

Is this it?

Emerson Milne

My life was good. I went to college and became a professor. I volunteered whenever I could. I advocated for free education and planted so many trees that I could have made my own forest. This is what makes me so sure I am supposed to be in heaven.

I knew my death was coming, and I was prepared. I was diagnosed with lung cancer six months ago. It wasn't caught in time, and I knew what that meant. Of course I was sad, but I knew I was going to heaven. I was put on hospice care and made as comfortable as possible. That comfort lasted until my death.

Death was calmer than I expected. It felt like being carried to bed after falling asleep in the car as a child. I wanted that feeling to stay. All too soon, it felt like I was falling and being jerked awake.

My head felt fuzzy, but all the pain I had endured was gone. I took a deep breath and smiled. No more rattling, just air. I stood up slowly and stretched my arms. I hadn't yet opened my eyes to the beauty I expected would surround me. I opened them to a bright glow, and I shut them as fast as I opened them. I peeked them open ever so slightly. My eyes started to adjust, and I saw...

Nothing.

I was taken aback. Why wasn't I surrounded by flowers and singing children?

I started to move forward. My feet moved left, right, left...

"Where are you going?" a small voice called out. Startled, I stopped and tried to pinpoint where the voice came from. I took a look around, not finding anything.

"Where are you?" I called back out. I put my hand above my eyes to try and see a bit better.

"Follow the sound." The small voice giggled. Instead of words, the small voice started humming as if it were the beacon of a lighthouse, and I was a lost ship. I followed the hum as best as I could with the brightness that clouded my vision.

As I got closer, the clearer my vision became. Instead of a bright glow, I was in a room.

"That's it! You're almost here!" The voice called out, sounding much closer now.

A few more steps, and everything was clearer. There were ratty stuffed animals on a broken twin-size bed. Broken toys were lined up in the corner. There was a filthy, stuffed bunny, as if it were found on the side of the road. There were Barbie dolls laying on the ground with missing limbs and blankets with cigarette burns and stains lying on the bed. A table with mismatched stools was in the middle of the room on a dirty rug.

"You made it!"

I look up to see a little girl sitting on one of the stools with a wide, unbrushed grin and a missing front tooth. The table was adorned with plastic cups and Ritz crackers set up to look like some sort of drab tea party.

"Are you going to sit?" She giggled.

"Where am I?" I asked desperately.

She looked at me with questioning eyes. "My room, of course." I looked at her with an equally confused expression. Her hair was tangled and messy, and her clothes were torn. The girl

couldn't be older than six. Hesitantly, I sat on the stool across from her. "Do you want something to eat?" She said, gesturing to the crackers on the paper plate.

"I'm not hungry." I managed to say.

"I'm Amelia," she declared without prompting. She stuck out her hand for me to shake. I cautiously shook it and took in the state the girl and her room were in. I wondered what kind of parents would let their child get as dirty as this. "I'm glad you came! Mommy and Daddy never hang out with me. I laid out what I could find. We don't have any fancy tea biscuits or tea, but we do have hot water and crackers!" she exclaimed, pouring me some of the hot water into a plastic cup. "So will you stay and play with me?" She asked, tilting her head slightly. Now what else was I going to do? Maybe this was a test to get into heaven and prove my worth. I decided to stay and what would happen.

I smiled, "Yes."

"Great! We just can't be too loud. Mommy doesn't like when I'm loud. She wouldn't be able to see or hear you anyway," she stated.

"Where's your mom now?" I asked curiously.

"Sleeping. That's all she really does. She doesn't play with me much, and when she does, it isn't fun," she said. I felt a pang of sympathy for the child in front of me. I decided not to ask questions and just let her talk. "Daddy isn't fun either. Whenever he's home, he always yells at Mommy. She always looks sad."

What was I supposed to say? I couldn't help her. I was dead. I felt helpless. This made me wonder why I was here in the first place. I was starting to feel as if this isn't a test but maybe an opportunity I didn't even want.

"Are you lonely?" I asked without really thinking.

"What does that mean?"

"It means not having people to talk to or be around." I answered.

"I think so. But I have you now, right?" She asked. I didn't know the answer. Was there a heaven, or is this it? Am I supposed to help this child? I don't want this responsibility. I worked my whole life to be sent to heaven. I did my part.

"Let's just start," I said, sipping the cup of hot water. I winced at the heat. I guess death doesn't stop all pain.

"So you will stay for tea?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure, why not?" I can figure out whatever this is later.