

ONE

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Charlie woke in the darkness, shivering. The memory of the accident returned. But he was not in a hospital bed. And not in pain. Something sharp poked him in the back. With his right hand, he touched a nugget of a rough stone floor. Why wasn't he on a stretcher?

"Where am I?"

If only he could see. The absolute darkness frightened him.

Dead. The thought flashed through him like a lightning bolt. He must be dead. That's why he didn't feel any pain after the crash. Is this what death felt like? Where was the warm light that was supposed to welcome the dead? Where was his daughter?

"Laura!" His voice echoed through the darkness. If she didn't survive, did she end up here?

Laura did not answer.

She'd noticed the sports car that rode their bumper and leaned forward to look in the rearview mirror. "What's the rush, man? Give us some room."

“Your game is over, Laura. We don’t need to challenge him.” Charlie drove toward the intersection. The windshield wiper swept away the raindrops. He replayed a few plays from the volleyball game in his mind. She played well today, and her team won.

“Lucky you.” Laura laughed. “We have a green light again.”

Charlie chuckled with her. His daughter brought him good luck, even on the rain-slicked road tonight. He chose the straight lane, and a new lane opened for the right turn. The sports car’s engine roared. The driver took this new lane, passed them at high speed, and turned right at the intersection.

Headlights approached Charlie from the left. Tires squealed. Laura screamed. With full force, a large, dark vehicle slammed into them in the middle of the intersection. Their car rolled over until it came to rest on its roof in the ditch. The sound of shattering glass and crashing metal echoed in Charlie’s ears long after all had gone quiet.

Much too quiet. Laura no longer screamed. He hung upside down in the seat belt, the weight of his back pressing his head against the roof.

A car pulled up nearby. Doors opened. Snatches of words drifted to Charlie from the street. He strained to look at his daughter but couldn’t move his neck. “Laura!” He wiggled to free himself. His twisted neck hurt. “Oh, God.”

More vehicles stopped. Doors slammed.

The pressure on his neck grew in this uncomfortable position. Blood rushed to his head. The world spun around him. His lungs burned. Was Laura okay? If she was hurt, or worse—

A man spoke beside the shattered window. “We’ve got two injured.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. *Please, just check on my daughter. I’ll be okay.*

The car rocked for a few seconds. “The door is crushed. I can’t get it open.” He bent down to Charlie. “Hang in there. The fire department will get you out of the car soon.”

Before the paramedics arrived, he must have lost consciousness.

“Help!”

If he wasn’t dead, why had he been left on stony ground in dead silence instead of being placed on a stretcher or hospital bed? Tormenting questions forced their way out of his subconscious. If he was dead, what would happen to his daughter? Who would help her grow up? The pain of uncertainty about her health stabbed at his heart.

What would become of Sarah now that he was gone? “Till death do us part,” they’d said. She’d mentioned divorce several times recently, but Charlie always refused. He still loved her.

“But you love yourself more.” Sarah’s accusation, screamed right after she threw a cup at him for the third

time in their marriage, still echoed in his thoughts. Only this time, the cup still held hot coffee. Charlie reached for the spot on his forearm where a red welt bore witness to the incident. Before the accident, the touch had hurt. Now he felt nothing.

He pursed his lips. Yes, he must be dead.

“But where is the damned light that draws me to the beautiful place?” He clenched his fists in the darkness. His heart pounded in his temples, and beads of sweat rolled down his forehead despite the cold. Was he damned? Was this hell? Maybe that’s why the light didn’t come to take him to a better afterlife.

Charlie considered himself a kind person. He donated to the disadvantaged and cared about the environment. He treated his wife and daughter well, or at least as best as he could. He was always honest and worked hard to earn his salary.

Could this be hell? No, that was ridiculous. Hell burned like fire, but here he wished for a thick jacket and gloves.

Still, deep darkness surrounded him. He stood and felt his way forward a few yards. Everything remained the same—dead silence, pitch-black darkness, icy cold, and rough stones.

A dim, blue glow in the distance caught his attention. The light hovered over the horizon and then disappeared. At least he could rule out blindness as the cause of the darkness. In the light’s momentary appearance, he’d seen

water just ahead. A vast lake or perhaps an ocean. A rocky cliff jutted up not far away. Maybe he could find a way out if he had a little light. But in the darkness, it was futile.

The light reappeared and hovered over the water as before. Stone desert as far as his eyes could reach. A landscape without form and empty. Just like he felt inside.

Why was he here?

The light streamed straight toward Charlie. The closer it came, the brighter and warmer it shone. Was this the mysterious "Light" that carried people from hell to heaven? When little Laura asked him about heaven, he'd told her, "After death, it's all over. There is no heaven." It seemed the least complicated. But it was not the whole truth. Deep down, he did believe in a life after death.

The light reached the cliff and rose into the air. A blast washed over Charlie with overwhelming intensity. The brightness intensified, accompanied by a violent shock-wave. Charlie shielded his eyes. His knees buckled, and he fell forward onto the hard stones. The light touched him so intensely that Charlie lost his breath, as if he'd been engulfed by a giant wave on the beach. He screamed against the thunderous noise which accompanied the shock wave.

Charlie's thoughts became crystal clear. He knew Sarah was right—he loved himself more than he loved her. The light sucked his darkest secrets out of him and played them out before his eyes like a movie. His wife in tears while he remained stubborn in his position. His daughter's disappointed face when he appeared in the auditorium dur-

ing the final applause. Shame and self-disgust washed over him, even though he thought some of these secrets were harmless. He no longer felt like a good person.

The light disappeared into the distance, leaving him alone on the rough stones.

Only now could Charlie's brain process the overwhelming sensations. Not the force of the wind had knocked him down. It was his awe of that force.

As the comforting warmth faded and silence surrounded him. Something was missing in Charlie's life. The power of that encounter revealed it. He longed for true feelings, deep encounters, and a meaningful purpose. As the force washed over him, he experienced a true and genuine sense of life.

Only twice in his life had he felt such genuine emotions. The first time happened during the birth of his daughter. Everyday problems and struggles faded away, replaced by an overwhelming sensation.

The second time he felt this in tune with his emotions was at a friend's funeral. He had never lost someone close to him before. Because of a short, serious illness, his friend was now gone, leaving only the memories they'd shared. The emotions at the funeral were not pleasant, but genuine. More so than any of his most intense experiences at a concert or sporting event.

The touch of the light combined both feelings experienced at the funeral and the birth. Death, as well as life.

The cold as well as the warmth. Hardness and softness.
The sacred, as well as love.

Sarah had once explained hell to Laura. "Hell is where there is no love."

Charlie marveled that although the pressure wave had shown his bad traits, he had also felt acceptance and at home. Wasn't that something like love?

"So this can't be hell."

"This is not hell," a voice said from behind.

Charlie spun and fell backward over a rock.

A man with a flashlight stood a few feet away. Despite the cold, he wore light pants and a short-sleeved shirt.

Charlie stammered, "Where am I? And where is Laura?"

Two

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The man shone his lamp over the stone landscape. “True, here the earth is without form and empty. But no, it’s not hell.” He pointed the beam of light at a large rock next to Charlie. “Let’s sit down.”

Charlie scrambled to his feet. “First, tell me where we are.”

“This is the beginning.” The man sat on the stone. “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. But the earth is still without form and void.”

“And dark as hell.” Charlie laughed. “Don’t tell me fairy tales. You’re holding a flashlight. They didn’t exist millions of years ago. Where are we?”

The man chuckled.

Charlie frowned. “Who are you? Am I in a hidden camera show?”

The man stood and offered his hand. “I’m Daniel. Nice to meet you, Charlie.”

“You know my name.”

“I’m your tour guide.”

“What tour?”

"You are chosen to receive a special insight into life."

Charlie backed away. "Do I have to go on this trip?"

"You can get out at any point. Everything here is voluntary."

Charlie scanned the room for an exit. "Okay, I'm leaving."

"Voluntary doesn't mean nothing here matters. Voluntary means you're not forced. Do you know what you're saying no to when you quit?"

"Sure, I know. I say no to darkness, no form, and emptiness." Charlie shook his head. "There is nothing here. No restaurants, no bed, no internet."

Daniel smiled. "You have no idea."

"Okay, know-it-all, enlighten me."

"Does this mean you want to stay? Voluntarily?"

Charlie hesitated.

"I'll make you a deal."

Charlie had pitched many deals that sounded excellent to clients, but the real winners were the shareholders and, at the end of the year, Charlie with an increased bonus. The man could not fool him. "Okay, tell me."

"Come and see what comes out of this desert," Daniel said. "If you don't like it, let me know. The journey ends, and you return to your old life. But I advise you to stay."

Charlie sat on the large stone. The landscape had no incentive to stay. But more than anything, he wanted to return to those genuine feelings he had experienced in the

light. Staying improved his chances of a new encounter. "What's the catch?"

Daniel smiled. "This experience will change you. The journey won't always be easy, but it's worth it."

Charlie's mind wandered. Staying made little sense, but his gut told him to do it.

"You're not even listening to me." Daniel waved the flashlight at Charlie's face.

"What about Laura?" Charlie blurted. "How is she?"

Daniel put a hand on his shoulder. "It doesn't look good. She's being taken to the hospital by helicopter as we speak. She'll have surgery."

"I need to see her."

"We can interrupt our journey. You will go back to your old life and return here when the time is right."

Charlie furrowed his brow. "I'm going back? Does it mean I'm not dead?"

"You're not even hurt. Just unconscious. When the doctors see the pictures of the car wreck, they'll call your condition a miracle."

Overwhelmed, Charlie steadied himself with both hands on the stone. "But how do I get back here?"

"Find a comfortable spot, sit back, and I'll do the rest."

"Okay. And where do we go from here?"

"Let there be light," a voice said.

And there was light.