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Questions on life and beyond. A nine-year-old boy befriends his ailing great-aunt and fears losing her.

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When I was a young boy, I believed in Heaven and Hell. I believed that people had places to go to when they died. Now I'm an adult, and I'm not so sure any more. It's easy to doubt what happened was real, easier to dismiss it as a dream. Sometimes I think that maybe there's nothing after death, a nonexistence, and I'm afraid. Then I remember Stacie.

Stacie was my father's aunt, and she was, as my mother described her, "sick." When I first saw her, a little woman with white hair and a smile on her face, she looked fine to me, just old. Now I understand that she had lung cancer, but at the time I didn't know what that was. My mother said that Stacie was ill and that she wanted to die in a house, not in a hospital. Since my father, who had died three years ago when I was six, was her only heir, the duty fell to my mother.

Stacie first came to us on a hot summer day about a week after my friend Kay-Kay and I had been released from school for the summer. Full of half-spun plans for the adventures summer would bring, we took a break from playing pirates to watch with curiosity and fascination as her wheelchair was brought into the house. Kay-Kay commented, "Must be rich to have something like that."

At first Stacie was only of mild interest to us, until she began giving us candy with a whispered message: "Don't tell your moms now, you'll get me in trouble." With these words she would press fireballs, jawbreakers, red licorice, and other treats into our open palms. From then on she became a cherished companion and confidant, telling us to "Just call me Stacie, that's good enough." Kay-Kay and I would push Stacie out onto the sunny deck adjoining her room, overlooking our backyard. There she would sit and watch the birds and throw bread to them. She loved the blackbirds especially.

One sticky July morning, Kay-Kay and I were sitting on the balcony with her and she watched the birds scoop up the bread she had thrown. "Those blackbirds talk to me sometimes, if I listen hard enough," she said. "It makes me feel a little less sad, they sound so pretty."

"Why are you sad?" I asked her.

"Because it's almost time for me to go, child, and I'm not quite ready yet."

"Go where?" Kay-Kay asked.

Stacie smiled. "I don't know exactly where, but not here. I won't be around much longer-this old body has had enough. I won't live to see you children grow up."

"But you can't die. We're just getting to know you," I protested.

"Believe me, Jimmy, I would like to stay. I have a lot of things left to do, and a lot of regrets. You see this necklace?" She held it out from her neck to show us. It was silver, with two little hearts dangling from it. "My sweetheart gave me this when I was sixteen, a few years before we married. We were happy together, for a long time." She sighed.

"Is he still alive?" Kay-Kay asked.

"No, he died a few years ago. . ." She was silent for awhile, then asked, "Do you remember your father very well, Jimmy? You remind me so much of him."

"Some. . ." I remembered crawling under my bed and crying when I heard he had died of a heart attack. He was taken from me suddenly, with no time for goodbyes. I remembered his booming laugh, and the way he played the accordion that would rouse us kids to dance and sing with him. Once, when the nose had fallen off my Dapper Dan doll, I had brought it to him, crying, and he had glued it back on. I remembered trying to call him in Heaven on the telephone and my mom telling me that I couldn't talk to him now because he was dead.

But I didn't feel like talking about my father. "Not much. Come on, Kay Kay, let's go to the Batcave."

Kay-Kay was my best friend. Her real name was Katrina, but all the local kids had called her Kay-Kay for as long as I can remember. I guess Katrina is a pretty name, but it didn't fit her-she was a steadfast tomboy and was a lot of fun to play with. Some kids made fun of us and called us boyfriend and girlfriend, and we just laughed at them. We had known each other since we were four years old, and we could talk about anything. At school we had our own separate circles of friends, but in our neighborhood we were always together. We could never understand why our parents always said "no" when we asked to sleep over each other's houses.

In those days we got our kicks by stealing matches from her mom's cabinet and lighting small fires in the woods behind her house. We always came back smelling of smoke but were never suspected. Her mom would ask if Mr.McCauliffe two houses down was burning leaves again. In the heat of the summer we had long talks and secret plans at the Batcave. The Batcave was a low forked tree nestled in the woods behind Kay-Kay's house. We could sit in that tree for hours and talk in the calm sweetness of birds chirping, under the cool canopy of the trees. The deepest talk we ever had was on the day Stacie had asked me about my father, the day we talked about heaven and hell.

Kay-Kay pulled herself up to a place where two branches met in a fork and sat. I struggled up to sit on the limb opposite her, almost losing the cache of feathers I had stuffed in my shorts pocket. Collecting bird feathers, no matter what kind, was my hobby then, because I couldn't afford stamps or coins. I enjoyed it even more because my mom always told me it was a filthy habit.

Kay-Kay swung her dangling legs back and forth. "Stacie's weird," she said. "She's always talking about death and stuff. I should show her some of my scary comics."

"Well, she's gonna die. What would you talk about if you were gonna die?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to talk about it. I'm scared of dying."

"Me too. . ." I hadn't really thought about it much until now. When my father had died, I think that was when I realized for the first time that I could die too, and I had asked my mother, "When will I die?" She said, "Oh, not for a long time, honey."



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"I'm glad I'm not old," I said, looking back at Kay-Kay.

"Don't have to be old," she answered.

I settled myself into a more comfortable position on the branch. "Hey," I said, "Do you ever wonder what Heaven's like? I wonder if I'll be able to see things, or if it'll just be dark?"

"I don't know. I hope you can see things. I hate the dark." She was quiet for a minute. "I wonder if you can see people that you knew, and if you can talk to them, and touch them. . ."

"Maybe you can see God there," I said, "And maybe if Hell you can see the devil."

"I wonder if there really is fire in Hell and you burn if you're bad, or is that just something your parents say to scare you so you'll be good."

That made me think. "What if it's all made up, like Santa Claus?" I asked. "After my dad died, I couldn't talk to him anymore. What if there's no Heaven or Hell, just nothing?"

"Jim, don't say that, it's scary."

"Well," I replied, because I was scaring myself too, "all the teachers at school say there's a Heaven and Hell, and that people really go there."

"I know, but that's still scary," she said, and shuddered. "Now I'm thinking that maybe what they say isn't true. . .how would they know?"

We walked home through the friendly grandfather trees in silence.

The next day, we decided to consult Stacie on the matter. We were sitting on the balcony again, feeding the blackbirds and watching them fight over the crumbs with the blue jays, when Kay-Kay nodded in the direction of Stacie's back and muttered, "Ask her."

"Ask her what?" I replied, loud enough for Stacie to hear.

Stacie turned her head and looked at Kay-Kay. "Why, is there something you want to talk about, child?"

"Big mouth," Kay-Kay hissed at me, then said smugly, "Jimmy wants to know if there really is a Heaven and a Hell, or if it's just made up."

Stacie turned back to me. "Well, I don't think it's a lie---"

"How do you know?" I asked.

Stacie smiled. "Nobody knows for sure, Jimmy. That's what I believe and hope for, a better place after this one where this old body won't trouble me anymore. I hope even more, now." She looked distressed. "I must have been really gloomy to get you two thinking about such a thing. Young children should not be thinking about death."

"Why not?" Kay-Kay asked.

"Oh, I don't know. . ."

For once, Stacie seemed at a loss for words. "It just seems too gloomy and depressing to talk

about it. Besides, you children probably won't have to worry about that for a long, long time."

I don't know why, but I blurted, "I almost died once."

"Really?" Kay-Kay sounded interested.

"Yeah, sort of, when I was little-I must've been about seven--"

Stacie chuckled. "That was only about two years ago."

"Well. . .I've changed a lot since then. Anyway, it was when I had just learned to ride my bike without training wheels. . ."

The wind rushed by me, my friends beside me on their bikes, as we dared to conquer Burt Street, the steepest hill of our neighborhood. Eddie, at ten one of the oldest of our gang, was a few feet in front of me, his white T-shirted back hunched over like a jockey's. Houses flashed by, and I had a wonderful feeling of power that turned quickly to panic.

I was going too fast and I couldn't stop. I pushed the pedals back but they didn't brake. I yelled, "I can't stop!" Heads turned. Suddenly everything and everyone was moving in slow motion except my bike. Everyone was yelling at me to use my brakes, but their voices seemed muted, far away. My feet kept pumping to brake, but nothing happened. Now I could see the busy main road looming ahead of me, and the cars rushing by.

Suddenly I saw Eddie. He had pulled up to the curb ahead and was yelling something at me. Without really knowing what I was doing, I steered my bike into his Huffy. . .

"And you weren't killed, I would guess." Stacie said with a little smile.

I frowned. "No, just a couple of scrapes. . .Eddie didn't even fall down. He wasn't mad, either, until I kept thanking him for saving my life. Then he told me to shut my mouth already.

"Kay-Kay eyed me. "Were your brakes busted?"

I felt my face grow hot. "Nooo. . .I guess I panicked and pushed the pedals the wrong way."

Kay-Kay grinned. "What an idiot. No wonder you never told me about it."

I didn't say anything, and neither did Stacie, although she was looking at me intently. Embarrassment was part of the reason I hadn't told her, or anyone else, until now. There was another reason. . .it just seemed too personal a thing to talk about. I couldn't really explain it, so I didn't say anything else. Something in Stacie's look seemed to say she understood.

That night it was so hot that I couldn't sleep, so I decided to go over and visit Kay-Kay. That summer was one of the hottest ever, and Kay-Kay had taken to sleeping in the tent pitched in her backyard. I waited until 11:30, when I heard my mom go to bed; then I opened the back window and jumped onto the back porch roof. It was a clear, fine summer night, with the stars shining brightly above me, and the night air felt refreshingly cool after the heat of our house. The crickets were chirping-a peaceful, comforting sound.

I took with me my flashlight and the bunk-bed ladder some neighborhood kid had given me last year. I hooked the ladder onto two nails embedded in the roof-the nails being the result of a secret operation performed while my mom was visiting a neighbor. Climbing down, I ran across the yard, scaled the fence separating Kay-Kay's yard and mine, and spotted the tent at the far end of her backyard, a comforting beacon in the darkness. It was illuminated from the inside by a faint yellow glow.

Kay-Kay, absorbed in a comic book, her flashlight trained on the colored pages, glanced up as I zipped the flaps open and crawled inside. "New issue of Spider-Man!" She grinned. "You can read it when I'm done." I took a handful of popcorn from the bag beside her and flopped down on the sleeping bag with a comic from the stack she always kept there. This one was an issue of Horror Tales, and it scared me to death.

One story ended up with a guy getting murdered by a ghost of someone he had killed. The ghost made the guy's scarf get stuck in a fan, and he

choked to death. Right before he died, the ghost's face appeared in a mirror and then the mirror cracked, leaving an image of a skull's face in the center, its unseeing eyes staring, just like the dead guy's open staring eyes. It was good, but I wished I had never read it. I decided to stay until it was light, for I was afraid to brave the darkness.

I stayed until dawn, reading and talking with Kay-Kay; then I crept back to my house, climbed up the ladder, and crawled into bed. I woke up around ten o'clock, and decided I might as well get up and go talk to Stacie. She enjoyed our morning talks, and I liked having her sympathetic ear all to myself.

I tiptoed down the hall and opened her door. She always told us, "never knock, just come in." The room was empty-I guessed Mom had come in earlier that morning and helped Stacie into the wheelchair. I pushed open the slightly ajar balcony doors and there she was, with her back turned towards me.

"Stacie?" I asked. No answer. I grinned. Whenever I caught her sleeping, I would squeeze her nose lightly until she woke up, and she never got mad. I tiptoed around the side of her chair and reached toward her face, and then I saw her eyes. They were open, just like that guy's had been in the comic book.

Terrified, I snatched my hand away and ran out the door, out of the house, running, running away, back to the tent. Kay-Kay was still there. I woke her up when I unzipped the flaps and cried, "Stacie's dead!"

At the wake, Kay-Kay and I ventured to the open coffin. I wanted to look, yet at the same time I was afraid to. She was very pale, but I guess people thought she looked good; at least, they kept saying so. She had makeup on and was all dressed up, but I thought it didn't matter anyway-she was gone, and I wouldn't be able to talk to her anymore, not even if I tried to call Heaven. If Heaven even exists at all, a little voice spoke up inside me, and I tried to ignore it. I turned to Kay-Kay. "Do you remember how she liked the blackbirds? I can't believe she's just-gone." My memories of talking to her, only a few days ago, jarred with the sight of her in the coffin. Even looking at her, I could hardly make myself believe that it was true.

"Yeah, I'll miss her too," said Kay-Kay. She tugged my sleeve and pointed to the silver necklace with the two hearts that lay still against Stacie's white throat. "I wonder if her boyfriend is waiting for her. . ."

We sat down for the service and I tried not to look at the coffin as the priest began, "We are here to honor one of our departed, Anastasia Myers. . ." It was then that I realized I never had known her real name.

A few days later, Kay-Kay and I were playing in my backyard when I heard bird cries. I looked up and saw the blackbirds had come again; but today there was no bread for them. I turned away.

A little while later, I heard the fluttering of wings. Discouraged, some of them were taking off in search of other feeding grounds. I saw a black feather flutter to the ground.

Kay-Kay saw it too. "Another one for your collection."

"Nah. I already have tons of those." But I ran over to pick it up anyway, with Kay-Kay following me.

But what I saw there on that spot of ground was not a feather. What my astounded eyes saw was something that filled an empty space inside of me with a kind of joy that lifted me up and made me feel that I could fly, something that shook all the sadness out of me and onto the ground. Our eyes met, and Kay Kay smiled.

In front of us, in the dirt, lay a shiny silver necklace with two tiny hearts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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S.E. Boldt has been writing stories since the age of eight. She attended the University of Rhode Island, majored in biology, minored in writing, and contributed stories to the campus magazine The Great Swamp Gazette. Currently employed as a scientist, she has also written for scientific journals. She has finished a YA novel, The Morgue Drinking Club, which is being workshopped on www.thenextbigwriter.com. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and two children.

