 18. I got so many women that I couldn’t tell you if you’re my grandson, nephew, or distant cousin, HA!” This is the first difference between John and Chester. John was always shy and full of moral fiber. To hear someone he closely resembles talk in such a crude way irks John and makes him suddenly tense.

“So, in the war, I was in trenches against the Jerries, and boy was I good with that trigger. I must’ve killed down half of the German army back then. But no man’s land wasn’t all that bad. I remember one night close to the end of the war; we soldiers went down to the nearest city and celebrated our latest victory. Boy, the booze was flowing that night and the local women – though quite different from what we were used to – well, they were just fine by me. I remember one of them getting rough with one of the men. Fightn’ him off, calling him a dirty pig and trying to run, but we men kinda turned it into a game. He’d pass her off to one of us and we’d give her a big ol’ kiss, and then pass her off to the next one. She was a squirrely one, she was. She ended up grabbing a glass bottle and smashing my best friend in the face, but we were just having fun. Before I knew it, her blood was on my hands, the room smelling of fresh gun powder-“

“You killed her?” John interrupts, his mouth hanging open.

“Well, I suppose I did, John. After the war, I came home and was awarded medals and honors, but none of them ever knew what we did to that poor woman. I nearly killed

myself over the whole ordeal, but then I met a special woman who turned me to God and after that I lived a good, boring life – kids, picket fence, good work, and even got damned lucky enough to die in my sleep.”

“I’m confused. How can you be here if you killed another person?”

Chester is a bit offended now, “Well, *boy*, I told you I found religion. Basically, I was saved and asked for forgiveness, and I guess I got it, now didn’t I? Hell, that happened to a lot of us up here. Judy over there.” He motions to one of the women on the bench staring out into nothing. “She was a kleptomaniac in her lifetime, but she went to confess every Sunday, and here she is now.”

“I’m sorry, I just didn’t realize it works like that. I thought, you break a commandment and then that’s it, no more heaven for you.”

“Kind of, John. There is my brother, Peter. He was a great man. Lived by the Bible, like my parents wanted us to do. He had a good life, but he was an adulterer. He had a lovely wife, Caroline, that was just sweet as the days were long, but he met another woman who offered him something that was sweeter than what he had, and that was that. He never felt any remorse for it though, never once asked for forgiveness. I was just as shocked as you when I found out.”

John is confused and mortified. How can a man so bad be here where he is and receives the same love from God? Does God really love all his children as long as they seek his forgiveness? And if He does, what does that mean for man?

“I’m ready to go, now.”

“So soon?” the guide asks, pulling his newspaper down to look up. “Alright I suppose.”

The guide stands from his park bench and leaves his newspaper behind. Putting his hands forward in an “after you” gesture, he lets John lead the way into the misty path up a steep set of stairs.

The stairs are never-ending, making John wish he had chosen a different path. The mist still continues up the stairs. John takes time to blow off steam and collect his thoughts.

“Whoo, I can see these going on forever,” breathes out John.

The guide cavalierly walks up the stairs with his hands in his pockets. He merely snickers at John’s remark.

“How are you not even tired, right now?”

Sweat is pouring off of John now. He looks up at the endless staircase. The guide might as well be running circles around him.

“Well, I guess I just think I’m not tired.”

John halts at the remark. With a confused and tired expression he turns. “So I’m only tired because I think I’m tired?” The guide stares at him with a look that gives John his answer.

John throws his arms up in frustration, “You’ve got to be kidding me. And the stairs?”

“Could’ve been gone many, many steps ago.”

Within a blink they are at the top of the stairs, John looking refreshed as ever except for the peeved look on his face. They continue to walk on, the guide with a boasting smile on his face and a look of contempt on John’s.

They walk forward into what looks like Roman ruins, but no longer ruined. Large arches and pillars mock both the stature of John and his guide. John mouth hangs open in awe. Between the arches draped satin fabric that lines the wall of the coliseum. The ivory of the building shines bright against the beams of light that caress it.

“What is this place?”

“The TV room.”

John looks down at his guide. “You’re joking. A beautiful place like this? Simply used for watching television?”

“What do you mean beautiful?”

John is confused about this question and questioningly stares at his guide. He looks forward at the room within the ruins. It looks like the TV room John had in his childhood home. The room has the same shaggy carpet, small television, and large sectional couch with ugly patterned upholstery as the one John grew up with. Ficuses center the television in the middle of the right wall. John is in shock.

“How is this real?”

“You thought of it, John. As soon as I said ‘TV Room’,” you filled the room yourself, aside from the people that is.”

He looks around and now there was numerous people lining the nauseating print sectional, all glued to a line of televisions that sit between the two ficuses that John grew up with.

“What are they watching?”

“Anything they want,” says the guide. “Some turn to their families on Earth, some turn to friends, others turn to whatever they feel comfortable with.”

John walks forward behind the sectional looking at the programs these people were watching. A man is watching his wife sit in a restaurant with their son as they eat breakfast foods. Another woman watches a box of puppies outside the local Thrifty get adopted one by one. For the first time since he's been here, John feels happiness. He can see whatever he wants on Earth. John sees an empty area of the sectional and moves quickly to the empty seat. He turns on the television that sits in front of him to only see static. He flips the channels and thinks about what he wants to see.

John squints his eyes as he tries to make out the picture coming through the snowy television screen. The outline of desks and figures sitting at them begins to appear. John recognizes this as his work place. He can see the light brown cubicle walls that create the maze within the neutral gray room. John's cubicle is right in the center of the picture. John's desk has still not been cleared off. The calendar reads "November 14," ten days since John arrived.

"How could I have been here for ten days already? It feels more like ten minutes!"

The guide spraying the ficus leaves with a small spray bottle doesn't even look up to explain. "Time moves differently here. Time is a man-made element that God did not need in Heaven. Why have time to measure eternity?"

John nods. This makes some sense to him. He looks back to the television. His coworker, George at the cubicle next to his, is talking to a customer on the phone, playing with a small stress ball, throwing it back and forth while hanging his head. Jillian, the woman on the other side of John's cubicle is taking sips of her coffee as she reads emails. A new squirrely looking kid in a dress shirt, black skinny tie, and pressed dress pants that

reveal just how skinny his legs are comes walking in slowly with the office manager, Greg.

“Now James, this will be your station here, between George and Jillian. Sorry, we haven’t cleared the desk from our last worker. He died. But, oh well. You win some, you lose some.”

John is offended. “How can someone be so callous about losing a worker? A good one, too! I was on time everyday and stayed late whenever I was asked. And what does it get me? A simple ‘he died.’ What the hell?”

“Shut up!” commands someone on the other side of the sectional.

“So what happened to the guy?” James calls out.

“We don’t really know, John. The guy who died, he wasn’t much about talking to other workers,” Jillian answers quickly.

“Hah, yeah. I didn’t even know the guy’s last name,” George chimes in.

“Didn’t he have a dog or something? I thought I heard him talking to some girl who was gonna watch the dog one weekend or something like that?” Jillian asks.

“This little guy?” James says as he picks up the only picture in what was once John’s workspace.

“I guess he did. Hope the dog’s okay,” George says, his eyes glued to his computer screen.

“I wonder what did happen to Millie,” says John. “Maybe I can find her on the screen.”

The screen is fuzzy as John thinks hard about his dog, her long fluffy black and white coat, a white body with black patches that covered her ears, eyes, and random

places around her butt. An Australian Sheppard. Lots of energy, recommended to John as an excuse to get out of his apartment. Lots of love, a good dog for John.

He can see her clearly in his mind, but as much as he focuses, nothing shows up. Angry and confused, John quickly got up to interrogate to his guide, "Where's my dog?"

With a clip board in his hand the guide politely asks, "Name?"

"Millie. Where the hell is my dog?"

"Now, no need for this," he flips through the pages on the clipboard. "Millie... Mill---lie, Millie, ah Millie. She was put down shortly after your death."

"Excuse me?" John is severely angered by this. "What do you mean she was put down? Why would they put down my dog?"

"Well, John, it looks like all the shelters but one were filled up, and she wasn't adopted within the allotted days the shelter gives the dog."

"Well then, why isn't she here? Where is my dog?" John says with gritted teeth.

"Do you remember that really dark Disney movie 'All Dogs Go to Heaven'?"

"Yeah, I remember it."

"They lied."

John is sick. His only friend and companion from life will not be spending eternity with him.

"What the HELL is the point of being in Heaven when I don't have anything to do? I have no one to look down on, no one to spend 'time' with that is a decent human being, and no purpose. I don't want to be here anymore."

"Well you can petition, I suppose, if you really want to."

"Petition?"

“Ask the Big Man if you can go down stairs... way down stairs.”

“Hell?!?”

“Yes, you haven’t been here long enough to be reincarnated, so the only other option is the deep—deep South.”

“No other option?”

“None that I can think of.”

“...Okay, then. Let’s do it.” John takes a deep hard swallow as he realizes what he’s about to do, what he’s about to give up. Mostly, John realizes he’ll be talking to God. The one and only God.

John and his guide are instantly transported into a warm, bright room with gold moldings on the walls. Grecian, Roman, and European Renaissance artwork decorates the room.

“God’s office?”

“Waiting room.”

The small man in glasses who first greeted John opens the large double doors by their golden handles and calls out John’s name. John looks toward the man who cocks his head to the side, motioning to John to enter the room. John steps forward and enters a space illuminated by a single bright light. The light dissipates into an office. A normal high-class business office. A large oak desk fills the far third of the room with a tall leather chair, turned away, obviously occupied.

John stares down at the red carpet below his black patent leather dress shoes and notices his new attire: a gray tailored business suit with a red tie laying flat on his chest exposed by the open sports coat. John can feel the awkward hardness of hair gel slicking

his hair back. He looks back toward the large desk and the bookshelf that covers the top half of the wall.

“John,” a voice calls out from behind the chair.

“G-God?”

“You may call me what you wish. God, Lord, or Big Guy, as your guide likes to refer to me. What ever you wish, my child.”

“I-I-I,” John mutters trying to push the ever-escaping words from his lips.

“Would like to leave? I know.”

“It isn’t that Heaven isn’t a great place. It is. The last thing I’d want to do is insult your creations, sir- uhm, God.”

“You are just not happy with it. I know, I know. You are not the first of my children to not like what I have made for them, you know?”

“I’m not? Really? That is a bit of a relief.”

“The vulpes lagopus would detest the desert and die, just as you would in the tundra without the proper skills. It is all relative my dear son.”

“I see,” John lies.

“So, John, you would like to go elsewhere. My rules dictate that you cannot be reincarnated, as you have not been here long enough. What do you suggest?”

“I suppose Hell is the only other option,” John says, followed by a deep hard swallow.

“Convince me.”

“Pardon?”

“Convince me.”

“Well, sir—God. Upon coming here, I had the best of intentions and as open a mind as I could imagine, after all, the only ones who know what Heaven is like are the ones who have been here.”

John paces and talks with his hands as he searches for the proper words to deliver to God.

“I met my biological family, and thank you dearly for that, but – they’re just not what I would have hoped. I always wanted a big loving family full of people who I could spot as mine from a mile away, which I got! Don’t get me wrong, but I just found that there were others I’d rather be here as opposed to the ones let in. And I mean that with no disrespect of your judgment, sir. I swear!”

God, still facing the bookshelf, rocks his tall leather chair as he listens.

John, still stumbling on his thoughts and words, continues. “Then I came across the television room and, well, I thought it was going to be great. I could watch the things that made me happy, but I really don’t have much to watch... if anything at all. And not to mention my only companion on Earth can’t be in Heaven. I’ve been having trouble learning how to make this place mine. I’d really just like to leave.”

“I am afraid that is just not possible, John.”

“What to you mean? Did I not explain well enough?”

“Oh no, you did a fine job, John. Really, I am just afraid I can not let you go anywhere else.”

“So, the rest of eternity, I’m stuck here? What about reincarnation? Once I’ve been here long enough, can I go back to Earth?”

“I’m afraid you just do not qualify, John. I am very sorry.”

“I don’t qualify for reincarnation and I have to spend the rest of my eternity in a place that has nothing for me. Do I need to beg?”

“It could help your case.”

“Fine!” John gets on his knees and brings his hands together as he pleads.” Please, please, please let me go to Hell. I will be your most loyal servant and most grateful, please.”

The chair begins to shake with laughter as it turns to face John. A tall dark-eyed man in a dead black suit stands with his fingers dug into the desk as his wide laughing smile fills his face.

“My boy, you’ve been here the whole time.”