

The Five People
You Meet in Heaven



Mitch Albom

 HYPERION

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YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU

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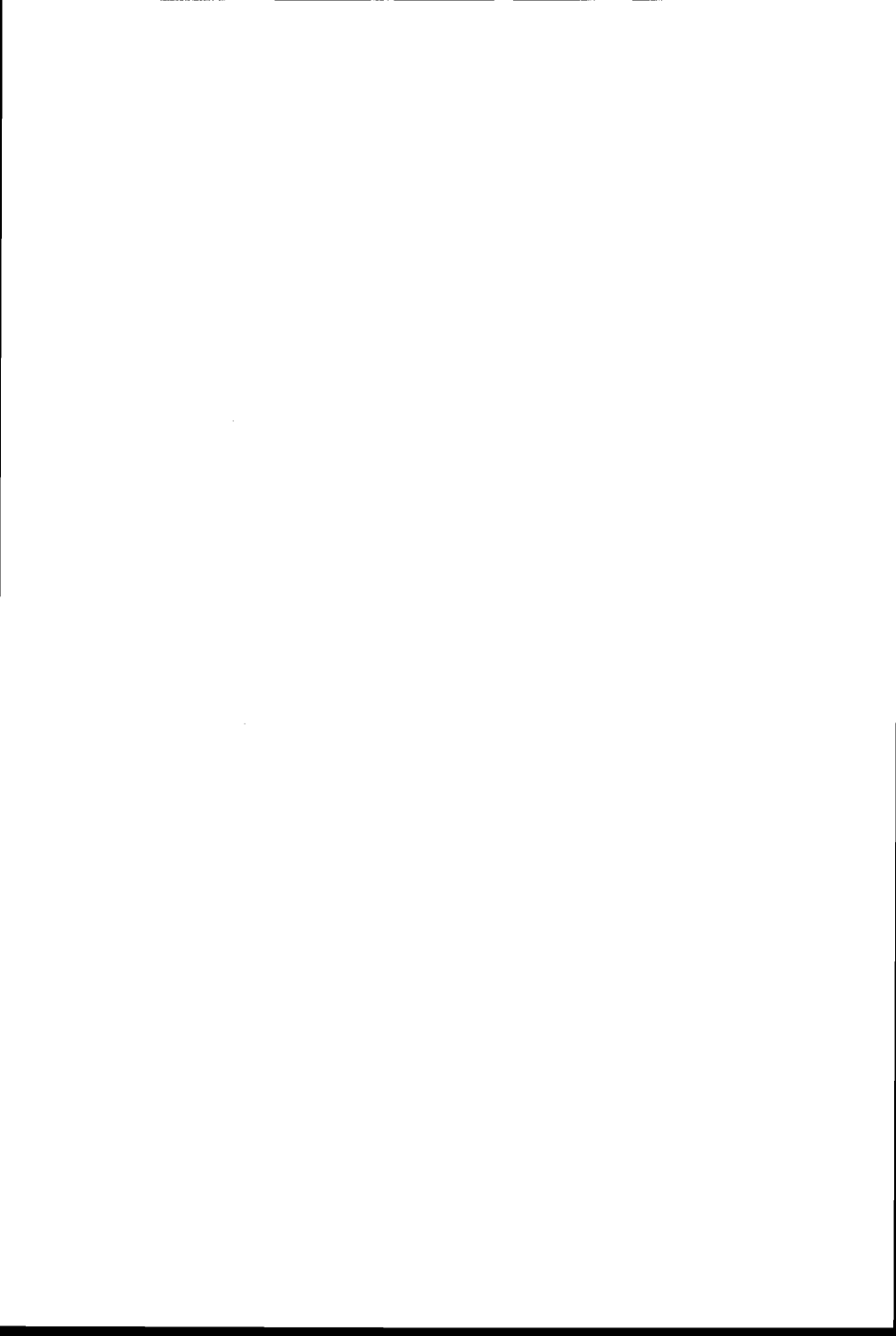
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This book is dedicated to Edward Beitchman, my beloved uncle, who gave me my first concept of heaven. Every year, around the Thanksgiving table, he spoke of a night in the hospital when he awoke to see the souls of his departed loved ones sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for him. I never forgot that story. And I never forgot him.

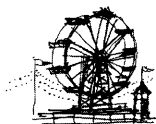
Everyone has an idea of heaven, as do most religions, and they should all be respected. The version represented here is only a guess, a wish, in some ways, that my uncle, and others like him—people who felt unimportant here on earth—realize, finally, how much they mattered and how they were loved.



The Five People
You Meet in Heaven



The End



*T*HIS IS A STORY ABOUT A MAN named Eddie and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun. It might seem strange to start a story with an ending. But all endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time.

☞THE LAST HOUR of Eddie's life was spent, like most of the others, at Ruby Pier, an amusement park by a great gray ocean. The park had the usual attractions, a boardwalk, a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, bumper cars, a taffy stand, and an arcade where you could shoot streams of water into a clown's mouth. It also had a big new ride called Freddy's Free Fall, and this would be where Eddie would be killed, in an accident that would make newspapers around the state.

☺ AT THE TIME of his death, Eddie was a squat, white-haired old man, with a short neck, a barrel chest, thick forearms, and a faded army tattoo on his right shoulder. His legs were thin and veined now, and his left knee, wounded in the war, was ruined by arthritis. He used a cane to get around. His face was broad and craggy from the sun, with salty whiskers and a lower jaw that protruded slightly, making him look prouder than he felt. He kept a cigarette behind his left ear and a ring of keys hooked to his belt. He wore rubber-soled shoes. He wore an old linen cap. His pale brown uniform suggested a workingman, and a workingman he was.

☺ EDDIE'S JOB WAS "maintaining" the rides, which really meant keeping them safe. Every afternoon, he walked the park, checking on each attraction, from the Tilt-A-Whirl to the Pipeline Plunge. He looked for broken boards, loose bolts, worn-out steel. Sometimes he would stop, his eyes glazing over, and people walking past thought something was wrong. But he was listening, that's all. After all these years he could *hear* trouble, he said, in the spits and stutters and thrumming of the equipment.

☺ WITH 50 MINUTES left on earth, Eddie took his last walk along Ruby Pier. He passed an elderly couple.

"Folks," he mumbled, touching his cap.

They nodded politely. Customers knew Eddie. At least the regular ones did. They saw him summer after summer,

one of those faces you associate with a place. His work shirt had a patch on the chest that read EDDIE above the word MAINTENANCE, and sometimes they would say, "Hiya, Eddie Maintenance," although he never thought that was funny.

Today, it so happened, was Eddie's birthday, his 83rd. A doctor, last week, had told him he had shingles. Shingles? Eddie didn't even know what they were. Once, he had been strong enough to lift a carousel horse in each arm. That was a long time ago.

☉ "EDDIE!" . . . "TAKE ME, Eddie!" . . . "Take me!"

Forty minutes until his death. Eddie made his way to the front of the roller coaster line. He rode every attraction at least once a week, to be certain the brakes and steering were solid. Today was coaster day—the "Ghoster Coaster" they called this one—and the kids who knew Eddie yelled to get in the cart with him.

Children liked Eddie. Not teenagers. Teenagers gave him headaches. Over the years, Eddie figured he'd seen every sort of do-nothing, snarl-at-you teenager there was. But children were different. Children looked at Eddie—who, with his protruding lower jaw, always seemed to be grinning, like a dolphin—and they trusted him. They drew in like cold hands to a fire. They hugged his leg. They played with his keys. Eddie mostly grunted, never saying much. He figured it was because he didn't say much that they liked him.

Now Eddie tapped two little boys with backward baseball caps. They raced to the cart and tumbled in. Eddie handed his cane to the ride attendant and slowly lowered himself between the two.

“Here we go. . . . *Here we go!* . . .” one boy squealed, as the other pulled Eddie’s arm around his shoulder. Eddie lowered the lap bar and *clack-clack-clack*, up they went.

☉A STORY WENT around about Eddie. When he was a boy, growing up by this very same pier, he got in an alley fight. Five kids from Pitkin Avenue had cornered his brother, Joe, and were about to give him a beating. Eddie was a block away, on a stoop, eating a sandwich. He heard his brother scream. He ran to the alley, grabbed a garbage can lid, and sent two boys to the hospital.

After that, Joe didn’t talk to him for months. He was ashamed. Joe was the oldest, the firstborn, but it was Eddie who did the fighting.

☉“CAN WE GO again, Eddie? *Please?*”

Thirty-four minutes to live. Eddie lifted the lap bar, gave each boy a sucking candy, retrieved his cane, then limped to the maintenance shop to cool down from the summer heat. Had he known his death was imminent, he might have gone somewhere else. Instead, he did what we all do. He went about his dull routine as if all the days in the world were still to come.

One of the shop workers, a lanky, bony-cheeked young man named Dominguez, was by the solvent sink, wiping grease off a wheel.

"Yo, Eddie," he said.

"Dom," Eddie said.

The shop smelled like sawdust. It was dark and cramped with a low ceiling and pegboard walls that held drills and saws and hammers. Skeleton parts of fun park rides were everywhere: compressors, engines, belts, lightbulbs, the top of a pirate's head. Stacked against one wall were coffee cans of nails and screws, and stacked against another wall were endless tubs of grease.

Greasing a track, Eddie would say, required no more brains than washing a dish; the only difference was you got dirtier as you did it, not cleaner. And that was the sort of work that Eddie did: spread grease, adjusted brakes, tightened bolts, checked electrical panels. Many times he had longed to leave this place, find different work, build another kind of life. But the war came. His plans never worked out. In time, he found himself graying and wearing looser pants and in a state of weary acceptance, that this was who he was and who he would always be, a man with sand in his shoes in a world of mechanical laughter and grilled frankfurters. Like his father before him, like the patch on his shirt, Eddie was maintenance—the head of maintenance—or as the kids sometimes called him, "the ride man at Ruby Pier."

☺THIRTY MINUTES LEFT.

"Hey, happy birthday, I hear," Dominguez said.

Eddie grunted.

"No party or nothing?"

Eddie looked at him as if he were crazy. For a moment he thought how strange it was to be growing old in a place that smelled of cotton candy.

"Well, remember, Eddie, I'm off next week, starting Monday. Going to Mexico."

Eddie nodded, and Dominguez did a little dance.

"Me and Theresa. Gonna see the whole family. Par-r-r-ty."

He stopped dancing when he noticed Eddie staring.

"You ever been?" Dominguez said.

"Been?"

"To Mexico?"

Eddie exhaled through his nose. "Kid, I never been anywhere I wasn't shipped to with a rifle."

He watched Dominguez return to the sink. He thought for a moment. Then he took a small wad of bills from his pocket and removed the only twenties he had, two of them. He held them out.

"Get your wife something nice," Eddie said.

Dominguez regarded the money, broke into a huge smile, and said, "C'mon, man. You sure?"

Eddie pushed the money into Dominguez's palm. Then he walked out back to the storage area. A small "fishing

hole" had been cut into the boardwalk planks years ago, and Eddie lifted the plastic cap. He tugged on a nylon line that dropped 80 feet to the sea. A piece of bologna was still attached.

"We catch anything?" Dominguez yelled. "Tell me we caught something!"

Eddie wondered how the guy could be so optimistic. There was never anything on that line.

"One day," Dominguez yelled, "we're gonna get a halibut!"

"Yep," Eddie mumbled, although he knew you could never pull a fish that big through a hole that small.

☉TWENTY-SIX MINUTES to live. Eddie crossed the boardwalk to the south end. Business was slow. The girl behind the taffy counter was leaning on her elbows, popping her gum.

Once, Ruby Pier was *the* place to go in the summer. It had elephants and fireworks and marathon dance contests. But people didn't go to ocean piers much anymore; they went to theme parks where you paid \$75 a ticket and had your photo taken with a giant furry character.

Eddie limped past the bumper cars and fixed his eyes on a group of teenagers leaning over the railing. *Great*, he told himself. *Just what I need.*

"Off," Eddie said, tapping the railing with his cane. "C'mon. It's not safe."

The teens glared at him. The car poles sizzled with electricity, *zzzap zzzap* sounds.

“It’s not safe,” Eddie repeated.

The teens looked at each other. One kid, who wore a streak of orange in his hair, sneered at Eddie, then stepped onto the middle rail.

“Come on, dudes, hit me!” he yelled, waving at the young drivers. “Hit m—”

Eddie whacked the railing so hard with his cane he almost snapped it in two. “MOVE IT!”

The teens ran away.

☞ANOTHER STORY WENT around about Eddie. As a soldier, he had engaged in combat numerous times. He’d been brave. Even won a medal. But toward the end of his service, he got into a fight with one of his own men. That’s how Eddie was wounded. No one knew what happened to the other guy.

No one asked.

☞WITH 19 MINUTES left on earth, Eddie sat for the last time, in an old aluminum beach chair. His short, muscled arms folded like a seal’s flippers across his chest. His legs were red from the sun, and his left knee still showed scars. In truth, much of Eddie’s body suggested a survived encounter. His fingers were bent at awkward angles, thanks to numerous fractures from assorted machinery. His nose had been broken several times in what he called

“saloon fights.” His broadly jawed face might have been good-looking once, the way a prizefighter might have looked before he took too many punches.

Now Eddie just looked tired. This was his regular spot on the Ruby Pier boardwalk, behind the Jackrabbit ride, which in the 1980s was the Thunderbolt, which in the 1970s was the Steel Eel, which in the 1960s was the Lollipop Swings, which in the 1950s was Laff In The Dark, and which before that was the Stardust Band Shell.

Which was where Eddie met Marguerite.

☺EVERY LIFE HAS one true-love snapshot. For Eddie, it came on a warm September night after a thunderstorm, when the boardwalk was spongy with water. She wore a yellow cotton dress, with a pink barrette in her hair. Eddie didn't say much. He was so nervous he felt as if his tongue were glued to his teeth. They danced to the music of a big band, Long Legs Delaney and his Everglades Orchestra. He bought her a lemon fizz. She said she had to go before her parents got angry. But as she walked away, she turned and waved.

That was the snapshot. For the rest of his life, whenever he thought of Marguerite, Eddie would see that moment, her waving over her shoulder, her dark hair falling over one eye, and he would feel the same arterial burst of love.

That night he came home and woke his older brother. He told him he'd met the girl he was going to marry.

“Go to sleep, Eddie,” his brother groaned.

Whrrrssh. A wave broke on the beach. Eddie coughed up something he did not want to see. He spat it away.

Whrrrssh. He used to think a lot about Marguerite. Not so much now. She was like a wound beneath an old bandage, and he had grown more used to the bandage.

Whrrrssh.

What was shingles?

Whrrrssh.

Sixteen minutes to live.

☺ NO STORY SITS by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, like stones beneath a river.

The end of Eddie's story was touched by another seemingly innocent story, months earlier—a cloudy night when a young man arrived at Ruby Pier with three of his friends.

The young man, whose name was Nicky, had just begun driving and was still not comfortable carrying a key chain. So he removed the single car key and put it in his jacket pocket, then tied the jacket around his waist.

For the next few hours, he and his friends rode all the fastest rides: the Flying Falcon, the Splashdown, Freddy's Free Fall, the Ghoster Coaster.

"Hands in the air!" one of them yelled.

They threw their hands in the air.

Later, when it was dark, they returned to the car lot,

exhausted and laughing, drinking beer from brown paper bags. Nicky reached into his jacket pocket. He fished around. He cursed.

The key was gone.

☉FOURTEEN MINUTES UNTIL his death. Eddie wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Out on the ocean, diamonds of sunlight danced on the water, and Eddie stared at their nimble movement. He had not been right on his feet since the war.

But back at the Stardust Band Shell with Marguerite—there Eddie had still been graceful. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to summon the song that brought them together, the one Judy Garland sang in that movie. It mixed in his head now with the cacophony of the crashing waves and children screaming on the rides.

“You made me love you—”

Whsssshbbb.

“—do it, I didn’t want to do i—”

Splllllaaaaashhhhhhh.

“—me love you—”

Eeeeeeee!

“—time you knew it, and all the—”

Chhhhhewisshhhh.

“—knew it . . .”

Eddie felt her hands on his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes tightly, to bring the memory closer.

☺TWELVE MINUTES TO live.

“’Scuse me.”

A young girl, maybe eight years old, stood before him, blocking his sunlight. She had blonde curls and wore flip-flops and denim cutoff shorts and a lime green T-shirt with a cartoon duck on the front. Amy, he thought her name was. Amy or Annie. She’d been here a lot this summer, although Eddie never saw a mother or father.

“’Scuuuse me,” she said again. “Eddie Maint’nance?”

Eddie sighed. “Just Eddie,” he said.

“Eddie?”

“Um hmm?”

“Can you make me . . .”

She put her hands together as if praying.

“C’mon, kiddo. I don’t have all day.”

“Can you make me an animal? *Can you?*”

Eddie looked up, as if he had to think about it. Then he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out three yellow pipe cleaners, which he carried for just this purpose.

“Yesssss!” the little girl said, slapping her hands.

Eddie began twisting the pipe cleaners.

“Where’s your parents?”

“Riding the rides.”

“Without you?”

The girl shrugged. “My mom’s with her boyfriend.”

Eddie looked up. Oh.

He bent the pipe cleaners into several small loops, then twisted the loops around one another. His hands shook now, so it took longer than it used to, but soon the pipe cleaners resembled a head, ears, body, and tail.

“A rabbit?” the little girl said.

Eddie winked.

“Thaaaank you!”

She spun away, lost in that place where kids don’t even know their feet are moving. Eddie wiped his brow again, then closed his eyes, slumped into the beach chair, and tried to get the old song back into his head.

A seagull squawked as it flew overhead.

☺☺HOW DO PEOPLE choose their final words? Do they realize their gravity? Are they fated to be wise?

By his 83rd birthday, Eddie had lost nearly everyone he’d cared about. Some had died young, and some had been given a chance to grow old before a disease or an accident took them away. At their funerals, Eddie listened as mourners recalled their final conversations. “*It’s as if he knew he was going to die. . .*” some would say.

Eddie never believed that. As far as he could tell, when your time came, it came, and that was that. You might say something smart on your way out, but you might just as easily say something stupid.

For the record, Eddie’s final words would be “Get back!”

☺ HERE ARE THE sounds of Eddie's last minutes on earth. Waves crashing. The distant thump of rock music. The whirring engine of a small biplane, dragging an ad from its tail. And this.

"OH MY GOD! LOOK!"

Eddie felt his eyes dart beneath his lids. Over the years, he had come to know every noise at Ruby Pier and could sleep through them all like a lullaby.

This voice was not in the lullaby.

"OH MY GOD! LOOK!"

Eddie bolted upright. A woman with fat, dimpled arms was holding a shopping bag and pointing and screaming. A small crowd gathered around her, their eyes to the skies.

Eddie saw it immediately. Atop Freddy's Free Fall, the new "tower drop" attraction, one of the carts was tilted at an angle, as if trying to dump its cargo. Four passengers, two men, two women, held only by a safety bar, were grabbing frantically at anything they could.

"OH MY GOD!" the fat woman yelled. "THOSE PEOPLE! THEY'RE GONNA FALL!"

A voice squawked from the radio on Eddie's belt. "*Eddie! Eddie!*"

He pressed the button. "I see it! Get security!"

People ran up from the beach, pointing as if they had practiced this drill. *Look! Up in the sky! An amusement ride turned evil!* Eddie grabbed his cane and clomped to the

safety fence around the platform base, his wad of keys jangling against his hip. His heart was racing.

Freddy's Free Fall was supposed to drop two carts in a stomach-churning descent, only to be halted at the last instant by a gush of hydraulic air. How did one cart come loose like that? It was tilted just a few feet below the upper platform, as if it had started downward then changed its mind.

Eddie reached the gate and had to catch his breath. Dominguez came running and nearly banged into him.

"Listen to me!" Eddie said, grabbing Dominguez by the shoulders. His grip was so tight, Dominguez made a pained face. "Listen to me! Who's up there?"

"Willie."

"OK. He must've hit the emergency stop. That's why the cart is hanging. Get up the ladder and tell Willie to manually release the safety restraint so those people can get out. OK? It's on the back of the cart, so you're gonna have to hold him while he leans out there. OK? Then . . . then, the two of ya's—the two of ya's now, not one, you got it?—the two of ya's get them out! One holds the other! Got it!? . . . *Got it?*"

Dominguez nodded quickly.

"Then send that damn cart down so we can figure out what happened!"

Eddie's head was pounding. Although his park had been free of any major accidents, he knew the horror stories of his business. Once, in Brighton, a bolt unfastened on a gondola ride and two people fell to their death. Another

time, in Wonderland Park, a man had tried to walk across a roller coaster track; he fell through and got stuck beneath his armpits. He was wedged in, screaming, and the cars came racing toward him and . . . well, that was the worst.

Eddie pushed that from his mind. There were people all around him now, hands over their mouths, watching Dominguez climb the ladder. Eddie tried to remember the insides of Freddy's Free Fall. *Engine. Cylinders. Hydraulics. Seals. Cables.* How does a cart come loose? He followed the ride visually, from the four frightened people at the top, down the towering shaft, and into the base. *Engine. Cylinders. Hydraulics. Seals. Cables. . . .*

Dominguez reached the upper platform. He did as Eddie told him, holding Willie as Willie leaned toward the back of the cart to release the restraint. One of the female riders lunged for Willie and nearly pulled him off the platform. The crowd gasped.

"Wait . . ." Eddie said to himself.

Willie tried again. This time he popped the safety release.

"Cable . . ." Eddie mumbled.

The bar lifted and the crowd went "Ahhhhh." The riders were quickly pulled to the platform.

"The cable is *unraveling*. . . ."

And Eddie was right. Inside the base of Freddy's Free Fall, hidden from view, the cable that lifted Cart No. 2 had, for the last few months, been scraping across a locked pul-

ley. Because it was locked, the pulley had gradually ripped the cable's steel wires—as if husking an ear of corn—until they were nearly severed. No one noticed. How could they notice? Only someone who had crawled inside the mechanism would have seen the unlikely cause of the problem.

The pulley was wedged by a small object that must have fallen through the opening at a most precise moment.

A car key.

☺☺“DON'T RELEASE THE CART!” Eddie yelled. He waved his arms. “HEY! HEEEEY! IT'S THE CABLE! DON'T RELEASE THE CART! IT'LL SNAP!”

The crowd drowned him out. It cheered wildly as Willie and Dominguez unloaded the final rider. All four were safe. They hugged atop the platform.

“DOM! WILLIE!” Eddie yelled. Someone banged against his waist, knocking his walkie-talkie to the ground. Eddie bent to get it. Willie went to the controls. He put his finger on the green button. Eddie looked up.

“NO, NO, NO, DON'T!”

Eddie turned to the crowd. “GET BACK!”

Something in Eddie's voice must have caught the people's attention; they stopped cheering and began to scatter. An opening cleared around the bottom of Freddy's Free Fall.

And Eddie saw the last face of his life.

She was sprawled upon the ride's metal base, as if someone had knocked her into it, her nose running, tears

filling her eyes, the little girl with the pipe-cleaner animal. Amy? Annie?

“Ma . . . Mom . . . Mom . . .” she heaved, almost rhythmically, her body frozen in the paralysis of crying children.

“Ma . . . Mom . . . Ma . . . Mom . . .”

Eddie’s eyes shot from her to the carts. Did he have time? Her to the carts—

Whump. Too late. The carts were dropping—*Jesus, he released the brake!*—and for Eddie, everything slipped into watery motion. He dropped his cane and pushed off his bad leg and felt a shot of pain that almost knocked him down. A big step. Another step. Inside the shaft of Freddy’s Free Fall, the cable snapped its final thread and ripped across the hydraulic line. Cart No. 2 was in a dead drop now, nothing to stop it, a boulder off a cliff.

In those final moments, Eddie seemed to hear the whole world: distant screaming, waves, music, a rush of wind, a low, loud, ugly sound that he realized was his own voice blasting through his chest. The little girl raised her arms. Eddie lunged. His bad leg buckled. He half flew, half stumbled toward her, landing on the metal platform, which ripped through his shirt and split open his skin, just beneath the patch that read EDDIE and MAINTENANCE. He felt two hands in his own, two small hands.

A stunning impact.

A blinding flash of light.

And then, nothing.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

It is the 1920s, a crowded hospital in one of the poorest sections of the city. Eddie's father smokes cigarettes in the waiting room, where the other fathers are also smoking cigarettes. The nurse enters with a clipboard. She calls his name. She mispronounces it. The other men blow smoke. Well?

He raises his hand.

"Congratulations," the nurse says.

He follows her down the hallway to the newborns' nursery. His shoes clap on the floor.

"Wait here," she says.

Through the glass, he sees her check the numbers of the wooden cribs. She moves past one, not his, another, not his, another, not his, another, not his.

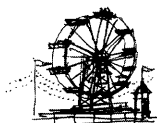
She stops. There. Beneath the blanket. A tiny head covered in a blue cap. She checks her clipboard again, then points.

The father breathes heavily, nods his head. For a moment, his face seems to crumble, like a bridge collapsing into a river. Then he smiles.

His.



The Journey



*E*DDIE SAW NOTHING OF HIS FINAL MOMENT on earth, nothing of the pier or the crowd or the shattered fiberglass cart.

In the stories about life after death, the soul often floats above the good-bye moment, hovering over police cars at highway accidents, or clinging like a spider to hospital-room ceilings. These are people who receive a second chance, who somehow, for some reason, resume their place in the world.

Eddie, it appeared, was not getting a second chance.

☉WHERE . . . ?

Where . . . ?

Where . . . ?

The sky was a misty pumpkin shade, then a deep

turquoise, then a bright lime. Eddie was floating, and his arms were still extended.

Where . . . ?

The tower cart was falling. He remembered that. The little girl—Amy? Annie?—she was crying. He remembered that. He remembered lunging. He remembered hitting the platform. He felt her two small hands in his.

Then what?

Did I save her?

Eddie could only picture it at a distance, as if it happened years ago. Stranger still, he could not *feel* any emotions that went with it. He could only feel calm, like a child in the cradle of its mother's arms.

Where . . . ?

The sky around him changed again, to grapefruit yellow, then a forest green, then a pink that Eddie momentarily associated with, of all things, cotton candy.

Did I save her?

Did she live?

Where . . .

. . . is my worry?

Where is my pain?

That was what was missing. Every hurt he'd ever suffered, every ache he'd ever endured—it was all as gone as an expired breath. He could not feel agony. He could not feel sadness. His consciousness felt smoky, wisplike, incapable of anything but calm. Below him now, the colors changed

again. Something was swirling. Water. An ocean. He was floating over a vast yellow sea. Now it turned melon. Now it was sapphire. Now he began to drop, hurtling toward the surface. It was faster than anything he'd ever imagined, yet there wasn't as much as a breeze on his face, and he felt no fear. He saw the sands of a golden shore.

Then he was under water.

Then everything was silent.

Where is my worry?

Where is my pain?

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is five years old. It is a Sunday afternoon at Ruby Pier. Picnic tables are set along the boardwalk, which overlooks the long white beach. There is a vanilla cake with blue wax candles. There is a bowl of orange juice. The pier workers are milling about, the barkers, the sideshow acts, the animal trainers, some men from the fishery. Eddie's father, as usual, is in a card game. Eddie plays at his feet. His older brother, Joe, is doing push-ups in front of a group of elderly women, who feign interest and clap politely.

Eddie is wearing his birthday gift, a red cowboy hat and a toy holster. He gets up and runs from one group to the next, pulling out the toy gun and going, "Bang, bang!"

"C'mere boy," Mickey Shea beckons from a bench.

"Bang, bang," goes Eddie.

Mickey Shea works with Eddie's dad, fixing the rides. He is fat and wears suspenders and is always singing Irish songs. To Eddie, he smells funny, like cough medicine.

"C'mere. Lemme do your birthday bumps," he says. "Like we do in Ireland."

Suddenly, Mickey's large hands are under Eddie's armpits and

he is hoisted up, then flipped over and dangled by the feet. Eddie's hat falls off.

"Careful, Mickey!" Eddie's mother yells. Eddie's father looks up, smirks, then returns to his card game.

"Ho, ho. I got 'im," Mickey says. "Now. One birthday bump for every year."

Mickey lowers Eddie gently, until his head brushes the floor.

"One!"

Mickey lifts Eddie back up. The others join in, laughing. They yell, "Two! . . . Three!"

Upside down, Eddie is not sure who is who. His head is getting heavy.

"Four! . . ." they shout. "Five!"

Eddie is flipped right-side up and put down. Everybody claps. Eddie reaches for his hat, then stumbles over. He gets up, wobbles to Mickey Shea, and punches him in the arm.

"Ho-ho! What was that for, little man?" Mickey says. Everyone laughs. Eddie turns and runs away, three steps, before being swept into his mother's arms.

"Are you all right, my darling birthday boy?" She is only inches from his face. He sees her deep red lipstick and her plump, soft cheeks and the wave of her auburn hair.

"I was upside down," he tells her.

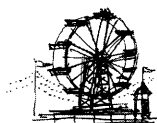
"I saw," she says.

She puts his hat back on his head. Later, she will walk him along the pier, perhaps take him on an elephant ride, or watch the

fishermen pull in their evening nets, the fish flipping like shiny, wet coins. She will hold his hand and tell him God is proud of him for being a good boy on his birthday, and that will make the world feel right-side up again.



The Arrival



*E*DDIE AWOKE IN A TEACUP.

It was a part of some old amusement park ride—a large teacup, made of dark, polished wood, with a cushioned seat and a steel-hinged door. Eddie's arms and legs dangled over the edges. The sky continued to change colors, from a shoe-leather brown to a deep scarlet.

His instinct was to reach for his cane. He had kept it by his bed the last few years, because there were mornings when he no longer had the strength to get up without it. This embarrassed Eddie, who used to punch men in the shoulders when he greeted them.

But now there was no cane, so Eddie exhaled and tried to pull himself up. Surprisingly, his back did not hurt. His leg did not throb. He yanked harder and hoisted himself

easily over the edge of the teacup, landing awkwardly on the ground, where he was struck by three quick thoughts.

First, he felt wonderful.

Second, he was all alone.

Third, he was still on Ruby Pier.

But it was a different Ruby Pier now. There were canvas tents and vacant grassy sections and so few obstructions you could see the mossy breakwater out in the ocean. The colors of the attractions were firehouse reds and creamy whites—no teals or maroons—and each ride had its own wooden ticket booth. The teacup he had awoken in was part of a primitive attraction called Spin-O-Rama. Its sign was plywood, as were the other low-slung signs, hinged on storefronts that lined the promenade:

El Tiempo Cigars! Now, That's a Smoke!

Chowder, 10 cents!

Ride the Whipper—The Sensation of the Age!

Eddie blinked hard. This was the Ruby Pier of his childhood, some 75 years ago, only everything was new, freshly scrubbed. Over there was the Loop-the-Loop ride—which had been torn down decades ago—and over there the bathhouses and the saltwater swimming pools that had been razed in the 1950s. Over there, jutting into the sky, was the original Ferris wheel—in its pristine white paint—and beyond that, the streets of his old neighborhood and the

rooftops of the crowded brick tenements, with laundry lines hanging from the windows.

Eddie tried to yell, but his voice was raspy air. He mouthed a "Hey!" but nothing came from his throat.

He grabbed at his arms and legs. Aside from his lack of voice, he felt incredible. He walked in a circle. He jumped. No pain. In the last ten years, he had forgotten what it was like to walk without wincing or to sit without struggling to find comfort for his lower back. On the outside, he looked the same as he had that morning: a squat, barrel-chested old man in a cap and shorts and a brown maintenance jersey. But he was *limber*. So limber, in fact, he could touch behind his ankles, and raise a leg to his belly. He explored his body like an infant, fascinated by the new mechanics, a rubber man doing a rubber man stretch.

Then he ran.

Ha-ha! Running! Eddie had not truly run in more than 60 years, not since the war, but he was running now, starting with a few gingerly steps, then accelerating into a full gait, faster, faster, like the running boy of his youth. He ran along the boardwalk, past a bait-and-tackle stand for fishermen (five cents) and a bathing suit rental stand for swimmers (three cents). He ran past a chute ride called The Dipsy Doodle. He ran along the Ruby Pier Promenade, beneath magnificent buildings of Moorish design, with spires and minarets and onion-shaped domes. He ran past the Parisian Carousel, with its carved wooden horses, glass mir-

rors, and Wurlitzer organ, all shiny and new. Only an hour ago, it seemed, he had been scraping rust from its pieces in his shop.

He ran down the heart of the old midway, where the weight guessers, fortune-tellers, and dancing gypsies had once worked. He lowered his chin and held his arms out like a glider, and every few steps he would jump, the way children do, hoping running will turn to flying. It might have seemed ridiculous to anyone watching, this white-haired maintenance worker, all alone, making like an airplane. But the running boy is inside every man, no matter how old he gets.

AND THEN EDDIE stopped running. He heard something. A voice, tinny, as if coming through a megaphone.

“How about him, ladies and gentlemen? Have you ever seen such a horrible sight? . . .”

Eddie was standing by an empty ticket kiosk in front of a large theater. The sign above read

The World's Most Curious Citizens.

Ruby Pier's Sideshow!

Holy Smoke! They're Fat! They're Skinny!

See the Wild Man!

The sideshow. The freak house. The ballyhoo hall. Eddie recalled them shutting this down at least 50 years ago,

about the time television became popular and people didn't need sideshows to tickle their imagination.

"Look well upon this savage, born into a most peculiar handicap . . ."

Eddie peered into the entrance. He had encountered some odd people here. There was Jolly Jane, who weighed over 500 pounds and needed two men to push her up the stairs. There were conjoined twin sisters, who shared a spine and played musical instruments. There were men who swallowed swords, women with beards, and a pair of Indian brothers whose skin went rubbery from being stretched and soaked in oils, until it hung in bunches from their limbs.

Eddie, as a child, had felt sorry for the sideshow cast. They were forced to sit in booths or on stages, sometimes behind bars, as patrons walked past them, leering and pointing. A barker would ballyhoo the oddity, and it was a barker's voice that Eddie heard now.

"Only a terrible twist of fate could leave a man in such a pitiful condition! From the farthest corner of the world, we have brought him for your examination. . . ."

Eddie entered the darkened hall. The voice grew louder.

"This tragic soul has endured a perversion of nature. . . ."

It was coming from the other side of a stage.

"Only here, at the World's Most Curious Citizens, can you draw this near. . . ."

Eddie pulled aside the curtain.

"Feast your eyes upon the most unus—"

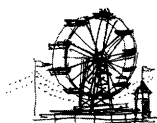
The barker's voice vanished. And Eddie stepped back in disbelief.

There, sitting in a chair, alone on the stage, was a middle-aged man with narrow, stooped shoulders, naked from the waist up. His belly sagged over his belt. His hair was closely cropped. His lips were thin and his face was long and drawn. Eddie would have long since forgotten him, were it not for one distinctive feature.

His skin was blue.

"Hello, Edward," he said. "I have been waiting for you."

The First Person Eddie Meets in Heaven



“DON’T BE AFRAID. . . .” THE BLUE MAN said, rising slowly from his chair. “Don’t be afraid. . . .”

His voice was soothing, but Eddie could only stare. He had barely known this man. Why was he seeing him now? He was like one of those faces that pops into your dreams and the next morning you say, “You’ll never guess who I dreamed about last night.”

“Your body feels like a child’s, right?”

Eddie nodded.

“You were a child when you knew me, that’s why. You start with the same feelings you had.”

Start what? Eddie thought.

The Blue Man lifted his chin. His skin was a grotesque shade, a graying blueberry. His fingers were wrinkled. He

walked outside. Eddie followed. The pier was empty. The beach was empty. Was the entire planet empty?

"Tell me something," the Blue Man said. He pointed to a two-humped wooden roller coaster in the distance. The Whipper. It was built in the 1920s, before under-friction wheels, meaning the cars couldn't turn very quickly—unless you wanted them launching off the track. "The Whipper. Is it still the 'fastest ride on earth'?"

Eddie looked at the old clanking thing, which had been torn down years ago. He shook his head no.

"Ah," the Blue Man said. "I imagined as much. Things don't change here. And there's none of that peering down from the clouds, I'm afraid."

Here? Eddie thought.

The Blue Man smiled as if he'd heard the question. He touched Eddie's shoulder and Eddie felt a surge of warmth unlike anything he had ever felt before. His thoughts came spilling out like sentences.

How did I die?

"An accident," the Blue Man said.

How long have I been dead?

"A minute. An hour. A thousand years."

Where am I?

The Blue Man pursed his lips, then repeated the question thoughtfully. "Where are you?" He turned and raised his arms. All at once, the rides at the old Ruby Pier cranked to life: The Ferris wheel spun, the Dodgem Cars

smacked into each other, the Whipper clacked uphill, and the Parisian Carousel horses bobbed on their brass poles to the cheery music of the Wurlitzer organ. The ocean was in front of them. The sky was the color of lemons.

“Where do you think?” the Blue Man asked. “Heaven.”

☹️NO! EDDIE SHOOK his head violently. NO! The Blue Man seemed amused.

“No? It can’t be heaven?” he said. “Why? Because this is where you grew up?”

Eddie mouthed the word *Yes*.

“Ah.” The Blue Man nodded. “Well. People often belittle the place where they were born. But heaven can be found in the most unlikely corners. And heaven itself has many steps. This, for me, is the second. And for you, the first.”

He led Eddie through the park, passing cigar shops and sausage stands and the “flat joints,” where suckers lost their nickels and dimes.

Heaven? Eddie thought. Ridiculous. He had spent most of his adult life trying to get *away* from Ruby Pier. It was an amusement park, that’s all, a place to scream and get wet and trade your dollars for kewpie dolls. The thought that this was some kind of blessed resting place was beyond his imagination.

He tried again to speak, and this time he heard a small grunt from his chest. The Blue Man turned.

“Your voice will come. We all go through the same thing. You cannot talk when you first arrive.”

He smiled. “It helps you listen.”

☺☺“THERE ARE FIVE people you meet in heaven,” the Blue Man suddenly said. “Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, and that is what heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth.”

Eddie looked confused.

“People think of heaven as a paradise garden, a place where they can float on clouds and laze in rivers and mountains. But scenery without solace is meaningless.

“This is the greatest gift God can give you: to understand what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the peace you have been searching for.”

Eddie coughed, trying to bring up his voice. He was tired of being silent.

“I am your first person, Edward. When I died, my life was illuminated by five others, and then I came here to wait for you, to stand in your line, to tell you my story, which becomes part of yours. There will be others for you, too. Some you knew, maybe some you didn’t. But they all crossed your path before they died. And they altered it forever.”

Eddie pushed a sound up from his chest, as hard as he could.

“What . . .” he finally croaked.

His voice seemed to be breaking through a shell, like a baby chick.

“What . . . killed . . .”

The Blue Man waited patiently.

“What . . . killed . . . you?”

The Blue Man looked a bit surprised. He smiled at Eddie.

“You did,” he said.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is seven years old and his gift is a new baseball. He squeezes it in each hand, feeling a surge of power that runs up his arms. He imagines he is one of his heroes on the Cracker Jack collector cards, maybe the great pitcher Walter Johnson.

"Here, toss it," his brother, Joe, says.

They are running along the midway, past the game booth where, if you knock over three green bottles, you win a coconut and a straw.

"Come on, Eddie," Joe says. "Share."

Eddie stops, and imagines himself in a stadium. He throws the ball. His brother pulls in his elbows and ducks.

"Too hard!" Joe yells.

"My ball!" Eddie screams. "Dang you, Joe."

Eddie watches it thump down the boardwalk and bang off a post into a small clearing behind the sideshow tents. He runs after it. Joe follows. They drop to the ground.

"You see it?" Eddie says.

"Nuh-uh."

A whumping noise interrupts them. A tent flap opens. Eddie and Joe look up. There is a grossly fat woman and a shirtless man with reddish hair covering his entire body. Freaks from the freak show.

The children freeze.

“What are you wiseacres doin’ back here?” the hairy man says, grinning. “Lookin’ for trouble?”

Joe’s lip trembles. He starts to cry. He jumps up and runs away, his arms pumping wildly. Eddie rises, too, then sees his ball against a sawhorse. He eyes the shirtless man and moves slowly toward it.

“This is mine,” he mumbles. He scoops up the ball and runs after his brother.



☺“LISTEN, MISTER,” EDDIE rasped, “I never killed you, OK? I don’t even *know* you.”

The Blue Man sat on a bench. He smiled as if trying to put a guest at ease. Eddie remained standing, a defensive posture.

“Let me begin with my real name,” the Blue Man said. “I was christened Joseph Corvelzchik, the son of a tailor in a small Polish village. We came to America in 1894. I was only a boy. My mother held me over the railing of the ship and this became my earliest childhood memory, my mother swinging me in the breezes of a new world.

“Like most immigrants, we had no money. We slept on a mattress in my uncle’s kitchen. My father was forced to take a job in a sweatshop, sewing buttons on coats. When I was ten, he took me from school and I joined him.”

Eddie watched the Blue Man’s pitted face, his thin lips, his sagging chest. *Why is he telling me this?* Eddie thought.

“I was a nervous child by nature, and the noise in the shop only made things worse. I was too young to be there, amongst all those men, swearing and complaining.

“Whenever the foreman came near, my father told me, ‘Look down. Don’t make him notice you.’ Once, however, I stumbled and dropped a sack of buttons, which spilled over

the floor. The foreman screamed that I was worthless, a worthless child, that I must go. I can still see that moment, my father pleading with him like a street beggar, the foreman sneering, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. I felt my stomach twist in pain. Then I felt something wet on my leg. I looked down. The foreman pointed at my soiled pants and laughed, and the other workers laughed, too.

“After that, my father refused to speak to me. He felt I had shamed him, and I suppose, in his world, I had. But fathers can ruin their sons, and I was, in a fashion, ruined after that. I was a nervous child, and when I grew, I was a nervous young man. Worst of all, at night, I still wet the bed. In the mornings I would sneak the soiled sheets to the washbasin and soak them. One morning, I looked up to see my father. He saw the dirty sheets, then glared at me with eyes that I will never forget, as if he wished he could snap the cord of life between us.”

The Blue Man paused. His skin, which seemed to be soaked in blue fluid, folded in small fatty layers around his belt. Eddie couldn't help staring.

“I was not always a freak, Edward,” he said. “But back then, medicine was rather primitive. I went to a chemist, seeking something for my nerves. He gave me a bottle of silver nitrate and told me to mix it with water and take it every night. Silver nitrate. It was later considered poison. But it was all I had, and when it failed to work, I could only as-

sume I was not ingesting enough. So I took more. I swallowed two gulps and sometimes three, with no water.

“Soon, people were looking at me strangely. My skin was turning the color of ash.

“I was ashamed and agitated. I swallowed even more silver nitrate, until my skin went from gray to blue, a side effect of the poison.”

The Blue Man paused. His voice dropped. “The factory dismissed me. The foreman said I scared the other workers. Without work, how would I eat? Where would I live?

“I found a saloon, a dark place where I could hide beneath a hat and coat. One night, a group of carnival men were in the back. They smoked cigars. They laughed. One of them, a rather small fellow with a wooden leg, kept looking at me. Finally, he approached.

“By the end of the night, I had agreed to join their carnival. And my life as a commodity had begun.”

Eddie noticed the resigned look on the Blue Man's face. He had often wondered where the sideshow cast came from. He assumed there was a sad story behind every one of them.

“The carnivals gave me my names, Edward. Sometimes I was the Blue Man of the North Pole, or the Blue Man of Algeria, or the Blue Man of New Zealand. I had never been to any of these places, of course, but it was pleasant to be considered exotic, if only on a painted sign. The ‘show’

was simple. I would sit on the stage, half undressed, as people walked past and the barker told them how pathetic I was. For this, I was able to put a few coins in my pocket. The manager once called me the ‘best freak’ in his stable, and, sad as it sounds, I took pride in that. When you are an outcast, even a tossed stone can be cherished.

“One winter, I came to this pier. Ruby Pier. They were starting a sideshow called *The Curious Citizens*. I liked the idea of being in one place, escaping the bumpy horse carts of carnival life.

“This became my home. I lived in a room above a sausage shop. I played cards at night with the other sideshow workers, with the tinsmiths, sometimes even with your father. In the early mornings, if I wore long shirts and draped my head in a towel, I could walk along this beach without scaring people. It may not sound like much, but for me, it was a freedom I had rarely known.”

He stopped. He looked at Eddie.

“Do you understand? Why we’re here? This is not *your* heaven. It’s mine.”

☉ TAKE ONE STORY, viewed from two different angles.

Take a rainy Sunday morning in July, in the late 1920s, when Eddie and his friends are tossing a baseball Eddie got for his birthday nearly a year ago. Take a moment when that ball flies over Eddie’s head and out into the street. Eddie, wearing tawny pants and a wool cap, chases after it,

and runs in front of an automobile, a Ford Model A. The car screeches, veers, and just misses him. He shivers, exhales, gets the ball, and races back to his friends. The game soon ends and the children run to the arcade to play the Erie Digger machine, with its claw-like mechanism that picks up small toys.

Now take that same story from a different angle. A man is behind the wheel of a Ford Model A, which he has borrowed from a friend to practice his driving. The road is wet from the morning rain. Suddenly, a baseball bounces across the street, and a boy comes racing after it. The driver slams on the brakes and yanks the wheel. The car skids, the tires screech.

The man somehow regains control, and the Model A rolls on. The child has disappeared in the rearview mirror, but the man's body is still affected, thinking of how close he came to tragedy. The jolt of adrenaline has forced his heart to pump furiously and this heart is not a strong one and the pumping leaves him drained. The man feels dizzy and his head drops momentarily. His automobile nearly collides with another. The second driver honks, the man veers again, spinning the wheel, pushing on the brake pedal. He skids along an avenue then turns down an alley. His vehicle rolls until it collides with the rear of a parked truck. There is a small crashing noise. The headlights shatter. The impact smacks the man into the steering wheel. His forehead bleeds. He steps from the Model A, sees the damage, then

collapses onto the wet pavement. His arm throbs. His chest hurts. It is Sunday morning. The alley is empty. He remains there, unnoticed, slumped against the side of the car. The blood from his coronary arteries no longer flows to his heart. An hour passes. A policeman finds him. A medical examiner pronounces him dead. The cause of death is listed as "heart attack." There are no known relatives.

Take one story, viewed from two different angles. It is the same day, the same moment, but one angle ends happily, at an arcade, with the little boy in tawny pants dropping pennies into the Erie Digger machine, and the other ends badly, in a city morgue, where one worker calls another worker over to marvel at the blue skin of the newest arrival.

"You see?" the Blue Man whispered, having finished the story from his point of view. "Little boy?"

Eddie felt a shiver.

"Oh no," he whispered.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is eight years old. He sits on the edge of a plaid couch, his arms crossed in anger. His mother is at his feet, tying his shoes. His father is at the mirror, fixing his tie.

"I don't WANT to go," Eddie says.

"I know," his mother says, not looking up, "but we have to. Sometimes you have to do things when sad things happen."

"But it's my BIRTHDAY."

Eddie looks mournfully across the room at the erector set in the corner, a pile of toy metal girders and three small rubber wheels. Eddie had been making a truck. He is good at putting things together. He had hoped to show it to his friends at a birthday party. Instead, they have to go someplace and get dressed up. It isn't fair, he thinks.

His brother, Joe, dressed in wool pants and a bow tie, enters with a baseball glove on his left hand. He slaps it hard. He makes a face at Eddie.

"Those were my old shoes," Joe says. "My new ones are better."

Eddie winces. He hates having to wear Joe's old things.

"Stop wiggling," his mother says.

"They HURT," Eddie whines.

"Enough!" his father yells. He glares at Eddie. Eddie goes silent.

At the cemetery, Eddie barely recognizes the pier people. The men who normally wear gold lamé and red turbans are now in black

suits, like his father. The women seem to be wearing the same black dress; some cover their faces in veils.

Eddie watches a man shovel dirt into a hole. The man says something about ashes. Eddie holds his mother's hand and squints at the sun. He is supposed to be sad, he knows, but he is secretly counting numbers, starting from 1, hoping that by the time he reaches 1000 he will have his birthday back.

