

Heavens and Hells

I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.

- Isaac Asimov

It took 5 hours for Adam E. Samuelson's mother to give birth to him. Half an hour to scream for help, another half to be delivered to a hospital by overworking ambulance men, and she had spared the rest of it to curse her husband and the fetus.

And it took 5 seconds for Adam E. Samuelson's cactus to kill him. Half a second to fall down from the window, another half to hit Adam's sadly hairless head and thus cracking his skull, and his body took care of the rest of it by shutting down the nerve system and stopping the once throbbing heart pitilessly.

So, Adam E. Samuelson was dead. A policeman later documented, 'Adam E. Samuelson – accident, hit by a blunt object on the head', a doctor 'A.E. Samuelson – DOA, skull fracture' and his 5-year-old daughter 'My father Adam made a journey to Heaven with his cactus'.

Accident or not, skull fracture or not, journey with the Killer Cactus or not, he was dead.

Adam E. Samuelson was fully aware of his own death. He accepted it and was almost happy to not be able to pay the 100\$ bill he received at Johnny's only a day before the tragic accident.

After the simple realization and acceptance, he was lead – by a mysterious force – to a colossal emptiness. He wasn't sure whether it was logical or not to describe emptiness in any other way than *empty*, but the colorless, odorless and spaceless room he was facing, was absolutely massive – as if billions of Adam could fit in. It was such a... such a big thing. And the people in it looked like nothing more than deformed pixel dots on an LCD monitor. But there were many – all in different ages and appearances.

The scene resembled those waiting lines at airports. There were desks beyond the horizon, and people were waiting for their turn. Some just stood there, watching other people come and go. Others chattered and laughed and moaned and did all sorts of other things a dead person was capable of doing.

Adam was standing slightly off the line, and the new arriving dead ones were pushing him on the back. He grunted and found a place for himself. There were so many people here and still, he was all alone.

Struck by a sudden feeling of frustration, Adam grabbed a woman who was standing right in front of him. She seemed to be irritated by Adam, and that made the former Customers Service manager at McDonald's embarrassed.

"Excuse me?" He mumbled. "Are you also dead?"

"Everyone here is dead," The woman answered bluntly. "What do you think?"

Adam nodded, feeling better. So he didn't end up somewhere wrong. That was good.

"Do you know where we are going to?" Adam asked. "I mean, we are *dead*. There must be some sort of a....."

"Heaven?" The woman finished Adam's sentence, Adam noticed that she was pronouncing that word as if pronouncing, hmm, *bi-a-tch*. "How am I supposed to know? I came here only a few seconds before you."

'Not that I think that there is something as fancy as a heaven,' heard Adam the woman mutter bitterly.

Adam asked cautiously. "Don't you believe in the life after death?"

"*Life after death?*" The woman began to laugh so loudly that people around them turned around to see what was

going on. She didn't seem to care. "I'm an atheist."

"Atheist?" Adam repeated the word which felt quite strange on his tongue. And the woman ignored him totally. Without throwing as much as a glance at Adam, she walked briskly towards one of the vacant desks.

"Name, please," The officer behind the desk asked with a formal but unfriendly tone.

And the woman, telling her name, was even more unfriendly (if that was even possible). "Kim Park."

"Well, Ms. Kim Park, are you religious?" The officer asked. And the question obviously made Kim the Atheist very irritated.

"No, *sir*," She spat out as if she'd just chewed a cockroach. "I'm not stupid."

"So you don't believe in any god?"

"No, I don't! *I told you that I'm not stupid!*"

The officer seemed to be utterly exhausted by the conversation. He scribbled something down on the parchment he had in front of him, and looked up at the dead, angry woman. "Okay, no heaven or hell for you. You get to choose whether to start believing in a god or to be born again."

The woman seemed to be greatly enraged by the thought of the former. "No. No. No. No way I'm becoming a fool and believe something that doesn't even exist."

"Yes, ma'am. Go to the line over there. The officer there will lead you to a new life in the Living World. Good luck," Kim Park left without hesitation, and Adam heard the officer murmur at her back, "And live long. Not another atheist, for heaven's sake."

And he changed his subject of interest to Adam. Adam gulped and realized how embarrassed he was, standing in front of the desk and being studied by an officer who didn't seem to be the world's most generous person.

"Name, please," The officer said.

"Um, Adam E. Samuelson, sir," Adam said in a shaky tone. "Adam like Adam and Eve."

"You a Christian?" The Officer asked nonchalantly.

Adam had to think about it. Was he a Christian? Probably. He was named after the first human, was baptized, and had religious parents. He quoted from the Holy Bible – does saying Oh My God count as quoting? – and celebrated Christmas as well as Easter, plus Thanksgiving if he was in a mood for a turkey. But didn't most of Westerners do that? Singing religious carols and having a Christian name? He never went to the church. Nor had he ever confessed his daily sins to a priest or a pastor. He didn't know that much about the Bible, either. Just a few major stories – wait, was it David who killed Goliath, or was it Peter?

"Sorry... I'm not sure about that," Adam said, feeling miserable for not even knowing his own religious status, "I've never actually thought about it, you know, when I was alive."

The Officer smiled meekly. "No worries. Nowadays people are quite confused about all these religion craps – Oops, excuse me, I meant *mess* I guess you can still take a short trip to some of the places here, you know, to get some idea."

Then it was a whole minute of waiting, watching the officer going through a long, long list of something that didn't seem much like anything else than religions. He finally looked up and asked. "Do you believe in the existence of a god, dear Adam Samuelson?"

Adam hesitated. Would he be sent to the Living World again, where he answered bazillions of phone calls by complaining customers all day and heard his wife complain about his salary when he finally came home, if he said a brisk *no*, to the question? Not that he was an atheist. He never thought about it, really. Never considered being a religious person, and never considered being an anti-religion person, either. His life was like that. Not much of a believing.

"Uh, I think I do," He said, and added to put some sincerity on it. "Yes, I do believe in the existence of a god."

"All right. It doesn't seem like you have that much of a choice. And since you haven't been religious in the Living World... You know, nowadays the gods are quite harsh when it comes to qualifications," the officer said, handing Adam a new list which he had written himself. "Ah, if you happen to meet anyone from the Greek gods of Olympus on

your way, please tell him or her that they should minimize the size of their world. Nobody comes to their world-after-death, anymore. They can give the place to Allah. He's getting millions of newcomers."

Then Adam was dismissed. He walked down the row, hypnotized, with a list of religions he should consider. He wondered if the gods were paying rent.

When Adam arrived in front of a gigantic door – just a door, no walls – another officer greeted him with a smile. These officers weren't so unique, he noticed. They all seemed tired, and had the same exhausted expression on their grey faces. He couldn't exactly find any differences between this one and the first one.

"Ready for a trip? Give me the list," The officer said.

Adam did as he was told to. The officer looked at the list for a split second and gave it back to Adam. Adam saw how the gigantic door, just standing there in the air, began to open. He was shoved by the officer, and next second he was on the other side of the door.

He was falling down.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaarg!" Adam cried out, trying to grab something but failing. He saw the officer's guiltless face through the open door. He was waving.

"Have a nice trip, Ad- Adrian."

Adam didn't know which part he should point out first. That his name was hardly Adrian, or that he was experiencing a vertical drop without a parachute?

Adam was standing in a cavern. The lower part of it was a great puddle of black water and the higher part of it was covered with stalactites, all with different lengths and diameters. Adam was paralyzed by the sight, and wondered where the hell this place was. And then panicked – where the hell this place was? This could be a hell!

It was so quite inside the cavern. The water was serene and the dim light that seemed to come from the ceilings wasn't enough for Adam to figure out where the possible exit might be situated. And that was when he noticed a movement.

It was a gondola – a small rowing gondola coming from the very other side of the puddle. The faint contour of a gondola moving slowly towards him in the mist was spooky enough to take away the last guts Adam had. Adam stepped back, but his back brushed against a cold wall and there was nowhere to go.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Adam repeated for himself. But regardless of how many times he called for God's mercy, the gondola was now only a few meters away from him. Then Adam was able to see who was rowing the gondola. It was an old man with rough beard, his back slightly crooked.

He looked at a terrified Adam and spoke in an utterly uninterested tone. "Passage fare."

Adam couldn't speak. He was desperate trying to figure out whether this man was a bad guy or not. "Wh- What do you want?"

The man looked at Adam as if seeing a rare but disgusting insect. Then he repeated. "Passage fare."

At that point, Adam realized that this man wasn't exactly beating him to death with the row. So he answered. "What passage fare?"

"An obolus or a danake, you pay or you don't go anywhere," The man said. That was when Adam finally got an idea about who this man was. A dark river, a man with a boat, and passage fare?

"Are, are you Charon?" Adam said, stammering. "Charon of the Styx?"

The man stared at Adam for a long time. "I am Charon, and this is the Styx river. Are you going to pay me or not?"

"I- I don't have any money. Not a cent," Adam protested, trying to look as poor as possible and turning his pockets inside out. But Charon didn't seem to care. He simply turned away and began to row, heading to the opposite side, where he came from. Adam ran and grasped the gondola. Charon turned around and glared at him. "Let go of my boat, before I crack your skull in half."

That had already happened (by his cactus), and Adam didn't exactly fancy getting skull fractures. So he let go of the boat.

"You, you know the Greek Gods, right?" Adam asked.

Charon just stared at him. Adam interpreted it as an approval. So he continued. "There was an officer up there who wanted me to tell the Greek Gods that they should really minimize the size of their, uh, property."

Charon didn't seem to be shocked at the news. He just kept staring at Adam and left, rowing. Adam could hear him murmuring, or maybe humming, to himself.

"Now the glories of Olympus are nothing more than a dream of the past..."

And so he was gone.

The second place he visited was a heaven. He could easily see it by its looks, its fineness and luxury. People were lying around on velvet couches, wearing golden garments with sparkling jewelries. There were also women in light clothes, going around and talking to any man they encountered. Adam blinked, trying to figure out what was flowing in the river that was crossing the, well, heaven. It wasn't water.

"Welcome to Jannah," Adam heard an unfamiliar voice right beside him. He was frightened by the sudden approach, but it was just a man, a young man wearing a beautifully embroidered robe. Adam thought he smelled of something good. Something delicious.

"Uh, what did you just say?" Adam said. "J- what?"

"Jannah, brother," The man repeated in a strangely kind tone. "It's a paradise for believers."

"So this is, um, a heaven?"

The man smiled meekly. "Indeed, brother. I suppose you are not a believer. But that doesn't matter, we welcome visitors. Though you are not allowed to reside here, you might consider coming back later."

Adam was confused. He coughed just because he couldn't really find anything to say. The man was still smiling the kind smile.

"Well, it looks really nice here," Adam said hesitantly. "It's, um, heavenly."

The man seemed to be pleased by the compliment, as if it was his own. He grabbed Adam's arm and lead him through the paradise. Adam had no choice than to follow him.

"In Jannah, there is no pain, no suffering and no fear. You will be always young and bear beautiful robes and lay with virgins."

"What?" Adam asked back, baffled. "Virgins?"

The man stopped walking. He stood there with his arms spread welcomingly. "It's what we deserve here in Jannah, brother. Beauty, happiness and immortality. This is where we belong, where everyone should belong to. Allah is almighty."

Adam just stared at the man dumbfounded. When he finally opened his lips, his voice was hoarse. "I think I should move on."

The young man smiled again. "Of course, brother. I hope that you choose the right way."

There is no second chance - that was the last thing Adam heard from him before finding himself in a totally different place.

It was burning hot, smelled of sulfur and shrieks of pain were heard everywhere. Adam was standing in the middle of an overwhelmingly traditional version of hell. He didn't know how to describe the scene he was made to

watch, but the tortures that were being done were cruel enough to make him angry. And afraid.

"This is supposedly the last place for you to visit," A voice was heard underneath him. Adam jumped and stepped back.

There was a hole on the ground he was standing on. And in that hole, a man was being fried. Just like the fries Adam's customers were complaining about, he was sitting in a pot filled with burning oil. Though this wasn't about potatoes, it was a human being with flesh and bones. Adam needed to vomit.

The fried man, however, seemed to be perfectly okay with the situation. He looked at Adam with a sign of boredom in his eyes – whatever was left of them.

"Hello, dear. Don't freak out like that, you've certainly heard about the hell?" The man said.

It didn't seem like the man was suffering, but Adam suffered by watching his skin burn and melt. He finally decided to close his eyes. "I- I've heard about it. I've never seen it for real."

The man's voice was still mild and pleasant. "Oh, nobody does. But now you've seen one."

"What have you done? Why are you here?" Adam's voice was uneven. And unlike him, the man who was being grilled and fried was in a perfectly calm mood.

"Well, not a single heaven would accept me," The man said in a way that reminded Adam of a very old person recalling something he had done in his youth. "So there was no choice."

"Wait, why don't you go back to the world and believe in a god?"

"I've done that thousands of times, but every time I die I wasn't religious," he said. "I got tired of living and dying."

And the awkward conversation was over. Adam opened his eyes only to find out that the man was gone.

Adam was back in the colossal room. He looked around and saw an officer staring at him. After all the vivid things he had seen, the officer looked so monotonous.

"Had a nice trip?" The officer asked. Adam felt an urge to answer no, but he wasn't sure if that was a wise thing to do. So he decided to nod.

"Alright, so what do you choose?" The officer had a parchment and a pen ready. "You know the choices."

Adam answered.

It took 5 hours for Betty A. Samuelson to give birth to her son. Half an hour to scream for help, another half to be delivered to a hospital by overworking ambulance men, and she had spared the rest of it to curse her husband and the fetus.

Holding her baby, she looked up at the baby's father.

"So which name shall we give him?"

"I don't know. We should get a godfather or something."

"Hmm... How about Adam?"

"Adam? That's a decent name."

"It's my dad's name. He died when I was five or something."

"Sounds okay for me. But honey, Adam is biting your finger."

"No teeth no pain."