

## What Comes After

By: Connor Mac Namara

Hand in hand, we walked down a trail, silently, enjoying the company of one another. He broke the silence, and I welcomed it.

"What comes after we die?" he asked me. I was surprised, he was so young and already had these questions. I wondered if he understood them.

"Nothing." I told him. "Nothing comes after you die; you're no longer living."

"When I asked my teacher, she said we go to Heaven with all of our family, and spend forever being happy."

Not surprising. If she's right then I'm going to Hell.

"There's no such thing as Heaven."

"Why would she lie to me?" he asked.

"Well, she's not lying if she thinks she's telling the truth, most people feel the same way as her, and they believe in Heaven, where you never die and get whatever you want. The fact is, you should find comfort in death, because without it our lives wouldn't mean anything. If the whole point of dying was to live forever, then what's the point in living now? Our lives matter more if we only have one chance." He looked down. I wondered if I hurt his feelings. "Bennie?" He raised his head, a reflection of all before him. His face was a mirror of thought and matter.

"The flowers are pretty today." *Oh?* I heard the sound of birds, suddenly, though I'm sure they were chirping before. He was right. Cherry blossoms, tall and looming, they lined the trail as we approached the street, showering the ground with petals. I heard the hum of a bus turning a corner, and it was full of people, each one living, each one feeling. I looked at my boy, his eyes still gazing upward, his pink eyes shimmering in the light of the trees before him, glistening, the whole world pink through his eyes, the whole world gazing into his eyes. Did he hear me? I'm sure he did. "Its beautiful," he uttered, out of breath. I'm so proud that he heard me. "How long do cherry blossoms live, Daddy?"

"Oh... Maybe a while. I don't know." How long do they live? These ones looked old. The bark curled on some edges here and there. Each petal so light and soft, and yet it looked as though they were crushing the tired branches beneath them. The wind would make them sway from time to time, and more petals would drop, weightlessly. Sometimes it looked like a butterfly would flutter down, landing without a sound. But the chirping birds were abundant, surely all the butterflies had been eaten by now.

"My teacher told me they live for about twenty years." He said, sounding proud of himself, looking up at me smiling.

"Why did you ask me if you knew already?"

"I just wanted to see if you knew."

He knows things I don't. He'll know much more than me someday.

"Hey Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"How long do people live?" That I knew, but did he?

"People usually live for about seventy years, but some people can live to be over a hundred." He looked down from me, obviously thinking about something. *Tell me.*

"How long do you think you'll live?"

What could I say?

"It's hard to tell. If I take care of my body, then I could live to be a hundred, maybe. Your great grandpa is 90, so that means I have a chance of being that old."

"When you die and go to heaven, won't you be sad without me? Isn't heaven where you spend time with everyone you love?"

Maybe such a thing would make me happy in heaven. I don't know how it works up there.

"I already told you that heaven doesn't exist." I'm only hoping that's true, because I couldn't imagine being apart from him. I'm selfish I know. But perhaps something as awful as being without him would make me smile in heaven. That's the only logic I can find for such a place.

"Yeah, heaven seems boring anyways."

"Heaven without you would be boring, wouldn't it?"

*Hmmm*, Heaven is an interesting thought I guess. A world devoid of pain, and yet I can't find the sense in that idea. How are we supposed to feel good, if we don't know what bad feels like? If there's no pain, no sadness, no suffering, then how is there bliss, harmony or *goodness*? Am I just forcing complexity through the juxtaposition of opposites? Such a cop out; the poet's cheap way of fabricating depth. But there's truth in it. I've never been happy without pain, so you could say that pain *is* happiness. For some people though, pain is all they feel. Maybe that's where Heaven comes in? Maybe the world needs to suffer endlessly, so that people in Heaven can look down and feel good with their own lack of pain?

The rope bound woman, watching her son beaten in front of her, her child being stolen of all the love she gave him, all the love she could give him, while Aunt Edna, who was buried in 1999, sits with Jerome, sipping lightly on her Earl Grey sighing, "Ohhh yeaah... That's the spot right there. That poor boy. He's fucked for life." She watches down from a lounge on the moon behind the clouds. The mother has stopped crying, and her mind goes blank as she hears the battle cries of her tribesmen skirmishing in the dirt roads of Sahara Africa, fighting over the different gods they pray to. Looking down, ashamed of their creation, the gods weep in each others arms and their tears fall in the West; torrential rains flooding and destroying homes, the families sitting on their rooftops look up to the skies, wondering what sin brought this misfortune upon them. It turns out the gods these men fought for, just didn't believe in them. Aunt Edna watches the cascade of events ripple across the globe, the boy and his mother, the bloodied men, the broken families without a home, it's painting just for her, a piece of ecstasy just for her, all completed with a warm cup of tea. She sips the last of it away, and Jerome floats daintily over, leaving a trail of light behind his wings, and he pours her some more, dropping in a sugar cube of dopamine to get her feeling good. The battles are nice, and they keep your attention in Heaven, but they don't draw the crowd like war.

War.

War is what you pay extra for. That's first class, with lines around the block. Thousands of hearts stop beating at once, each one with a wife, each one with a mother, a child who looks out the window each day, and then the notifier is making his way down the block, stopping by each house with letter. Patricia watches her mother peer through the peephole of the door. The

man turns down the driveway. Up above a theatre tenant begins to giggle, the crowd shushes him, and one man says, "Wait for it!" The mother falls, her back against the closed door, crying, screaming, kicking, her daughter watching. He sets the letter on the doorstep, he can hear the screams, but as he turns to walk away makes eye contact with Patricia by the window, who is smart enough to know her *daddy ain't comin home today*. She stands there, expressionless, blaming herself for not loving him hard enough. The crowd erupts in laughter, clapping and hooting, "Oh that one was cold! Cold I tell ya!"

Down the same street of the Holy Theatre, Ambroise is sitting at a bar sharing a beer with Gunther. The TV plays a scene in black and white, May 1940. Franc, along with Ambroise was deployed the day before to defend France against German forces, in a battle that would be later known as the Fall of France. They were 17 that day. Having just abandoned his brother in arms, Franc hides in a shrub, shivering, sobbing, a constant ring of tinnitus shaking his soul. Between the leaves he sees his dear Ambroise on his knees before the Wehrmacht, begging for his life. Gunther is there too, he holds a Luger in his right hand, a cross in his other, and puts a bullet in Ambroise.

"Prost!" yells Gunther, raising his glass to the TV, an image of his former self, where he looks younger but feels older. Heaven can make you feel young if you want to.

"*Ah oui, acclamations,*" says Ambroise as he pats Gunther on his shoulder, and they clink glasses, each of their drinks spilling into the other. They look back up at the TV, and now it's 1989, in full color. Franc is 66, and no longer able to take care of himself. His nurse lies him down, changes his diaper, cleans his bedsores, and gives him a glass of water. Drinking is the only thing he is able to do by himself.

"Boire tout," she tells him. He drinks it all. He lowers the glass and the nurse looks him in the eyes. There's something in the distance, Franc can barely see it.

"Reach out," says Ambroise in a thick, french accent. "*Atteindre.*" Gunther smirks and playfully jabs him with his elbow.

"You cheeky bastard!" The program continues, and a close-up of Franc's eyes is all that's visible on the screen, blue-grey eyes looking through and through, past the leaves, as if they see Ambroise, lying dead in the bloodied streets of France. "Oooh, gives me chills. It's like he can see through the screen!" Ambroise cheerfully waves, his eyes squinting, his grin from ear to ear.

"Hi there!" he whispers. Gunther slams the table, barely keeping his composure as he laughs full gut. They share a laugh, and look back up, Franc's eyes still staring emptily, distantly, and they laugh harder.

"Too much," says Ambroise out of breath, nearly falling to the floor, "Oh my, that was way too much!" They spend the rest of the night getting drunker and drunker, even though they only had one drink each. TV will do that to you in Heaven.

Meanwhile, Margaret is on her deathbed, holding her son's hand. "I've had a good life, Jimmy, and someday your kids will too." Jimmy races cars and gets paid for it. Good money. His mom is proud. Jimmy can see it in her smile.

"I love you mom." He says, containing himself from crying.

"I'll see you in heaven, sweetie." Jimmy puts his head in his mother's dying lap and thinks, *watch me mom, watch me drive!*

She will, the big race is next week, he'll crash fatally with seven other drivers, a televised tragedy. Jimmy's wife and kids will sit in the stands of the stadium watching in horror, and Ol' Margey will sit in the stands in the clouds watching with glee. As the fire envelopes Jimmy's car, he'll appear smiling in the Holy Speedway of Heaven, where he's always first, and he can turn those corners with ease, and he can race forever, racing nobody, but checking his rear view for his wife and kids as they walk the halls of their quiet home, gazing into the silver of his trophies, still wondering years later how to live without him. Jimmy gives his mother a wave down from the track as he passes her, his engine screaming, his heart soaring, his hopeless family in the pit, where he stops by after ten laps and refuels on their sorrow, changing his tires with their grief, occasionally cleaning his windows and mirrors with their tears, and he's off, only a memory down the track. Down below, his kids sit with their mother like Jimmy did with his, but this time mom's in a coma, overdosed on antidepressants. Jimmy's money put them in a nice hospital, where they can walk out to the courtyard right next to their mother's room. Up in the trees, some birds chirp in tempo with the bedside monitor, bobbing their heads, singing along with a machine they don't understand. As it beeps faster, the birds chirp with it, keeping up until it flat lines and they lose track, a haze of chirps and tweets. The harmony is lovely.

*Oh, the birds?* They have been chirping all this time. My boy, he's still holding my hand.

"What's on your mind, buddy?" I ask him. He looks down again.

"I feel like I'm falling," he says as he raises his gaze to the sky, pink and blue. "Like the petals from a tree." This boy is special, so aware, so acutely aware of his place in the world, falling, no control, *like the petals from a tree*. Those are his words not mine. I'm so glad he's my boy.

"That's very poetic of you son."

"Oh." he says, unaware of his genius, but aware of all around him. I'm pretty sure he's already found the answers to his questions, and he's only asking me as some sort of confirmation to something he already figured out. "Can we get ice cream, Daddy?" Sometimes he has to remind me that he's just a boy, new to this world and its contents. He does such a good job of making me forget that.

"I don't see why not." He lights up with glee. Still holding my hand, I can feel his emotion, barely contained by his small body, a tiny vessel unable to hold all his feelings and thoughts. He has to tense up, kick about, jump up and down as his being pours through his physical self. He is only a boy after all, full of thought and wonder, and wanting ice cream. I have no reason to deny him that.