

Heaven Sent

A *Way of the World* investigation has uncovered a spate of reports in local newspapers, all with a similar strange story. The protagonist has been lost in tragic or violent circumstances, presumed dead – but a few days later he reappears, unharmed, yet he refuses to explain what happened to him. But now, in a WotW exclusive, one man has agreed to tell his story, asking only for anonymity and a five-figure fee. He had disappeared in a snowstorm while climbing in the Cairngorms, but a week later he descended again. This is what he said...

Hours after my fatal fall, I had the near-death experience you hear about: the agonising pain and hypothermia faded, and I floated upward, away from my body. Then I felt myself sucked through a dark tunnel, faster and faster, towards a point of bright light, which grew and grew until I emerged into a vast park: green lawns and flowerbeds, dotted with gleaming glasshouses lit from within by an ethereal glow. At first glance it looked familiar.

“Am I in Kew?” I asked an old man with a long grey beard who was standing by the entrance.

“A queue? No, there’s no queue. Come straight in! Enter unto the Garden of Eden, my son.”

He scanned my National Trust card and gave me a leaflet detailing the Garden’s historic links to slavery, ophidiophilia, fratricide and female stereotypical victim-shaming.

As I walked down the stairway and into the park I soon realised that this wasn’t Kew Gardens. The streams were flowing with full-fat milk and Manuka honey, and I passed a giant chocolate fountain. A small orchard was cordoned off by a barbed-wire fence. Chillout tracks played through loudspeakers hidden in the greenery, which was all in soft focus. And there was no litter (apart from the discarded leaflets).

Signposts indicated different paths leading to the crystal pavilions. The most impressive were written in Arabic and Hebrew, but I eventually found a small faded sign saying ‘Heaven (C of E)’ with a flag of St George in the bottom right corner. The weed-strewn path led me to a rather scruffy glasshouse, its panes dirty and one of them broken – but I knew that this was the Anglican heaven because of the pearly gates at the entrance. Though, coming closer, I saw they were actually of pearl-effect melamine. The sound of a choir practice came through the broken pane. There was no-one around. I rattled the gates but they were locked. Then I noticed an answerphone on the wall; I pressed the button and it crackled into life.

After giving my full name and dates of birth and death, and answering a series of security questions, there was a recorded announcement:

“Welcome to the Gates of Heaven (Church of England). Your visit is important to us. However we are currently experiencing higher than usual call volumes; please wait and a member of St Peter’s Reception Team will be with you shortly.”

Then it started playing a tinny melody: *Jerusalem*, over and over.

Half an hour later, I remembered that in the Muslim heaven, male believers are rewarded with 72 dark-eyed virgins, and I was about to go and look for it when a fiery chariot drew up. On its side was a slogan:

SUPPORTING THE ANDROGYNOUS COMMUNITY

in rainbow colours. On board were three willowy youths with wispy blond hair, pale skin and small diaphanous wings, dressed in white surplices. Their leader descended and addressed me.

“Yes? What do you want?” he asked in a very abrupt tone.

“Well – to enter into Heaven, of course,” I replied with equal annoyance.

“Full name? Dates of birth and death? Name of your first pet?” Like Moses, he was holding a large tablet. As I answered he tapped on its screen, and finally swiped left. Then he looked up at me. “Sorry, mate. Computer says No.”

“But that’s ridiculous! I know my rights. I demand a fair hearing. I demand...”

He sighed. “Oh, for God’s sake! Alright, get on the chariot.”

I started to remonstrate with him. Meanwhile, two bearded men dressed in climbing outfits like mine came along the path. The angel bowed, then pressed a button on a key fob he took from his shoulder bag and the pearly gates swung open to admit them. One of them gave me a smile and a thumbs-up sign as he passed by.

For a moment I was speechless. Then I lost my temper.

“You... They... What...? You let that pair into Heaven without any question, but you treat me like a second-class citizen! It’s blatant discrimination! I want a lawyer: I want to lodge an appeal...”

Like Moses, he threw down his tablet in frustration; it floated gently to the ground. “What on Earth’s wrong with you people these days? The Buddhists don’t have this trouble with their adherents. Just shut up and get on the bloody chariot, or you can go to Hell!”

They took me to a three-star hotel on the outskirts of the park. I spent days sitting in isolation in a grey concrete room: no television, and only the Gideon Bible to read. The food was terrible: Ambrosia rice pudding for every meal. The corridor outside was patrolled by a security guard with a three-headed dog.

I guessed that I was being held in pre-Heaven quarantine, and indeed on the seventh day a senior angel appeared. He perched on the end of the bed, folded his magnificent wings and smiled beatifically at me.

“How nice to meet you. To meet you, nice! I’m Archangel Evelyn. Sorry it’s taken so long to assess your case. And apologies for Angel Hilary being a bit brusque when you arrived. He’s stressed out. We’ve all been rushed off our feet because of this pandemic you’re having down on Earth. Flooded with new arrivals, which is why we’re using this holding facility.”

“I thought that St Peter welcomes everyone in? Those two men who arrived at the same time as me – your angel just waved them through. No assessment.”

“No need. They were members of the Search and Rescue team who were looking for you on the mountain. They slipped and lost their lives trying to save you.

“Anyway, it’s not that simple. Our share of the Firmament isn’t infinite, you know, and we’re getting close to capacity. First there was the influx of martyrs from what used to be the Holy Land, and now all the additional deaths from Covid. Then there are new sects forming all the time, demanding their own Paradise pavilion and piece of *Sterbensraum* territory. We’re seriously thinking of following the Buddhists and introducing reincarnation – soul recycling – to control the population. We can’t go on for ever taking in everyone who claims to be C of E; we’ve introduced a points-based immigration system. And I’m afraid you haven’t earned the requisite number...”

“What? But I’m a good Christian! I’ve been baptised, and Confirmed. I go to Communion every Sunday. Well, not *every* Sunday, but certainly at Christmas and Easter. Until lockdown, of course. But I pray every night, and...”

“Unfortunately church-going doesn’t count for very much, these days. Most people just do it so as to get their kids into our schools. And prayers asking for God’s intercession put an extra burden on our already overstretched pastoral health service. It’s good deeds which count. Like with those unfortunate rescuers. No, I’m afraid you’ll have to go back.”

“Wait a minute! What about my human rights? My right to a family life? My dear wife passed away a couple of years back. She must be up here – she was always doing good deeds and looking after the house. We were inseparable; I was heartbroken when she died. She’ll vouch...”

“Actually, I already checked with her, if she would sponsor you. Her response was a bit less than enthusiastic.” He tapped on the tablet he held, and then quoted from it. “ ‘No way! The bastard can burn in Hell, for all I care!’ Hm, not very charitable. But no luck there.”

I confess, I started to cry. He put a consoling hand on my knee.

“Look, if you really don’t want to return to Earth, you could always try the Other Place, like she says. They’ll take anyone in: terrorists, murderers, rapists, even politicians. Fallen Archangel Maalik, my counterpart down at the Hades reception furnace is always teasing me that their open-door policy is more humanitarian and compassionate than ours. Mind you, they have a lot of religious fanatics running things in Hell nowadays. But up here we’re more concerned about our residents’ quality of afterlife.”

“No! I’m not going to Hell!”

“I know it has a bad reputation, but...”

“No!”

He sighed. “You are an awkward customer, to be sure. But I don’t have time to argue. I’m sending you back. Do some good works, give your money to charity before you come here again. And a word of advice: don’t try to return by deliberately putting yourself in mortal danger. Like you did by going out on that mountain when a storm was forecast. We take a dim view of that sort of reckless behaviour. And don’t try to cheat the system by committing suicide.”

He led me out to a waiting chariot. Before it set off to take me back to the Tunnel he said, “Very important: you mustn’t tell anyone what you’ve seen here. We have a rule: ‘What happens in Eden stays in Eden.’ If you talk about what you’ve learned, you’ll face an afterlifetime ban. The Living must get on with their lives without knowing about the World Beyond. If they had proof that Heaven exists and rewards good deeds, it would invalidate the whole Experiment.”