

## Heaven or Hell

I opened my eyes and peeked around. I was in tall grass, just laying there on the dewdrop covered ground as the green blades grazed my pale, nearly translucent skin, which was glowing under the soft moonlight. But, how did I get outside? I was just tucked safely in my bed, on my street lined with houses, all dusted with snow. I was simply trying to be released from this fever that had been clinging to me for weeks like a parasite. I remembered seeing the snow before I went to sleep. I enjoyed watching it fall because my town reminds me of a Christmas setup, like we are all living in a lineup of snowglobes. And I decided to fall asleep in my onesie with candy canes all over it. How did I manage to get here, in this tall grassy field under the moonlight with no one else around me? I stood up slowly, my legs and back sore and creaking as I stretched on the tips of my toes, reaching towards the stars. I was barefoot, feet touching the ground. I was no longer in my onesie but in a long, flowing white dress that was hitting my ankles in the wind. Then it hit me, the disorientation, the confusion, the fear. I pinched myself hard, so hard blood began to drip from the mark. Where was I? Where were my parents? How did I get here? How do I get back? "Help! Help me! HELP ME!" I said spinning around, looking for any other life source. That's when I saw him.

He was like the villain of some scary movie I would stay up to watch on cable as I would study for all of these useless college tests. He was tall and dressed in all black, shadowy and frightening. As he looked up to the moon with a gasping breath I got a glimpse of his face. Brown skin with startlingly gray eyes, I think I had seen him before. I could remember those eyes, I just couldn't recall from where. His jaw was sharp and his mouth was pressed into a hard line. He looked back down and began walking slowly towards me. I wanted to run, but what was I running to? I didn't know where I was, so I just stood there paralyzed with fear as I looked up at this strange person. That's when the fireworks exploded around us.

The sky exploded with bright blues, purples, greens, reds, whites, and golds. They were like humongous stars lighting up our faces. Their spectacularness rivaled that of the Aurora Borealis. I shook it out of my head though, as I started screaming as loud as I could. "Who are

you? Where are we? How do I get back home?” “My name is Lima,” he said somehow understandably without even yelling. “And you, Katerina, you are in heaven.” I began screaming rejections and mercies at the top of my lungs, he began trying to remind me as he stepped closer. I pushed him away as my eyes fogged with tears, and head pounding so much that I didn’t even notice when the little droplets of fire began falling around me growing into huge flames. They touched my ankles, then my legs, then began scorching the fabric of my dress. It hurt so much, and Lima just watched me writhe in pain and scream in agony until it engulfed my face and everything turned black.

My eyes popped open as I immediately reached for my face and my dress. Somehow my dress had turned into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. My face and hair were still there, though, and they felt the same. This time I wasn’t in a grassy field, instead, I was in a park. I couldn’t see anything from where I was so I moved higher. I climbed up the plastic rock wall until I got to the top floor of the park complex and I could see everything around me, but there was still nothing in view, just another park over and over. It reminded me of when I was being bullied and had my pants pulled down right in front of everybody by these goons whose names I never bothered to learn.

Before I could remember the rest of the memory, a shadow appeared directly behind me and goosebumps went up my spine. “Lima,” I gathered without even having to turn around. He grabbed my hand as we launched high up in the air. As we floated down I couldn’t help but recognize how gorgeous the clear sky was, and how Lima’s eyes glowed silver in the sun. Once we reached the ground, I tugged harshly away from him and smacked him right across his chiseled face. “This isn’t heaven, because I’m not dead! Also how can you fly?” “I can fly because this is heaven, this is our heaven, Katerina.” I stumbled over my own foot and Lima offered me his hand once again. I took it as he went into another monologue. “I remember this park, I loved it here. This is where I realized who was the love of my life. I offered her some of my food. I had so many good memories here. How can this not be heaven?”

“It’s not heaven because what was that before. We were in a grassy field watching fireworks and I died. I *literally* got eaten alive by fire and I could feel it. Plus, I don’t even know who you are and I hate parks. But most of all, this is not heaven because I’m not dead!” In my tangent, I tripped again, right onto my knees. What I tripped over though definitely wasn’t a part of my heaven.

This time Lima didn’t reach out his hand to stop me from falling. I hit the ground sliding and scraping a hole in my jeans. I looked up at the tall, shadowy man in front of me, then to what I tripped over. It was a beautiful bird, purple, green, blue, and silver, shining underneath the light of the setting sun. It seemed fine, a little wounded, hopping around for a while, but then it started to twitch and curl up releasing one final squawk. As its heart stopped beating out of its chest and it lacked all movement, it lost all beauty that it once had in its living state. That’s when I finally realized what it was, a moment too late.

A billion other crows like the dead one across from me began swooping down on me before I could make it to my feet. They were vicious creatures, talons as sharp as knives, beaks as pointed as the tip of a spear, wings that could bruise you with a hit, and bird calls that were so loud they could cause deafness. I tried to swat them away but one put their beak straight into my hand, then they crawled across my face and my stomach, a wing hit me across my face causing black spots all throughout my vision. Just when I regained my ability to see though, it was of no use, there were already two with beaks and claws lodged into my heart. I felt the worst pain in the entire world and then relief as I faded away.

I woke up with my arms thrashing, like a dog struggling to stay afloat. I was wearing a pretty blue dress and uncomfortable heels that felt too tight and suffocating around my feet. I kicked them off and stared up at the ceiling with the gorgeous disco ball and the lights floating across. For a moment I wished that I could just stay there. Maybe I was dead, maybe it might be true, I did go to sleep very sleepy but at peace with the world. How much more of this could I take? I was so confused. I’ve never done anything wrong. I’ve only drunk a single beer, I’ve never

smoked, I don't normally cuss, and I've never committed any sins. Why am I stuck inside this hell? For a second, I just thought, maybe if I stay here alone I won't die and go to another version. That's when Lima appeared next to me, whooshed me up, and began to dance with me. We rocked back and forth under the lights. My first middle school dance is the thought that came to mind. I was having so much fun, my bullies got embarrassed as I got to laugh, but of course, they got their revenge. I shook the sad memory out of my head and continued rocking back and forth as Lima began whispering in my ear.

“Dear Katerina, you are so pretty. I remember being at a dance. It was so embarrassing. I was such a dork back in those days.” I decided to at least try and make polite conversation, maybe then nothing bad would happen. “So, what happened?” “Oh, it's too embarrassing to even recall and the girl I loved laughed at me too. It's ok though I forgave her.” He went to spin me around but was unable and his hand got twisted around and he tripped over his shoes, similar to how my bullies did back then. It was so funny that I laughed, without even thinking I laughed. I felt a chill go across the room as he let me go. For a moment I thought, I'm such a horrible person, I just laughed at him and I've been being such a jerk. The lights turned a rainbow color and spun around making everything feel trippy and out of control. I fell down, a sharp pain shooting through my back, shattering my spine, paralyzing me. “Gahhh, it hurts! It hurts! Please! Please help me Lima!” I said crying. He held up a fist as the lights stopped and everything felt still for a moment. He walked over like the angel of death, eyes dark, and stomped down on my skull ending my afterlife with a crunch.

I came to once again, surrounded by loud music with pounding bass and an equally pounding headache. I was at a concert, the concert I went to go to years ago that I found out my tormentors would be at a little too late. Now, I was dancing to the Migos with my closest friends, dancing, laughing, eating, and singing along. I touched my bare arms and I could feel goosebumps from my cold hands, I stepped on my foot and it hurt, I ate the candy in my hand and I could taste it. I was with my friends at a regular concert. I could feel, hear, see, smell, and

taste. Lima was nowhere in sight with his dark eyes, or my bullies who chased me to a concert years ago trying to hit on me as I tried to fend them off. This concert was the opposite, so filled with light, maybe I was finally in heaven. “Hey girls, did you miss me?” I asked my friends. “Girls? Girls? GIRLS!” I waved my hands in front of their faces, but they couldn’t see me or hear me. Then all in one instant, the place became as dark as Lima’s eyes as I heard his voice, “they can’t hear you sweetie, you’re in heaven but they aren’t dead. I’m the only one who can hear you. This is the first time I kissed the woman I loved. Stay in this heaven with me. This is heaven Katerina, you can trust me.” I decided to risk it, fight back, and run.

I ran through the dark concert bumping past people, running into them, knocking people out of my way. They couldn’t feel me anyways and maybe I should just become as horrible as the place I’m stuck in to get out. I ran on my sore feet from dancing, with my stomach churning from the sugar I ate. I didn’t stop until I reached the bathroom which was filled with light and collapsed against the wall with a glistening forehead, a heaving chest, and tears in my eyes. God, I have to get out of here, I just kept thinking that. Somehow he found me, entering the room silently because I blinked and he was there. He grabbed my arm tightly and pushed me back so I couldn’t move. He released me. Run, run Kat, I told myself but I was too slow on my blistered feet.

He began hugging me and kissing me as those monsters did during my eighth-grade year. I should’ve told somebody but my fear was too great, and I felt so much shame. I just wanted to live my life. That’s how I managed to forget their evil faces and their godforsaken names. I thought I was done with those bullies, but now someone I didn’t know was bullying me worse and preaching heaven. I couldn’t be a victim again. I was a victim back then and I was a victim for the past times he did this to me, it would hurt but I had to fight. I kicked him in the leg, clawed at his face, and hit him so hard blood started to trail from his nose and his lips. I swung and kicked until my legs could barely support me and my arms felt limp. He was hurt though, and that was all that mattered. Like magic though, he whispered something unintelligible, it sounded vaguely like names, but I couldn’t tell. Or, I just didn’t have time to

decipher it before he threw me from the wall to the sink on the other side of the room. My skull and nose hit it, leaving blood. I saw stars, so bright and beautiful, just before I died again

I woke up again slowly, barely lucid. I felt loopy as if somebody put me back on those medicines that I was on before I went to sleep, no, died the night before. Lima was in front of me in an all black suit and tie, with an exhausted look on his face. “Katerina, I can’t keep playing these games with you. I am trying to love you, you love me too, you have to love me! This is our heaven, me and you. We finally got our heaven after all of those years where we were stuck in the mortal world surrounded by petty distractions. You finally can love me and be in heaven! I remember, here is where I went on a date with my love, and some jerk tried to ruin it but I defended her. This is heaven so many good memories, so many good memories, this is heaven. This is heaven believe me Katerina. Love me! This is HEAVEN!”

I wanted to lunge forward and rip that smug love-struck look off his face. My hands and feet were tied to the chair I was in. I spat out the gag in my mouth as he stopped his madman mutterings. “No this isn’t HEAVEN! I hated restaurants ever since I was a high schooler and my first date was ruined by these teenage idiotic jerks. You’re just like them! Actually, no you’re worse! You keep causing me to die and you won’t let me go. You are abusive. You are torture. You are Hell! I hope you die.” I spit right into the face of the man in front of me, no longer scared of death. But the demon inside of him was far more terrible this time.

He screamed with a voice so loud blood began to drip out of my ears. “I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!” Lima got up still screaming and undid the restraints on my chair. Thank god I’m free, I kept thinking through the loudness of his screams. I made feeble attempts to stand, but my legs were like jelly, and I fell right back into the strong arms of my captor. He picked me up since I was too weak to thrash, as we went outside the restaurant overlooking a lake shaped like an upside down cross. He turned me around and began stroking honey blonde strands out of my face and his fingertips touched my cheek. I forced myself to stay there as tears of exhaustion, anger, sadness, and desperation streamed down. “Oh

Katerina, you're useless," he said, ever so composed. That's when it all came back to me. The words, the face, the person, and the truth. Only seconds too late as he broke my neck and threw me into the freezing water.

I woke up in my room. I was curled in my bed, head resting on my pillow. I stood up, telling myself that I was strong and then I became so. Lima appeared in a shadow in front of me walking me back to the bed. I sat next to him as he said, "I didn't mean what I said before. Please forgive me," in a pitiful yet carefully calculated voice. I hugged him, arms wrapping around him, head on his empty chest with no beating heart. He released a sigh, but before he could begin talking again, I spoke, clear and confident.

"Luther. I remember you now." I paused to look up at his face and remember all the harm he did me as a child and even more now. "The field is where you and your buddies took me as a target for the first time over the summer. The park is where you offered me food that I turned down because of my allergy to it, and you decided to humiliate me. The dance is where you, and the rest of the bullies like you got embarrassed and I laughed because it was so ironic, and y'all made sure I paid for my laughter. The concert is where you were most likely the ringleader in my sexual assault after I tried so hard to get away from you. The restaurant is where you ruined my final good moment before finally getting sent away, all due to your jealousy that I rejected your date from 2 weeks before." I held on tighter so he couldn't hurt me. "Somewhere in your sick and twisted mind you made these moments good but I know the truth. I remember that you told me how useless I was right as you left the restaurant. The words that left me with depression and having to go to counseling. I remember it *all*. See Luther, or Lima, or whoever you think you are. This is not heaven. *You* are not an angel. This might be your heaven but this is my hell. And if I'm making your heaven so great, then all of that is soon to be over because I don't deserve to suffer *YOU DO!* You're a monster, a torturer, a captor, an abuser, a bully, and the Devil himself." He took me up, as if I weighed nothing and slammed my head on the bedpost, like I was no more than a mere rag doll. Before he got the

chance to finally kill me, and before my world dimmed. I told myself, or whoever was desperately trying to help me that I had a gun. I repeated it over and over like a mantra under my breath until finally I could feel the metal weapon in my hand. It was already loaded and ready for fire. I didn't hesitate, I didn't feel anything at all as I pulled the trigger and shot him directly in the heart. As I died once again I watched the light fade from his evil eyes, and passed on with a smile.

I woke up again, thrashing and screaming like a wild animal. All of my happiness of being able to kill my demons instantly faded. Was this the afterlife I was destined to. Years of living after death in torture and agony with someone I hated. A billion more terrifying images came into my head of me managing to live with him, with it, with whatever he was. Learning how he died and feeling sympathy, messing up and him killing me, coming back to afterlife until I became essentially like a vegetable or an end table. I closed my eyes and sobbed, I couldn't even bring myself to face him once again, in another terrible hellscape, with a terrible demon, I couldn't do it again. All of a sudden, I heard other voices, not the one of Lima, but some soft, some light, some deep, all quiet, none like his. I reached out tentatively around me, fingertips touching something soft, like a pillow, or a bed, or maybe a cloud. I opened my brown eyes to see billowing white clouds all around me, surrounding me, holding me as if I was a baby. Glowing figures with long hair and magical hands stood around me talking. I was under a golden light, in a bubble, with smiling faces and a safe feeling. I stood up, questions of the fate of the Devil in my eyes, answered with a slow nod by God himself. They took my bruised arms and fragile hands in theirs, as we walked through the gates of heaven, and I would never see hell again.