

Heaven Can't Wait (Can It?)

Written by Jack Sparacino
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Remember that old comedy, "Heaven Can Wait"? It came from the quirky movie team of Warren Beatty and Buck Henry in 1978. Beatty starred as a pro football player, routed to heaven prematurely after a bicycle accident by an "over-anxious guardian angel" (Henry) on his first assignment. Jimmy Carter was president back then, gas cost about 70 cents a gallon, and I finally escaped from the grad school rat race, apparently thanks to a few guardian angels of my own and enough caffeine to float a battleship. Yeah, the ribs were really good in Chicago and we liked watching the usually hapless Cubs and White Sox but it was a tough, financially challenged period with too much bike riding on busy streets and counting the loose change in my pockets at lunch time.

With 30 cents and a smile you could leverage a fully loaded hotdog and a soda from the cheerful lunch truck guy parked outside the library and buy either the Sun Times or the Chicago Tribune (both papers cost a dime). Usually I was lucky to scrounge a quarter so something had to go. But at age 27, nothing really got to me or my peers. We were, like most of our age mates around the country, tough as a five pound bag of forged nails. As grad students, we were willing to "delay gratification." Bide our time. Lots more loose change was around the corner, we thought, with better weather and way better baseball teams. And hey, maybe some new bikes!

Without straying into theology, about which I am vastly ignorant, heaven –according to one current definition – is "a place regarded in various religions as the abode of God (or the gods) and the angels, and of the good after death, often traditionally depicted as being above the sky." More simply, it's an almost indescribably, transcendently beautiful, peaceful and pleasant place or state of mind. In short, paradise, and don't we all deserve at least a piece of it? In any case, if there is a heaven (with limitless loose change in one's pockets for starters), surely it's better to get there sooner than too much later. If it's all that good, maybe it just can't wait (sorry, Warren and Buck).

And if we took a sneak peek, here is my idea of what heaven might look like around the edges. Let's start with the ambience. Surely the background music has to be out of this world and my nominations include Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" and Will Hudson, Irving Mills and Eddie DeLange's "Moonglow," the version recorded by the great clarinetist Artie Shaw. Others may have their own favorites, so personal listening devices may be needed at the gate. Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek" needs to be on the playlist ("Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak..."). In the interest of cultural diversity, we'll need to include at least a few songs that weren't penned by American artists during the Depression. But they'll need to be happy tunes and there won't be any jukeboxes unless we are all issued baggy pants with giant pockets that can hold a fortune in coins (fortune defined as in excess of 30 cents).

And naturally we'll need to envision gardens and a stellar wait staff. An image from Ben Macintyre's "Operation Mincemeat" (2010, Broadway) per the Hotel St. George in 1940's Algiers

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comes to mind—"Built on the site of an ancient Moorish palace, it was surrounded by botanical gardens with hibiscus, roses, and flowering cacti; in both war and peace, visitors sipped cocktails in the shade of vast umbrellas beneath the palms and banana trees, served by Algerian waiters in starched uniforms with epaulettes." All of whom can sing like, well, angels. And will hold the door for you, help locate strange places like Slovenia on the map, and gush, "gee you look great!" Perhaps confuse you with one of your childhood heroes or your favorite Disney character. (But not Goofy.)

Surely the food these splendidly attired folks serve will be, err, far out. Calories won't count, needless to say. The fish will have been caught and delivered in real time, fruits and vegetables will look like they were just photographed for Gourmet magazine, the pies and pastries will be cooed over by Martha Stewart or one of her twinkly eyed minions. Cannoli will drift around like snowflakes in an old fashioned paperweight. All the peanut butter will be Skippy, the mayonnaise Hellman's, and no, so sorry, vegan mayo will be off the radar (non-sequiturs are not allowed, you see).

Safety will be paramount... we'll need superb security and get it in the form of kind souls who look like they just left the set of "Miami Vice." Lots of lovely pastels and linen, glimmering jeweled watches and cool sunglasses.

Now as for TV... no irritating commercials except for the ones you like, at pleasant volume levels, so no more back spraining luges for the remote control to lower the decibels for ambulance chasers, overstock companies, storefronts which welcome low or no credit (!) or used car outfits. All your favorite shows, even the ones you haven't been able to see in decades like "Sea Hunt" (wow, that Mike Nelson guy kind of looks like Jeff Bridges, hmm...) or "The Rifleman." Anyone for "Flipper"? All in HD and 3D and with streaming and hey, what do you mean you already have all that?

But what about those of us who need to keep up with the "news"? Well, no depressing stuff here, it's all good all the time. No more stories about rotten weather, mass shootings, delayed product recalls, political scandals, or peanut allergies. Just pleasing fare loaded with frolicking puppies, irresistible children, fantastic sports teams, wild adventures, scientific and humanitarian breakthroughs.

One more thing for now and that's awards. Most of us really appreciate recognition for our genuine accomplishments and understand, at some level, that way too many superficial trophies and ribbons are handed out. I propose that our heavenly body of gossamer souls includes an awards maven. My nomination for this position is one Lieutenant Richard Halsey Best of the U.S. Navy. Best served on the finest aircraft carrier in U.S. history, the Enterprise. He was in the eye of the hurricane in our pivotal victory at Midway in June of 1942.

Best was a crack dive bomber pilot, the airman who personally sunk Japan's flagship aircraft carrier Akagi (see "Shattered Sword" by Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, Potomac Books, 2005). Without Best's heroics (he was awarded the Navy Cross and Distinguished Flying Cross), it is entirely possible that the wrong side would have won and we'd all be speaking other languages today. Yikes.

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So there it is, a fleeting personal version of heaven, where the best of the best—along with Lieutenant Best – prevail. Right is right, wrong is wrong, and we are forever aligned. Forgiveness and love are spread as thick as grandma's strawberry jam on fresh warm bread. It's only good guys and white hats. Dogs all over the place.

And the music stays out of this world. Way out. C'mon, Glenn, please play us another song. The angels can sing us to break.