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Answers from the Great Beyond

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You know you're about to have a bad day when you wake up and the first thing you see is an emissary from Hell relaxing in the old leather wingback at the foot of your bed. I rubbed my eyes—really hard—but he was still there, slumped in the chair with eyes closed and a well-loved teddy bear cradled in his lap.

I pulled myself upright, clutching the sheet to my chest. As if that could protect me from one of the Devil's minions. On the other hand, he didn't actually look all that threatening; he wasn't built along the lines of Batman (the modern version) or Schwarzenegger, like you see in drawings. In fact, he looked an awful lot like the idiot doctor on M*A*S*H, although the long spiral horns somewhat spoiled the effect. He also had a pointy tail draped over one leg and coiled around the bear.

How could something like this possibly end well?

One eye popped open and regarded me with a pupil that was noticeably red in hue. He smacked his lips. "Hey, boy," he muttered. *Boy?* Hardly. I was two whole weeks into being sixty-eight years old. Perhaps the accursed creature had misread the address and arrived at the wrong house. He coughed roughly. "I was beginnin' ta think you'd *never* wake up."

I noticed the creature could use a shave. "Are you, uhm... real?"

"Depends." His sigh sounded like gravel being poured into a cement mixer. "See, whether I'm real or not to somebody—you, for instance—depends on whether or not he, or *she*, believes in me. If you do, I'm real. If you don't, then I ain't."

"But I don't—believe in you, I mean. I didn't."

He grinned. "High time you *re*-evaluated your outlook on life."

I shook my head. "This could be a gag, a spoof, a spot of mischief. Did someone put you up to this?" My voice firmed. "How did you get in here?"

He looked irritated. "How do you think? I zapped in, same as always. Think of it as 'beaming in', afterlife-style. Or traveling by 'floo powder', minus the soot."

"This is ridiculous. People can't just 'zap' wherever they want."

"I'm not people." He held up the teddy, pointed to it with a forefinger—and it disappeared in a crackle of miniature lightning.

I stared. "Where did it go? Is it... gone? Disintegrated?"

"He's not *gone* gone. Heck, I wouldn't do *that*; he's my bff. Floo powder."

Belief began to flower within me; *something* out of the ordinary was going on. As to exactly what... “Are you, uhm... from Hell?” Spoken out loud, it just sounded ridiculous. I’d stopped believing in Hell about the same time I figured out the truth about Santa Claus. I took no definite position about the existence of God, but as a character the Devil was about as credible as the Easter Bunny.

He laughed. “I get that a lot. I know, the horns, the tail...” He lifted the leathery appendage and gave it a twirl. “Truth is, it’s not so cut and dry. I’m not a ‘demon’ as such; I don’t answer to Old Nick—who *does* exist, by the way, he just ain’t nearly as powerful or as influential as you’d think.” He sighed. “I ain’t one of them ‘angels’ either. Self-righteous bastards, you’d think they owned the place.”

My frustration was building. Was the creature *ever* going to get to the point? “So what *are* you? And why do you look like Frank Burns?”

He poked a finger my way. “That’s down to you, bud. I don’t have what you’d call a ‘true image’, bein’ immaterial and all. I take on whatever form people expect.”

“Why would I expect you to look like a fictional character from a TV show I used to watch as a kid? I didn’t ‘expect’ you at all!”

“Shee-it, you don’t have to—” He waved a hand. “Lemme explain.”

“About time,” I grumbled.

He glowered at me. “First off, Hell ain’t just one place, see? It’s a whole bunch of places, some worse than others. Dante—remember him? The *Inferno* and all that? He had the right idea when he talked about the ‘nine circles of Hell’, only they’re not really circles and there’s way more than nine. He also mentioned Purgatory as being an in-between sort of place, only it isn’t just one place either. If it helps, you can think of me as a ‘minion of Purgatory’.”

“Okay... and the Frank Burns thing?”

“Gettin’ to that! See, before I manifest myself to someone I look into their mind to see what form I should take. For some folks that might be a demon-type critter, maybe less scary than the worst ones. For others, maybe an angel who’s gone to seed or even a relative who’s passed on but they were kind of ambivalent about.” He pointed both forefingers at me. “In *your* case, with no particular religion in play, I needed an image that was neither good nor overtly evil. Poor old Frank, in your mind, was right down the middle: nominally one of the good guys, saving lives and all that, but his selfishness and general idiocy made him do bad things as well.” He shrugged. “Seemed to fit the bill.”

The truth was slowly forcing its way into my conscious mind. No big surprise; I was still only half-awake. “Does this mean I’m... dead?”

He slapped his knee. “Now we’re gettin’ somewhere! Yes you are, boy. Dead as a doornail, sad to say. It was one of those middle-of-the-night coronaries ya hear about sometimes. Didn’t feel a thing—that’s the good news.”

Terrific. I’d tried to eat right, stay active and all that; apparently to no avail. I took better care of myself than my parents did—no smoking, no drinking—and then I don’t even make it as far as they did? Dammit anyway! And now I’m *dead*? It’s a tough thing to wrap your head around. What was the bigger surprise—than I died before my time, or that I woke up talking to *this* guy? I bit my lip. “All right, let’s assume you’re right. What happens now?”

Frank climbed wearily to his feet. “Yeah... that’s where it gets tricky.” He wagged a finger as he began pacing. “See, the interestin’ thing about the afterlife is that *everybody* gets more or less what they expect. You got your Christians and their Heaven and Hell—that’s where I come in, a’course. But you also got Islamists and Jews with their own versions; ya got Hindus and their karma and endless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth; ya got Buddhists and their ‘four noble truths’ and reincarnation. You got Egypt and their pantheon of gods; ya got ancient Greeks and *their* pantheon of gods; ya got the Norse pantheon of gods. Wow, the list just goes on and on.” He threw up his hands. “The damn thing is, it’s all true! Every last creed of it. If you believe in it, that’s what ya get.”

He stopped pacing to make his point. “See, it was never a matter of tryin’ to figure out which one was *right*. It just boiled down to whichever gonzo set of parables and policies you found most convincing. That’s why they call it *faith*, see? Bein’ raised in whatever church certainly helps in that regard. Otherwise, tryin’ to make sense of it all can get a bit dicey.”

My head hurt. Either this guy was a mental patient who could make teddy bears vanish into thin air, or the whole universe was a clockwork orange. Either way, it didn’t really answer the question. “So... does this mean I’m going to Heaven?”

He laughed. “Oh, man, if I had a nickel...” He plopped back into the wingback. “Everybody and his *dog* thinks they’re gonna go straight to Heaven—do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred bucks. To the point where you’d have to think Heaven would be full-up with all them pious types mentioned in the Bible, and all them Bible-thumpers in the centuries since—but you’d be wrong. Little known fact, my friend: Heaven is darn near empty. God’s gettin’ lonely up there.”

I puffed up my cheeks. “I don’t see how—”

“Well, all them good Christians tend to be pretty hard on themselves. When it gets right down to the nitty-gritty at the Pearly Gates, nearly all of ‘em figure they ain’t got what it takes to pass through. Kind of sad, really. But down they go. Most of

‘em wind up somewhere in Purgatory, but a fair number go right off the deep end; either because they actually did do some wicked stuff in their time—always in the name of God, of course—or ‘cause they were just *really* hard on themselves.” He shook his head. “Doesn’t really matter which, the way I figure. Everyone just judges him- or *her*-self and is punished accordingly.”

I stared at the ceiling, the better to deny that I was talking to Frank Burns. “That just doesn’t make sense. What if you had some egocentric buffoon who acted selfishly, screwed up royally and caused all kinds of damage, but was so self-absorbed and blind to the truth that he *still* thought the sun shone out of his ass. Wouldn’t he just march straight through the Pearly Gates, assuming he belonged there? Where’s the justice in *that*?”

Frank gave me the stink-eye. “Thinkin’ about anyone in particular?” He shrugged. “The system ain’t perfect. Works for most people, but maybe there’s a loophole. I doubt it, though. God’s a pretty sharp cookie. More likely, there are checks and balances I’m not aware of. Maybe there’s a back door into Heaven for folks who really should be in there, and a flush toilet for guys like—whoever you had in mind—who by all rights should be slaving away in a pit of fire.”

I sighed. “Okay, what I’m hearing is that I’m *not* headed for Heaven. But I’m not a guilt-ridden religious type either; I’ve made my share of mistakes, cheesed off a few people along the way, but for the most part my conscience is clear. So Hell is out too. Does that mean I’m bound for Purgatory until you can figure out what to do with me?”

“Yes and no... We already figured out what to do with you, but it *could* sort of be considered part of Purgatory. Depends on how you define it. See, most folks think of all these things—Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and subsections thereof—as being separate *places*. Distinct from both each other and the Earth itself. But they aren’t; they’re all the same place. To put it another way, there’s really only *one* place; it’s just that everything’s all jumbled up and mixed together. So you could nominally be in Purgatory, while still being here on Earth at the same time. Clear?”

“No.” I held my head, thinking fondly of Extra Strength Tylenol.

“You’ll figure it out,” he assured me. “As much as it pertains to you, at least. No one understands the whole system, maybe not even the man upstairs.”

“So what’s gonna happen to *me*?”

“Oh, yeah. I was gettin’ to that. See, you’re an interesting case. Never believed in any of the regular religions, but ya weren’t an atheist either. Another of them goddamn ‘agnostics’. Pains in the ass, you ask me. Every last one of ‘em has to be handled separately, to figure out what to do. More work for guys like me!”

“All right, all right! Sorry, okay? What did you decide?”

“Kind of hard to describe. Probably be easier if I just showed ya.” He snapped his fingers. The world faded to black.

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When my eyelids fluttered open, everything was different. My bedroom was gone, replaced by somebody’s living room. I didn’t recognize any of it. I was slumped in the corner of a black leather couch, with my legs trailing onto the floor. Only I didn’t recognize *them* either; they were slim, rather shapely, and they were clad in black stockings and a short skirt. The phrase *What the Hell?* drifted through my mind.

That wasn’t all. There was a noticeable cleft in the middle of my chest that I was slow to recognize as actual *cleavage*, bounded by a pair of female breasts that were themselves contained and supported by a lacy black brassiere, of the sort that my late wife wouldn’t have been caught dead wearing. Long dark hair framed my view, partially covering my upper chest.

So—what happened? Had Frank Burns turned me into a Klinger wannabe, a man dressed up as a woman? Then again, those breasts looked pretty damn real and for all his cross-dressing Klinger never had *those*. He’d have been drummed out of the army for sure if he’d managed that particular trick.

A woman stepped into view. She bent to peer into my face, her dirty blonde hair dangling freely. *Hot Lips?* “I see you’re awake,” she said. “High time. You always been such a heavy sleeper?”

All I managed to say was, “What’s going on?” Only it wasn’t *my* voice that spoke; it sounded more like something a girl would say—one who’d had a few too many.

“Did ya forget our little conversation?” She dropped into an easy chair facing the couch. “Heaven, Hell, Purgatory—all that good stuff?”

I pulled myself upright. Long hair danced around my shoulders. A string of pearls rested close to my throat. I was wearing some sort of black blouse, possibly made of silk or satin, parted nearly to the waist. And yeah, I *did* remember. But that spectacularly failed to explain why I was talking to another cast member from a forty-year-old sitcom. “Why do you look like Margaret?”

“Oh, ask me a hard one. I figured since you just turned into a woman, least I could do was keep you company. Better for a gal like you to talk to me instead of some dick-head like Frank Burns, right?” Frowning, she inspected her nails. A moment later a nail file appeared and she set to work.

A *woman*? I looked down at myself. Long hair, breasts, short skirt... hesitantly, I touched my nylon-clad legs. A chill sank through me; all the hair there was gone, and my own fingernails had been painted red. I could sense that I was smaller than I had been, and without even checking I knew there was a void between my legs that hadn't been there before. Not just dressed like a woman then; I had somehow *become* one. But how—and why?



I licked my lips. My mouth felt dry and I realized that my head hurt, like the fading remnants of a really bad migraine. “Wh—why am I a woman?”

Margaret chuckled. “Whatsamatter? You don’t like bein’ a chick?”

I had to think about that. My memory slowly trickled back. Frank Burns didn’t like agnostics, Heaven and Hell weren’t options, and all that stuff was jumbled up into one place anyway... wasn’t I supposed to be in Purgatory? “Weren’t you—Frank was about to tell me something. Like where I’m supposed to go.”

“Absolutely. Like I said, you’re an interesting case. You agnostics don’t believe in anything in particular, so what’re we supposed to do with ‘em?” She blew on her fingertips. “In your case, though, we found an out. Turns out you kinda wanted to be female all along, didn’t ya?”

My mouth dropped. “What? No—why would you think that? I—”

“Oh, c’mon! You’re talkin’ to an entity who can read your mind, remember? It’s all there, laid out for me to see like one of them scrolls the old Greeks used to write on, all the way down to the subconscious. You buried it pretty deep, but it’s right there in black and white: you should’a been a girl.”

“What, really? I should...” My gaze fell to the floor.

“Hey, I get it. I really do. One gal to another: you’ve been denying this your whole life. Probably couldn’t even admit it to yourself, amiright? But you *identify* with women, you always have. You were always jealous of ‘em, sure. But—point in your favor—you never let that descend into resentment, or even violence like it does with some guys. *Those* dudes wind up way deep in Hell, by the way.”

I couldn’t think straight. Identify with women? Sure—who wouldn’t? I mean, isn’t that just normal? It *felt* normal. I admired women, in general terms, and there was more to it than just physical attraction. But as for me wanting to actually *be* a woman? Well... maybe. Isn’t that normal too?

“The thing is,” Margaret said, “when a guy like you passes on, we don’t just go and make his deepest desire come true. That’s more like what an angel might do if ya ever make it to Heaven. Here’s the weird part: you actually believed, in your heart of hearts, way down deep, that in your next life you would *be* a woman. No specific methodology,” she added. “Could be a Heavenly reward, or reincarnation, or even some sort of penance, but somehow you’d wind up female.”

I drew back a stray fall of hair. “What’re you saying? Because I thought I might be a woman in another life, you turned me into one?”

“In essence. Not just any old woman, though.” She pointed at me. “You remember what I said about everything being all jumbled together?”

I shook my head, even though I remembered all too well. “Doesn’t make sense. How can Heaven and Hell be the same place?”

“It’s good old planet Earth too, don’t forget about that.” Margaret leaned forward. “Think about it. It isn’t the *place* that matters, it’s what you do there—or what gets done *to* you.” She shrugged. “That’s why nobody can ever make sense of the way the world works. For example: some guy gets knocked around as a kid, ends up in jail and gets abused there—that guy’s in Hell. Not just figuratively—literally! Not that he necessary deserved to be there, of course—recalling what I said about Christian guilt. It’s not just Christianity either; all the religions do it. The guy put himself there, from the weight of his own expectations, real or imagined.” She waved a finger in the air. “Not that that excuses whoever abused the guy, in jail or anywhere else. Oh no, they’re still sinners and they’re guilty of criminal behavior, for which they’ll pay at some point. But for the guy we were talking about, he really *is* in Hell. Hopefully, over time, his expectations will change and next time around he’ll find his way to a better place.”

“That’s... really confusing.”

“No argument here. Like I said, no one really groks the system. We all just have to figure out a way to work within it.”

Okay, back to basics. “I’m a woman now... because I expected to be one?”

“Correct. You’re back on Earth in a female body, and you’re in Purgatory at the same time. Which means that things aren’t too bad—no Hell for you—but they aren’t exactly comin’ up roses either. You’re a normal woman, with issues.”

I pinched the bridge of my delicate nose. “If I’m not *me* anymore, who am I?”

“Good question! Shows you’ve been payin’ attention. Since you’re back on Earth and you’re obviously a grown-up lady, you must already *be* someone—a female someone. Your name is Monique Stonemart, age thirty-four. You’re healthy and quite attractive, but with low self-esteem, sadly. You sleep around, but you’re in therapy for that. You’ve got daddy issues and you’re just out of a bad relationship, but you’re worried the guy might stalk you. Aaaand you just died.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean? I just got here!”

“My bad. What I meant is, *she* just died. How do ya think you got here? There was a vacancy. We fixed the aneurism that killed her and slipped you right inside. The body was dead for maybe ten seconds.”

I stared at my hands. “Then, if I’m *her*, then where is she?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? Not my job. It depends on her expectations. Hell, at a guess, but not way down deep, just noodling around the edges somewhere. Or

Purgatory; a lot of non-religious types go there these days. I'd call it popular, but it ain't really a popularity contest. Nobody gets to vote."

Again I stroked my leg, trying to take stock. My old life was over and done with; family, friends, possessions—all gone. I was a woman named Monique and from what I'd seen so far, fairly attractive. My mind went blank. I looked at Margaret. "What am I supposed to do now? Redeem this woman's life?"

Another shrug. "You can if you want. It's your body now. It's your *life*; you don't bear the weight of her sins, only your own. Her life choices thus far may have some bearing on what you choose to do, but you're not obligated to stick with 'em. Find a different line of work; pick your own friends; push her family away or bring 'em closer—whatever you like. No one will understand why you changed all of a sudden, but that's their problem. It happens."

That actually made sense; my life, my choices, my fate. I glanced down at my new self and was moved to button up my blouse. Monique may have been 'that' sort of girl, but I didn't have to be. I heaved a sigh. "It's just—now that I know there really *is* a Heaven and a Hell, everything's different. I get that it's not cut and dry like the religions say, but I *am* being judged. On how I live my life, my actions, the way I treat others—that sort of thing. What I need to know is, what do I hafta to do get into Heaven?"

Margaret smiled. "You wanna get into Heaven, huh? Can't say I blame ya; it's pretty sweet up there. I'm not allowed to say what goes on, but—wow." She winked. Then she got serious. "But you gotta realize: this ain't a test. There's no pass or fail. You want my advice? Be the best person you can possibly be. Doesn't matter what anyone else thinks: it's what *you* think that matters."

I swept my hair back. "Forgive me for saying, but that sounds too easy."

"It isn't. Self-improvement is hard work." She glanced upward. "Here's a tip: if you're gonna do good stuff, for yourself or for others—good deeds, like—just make sure you do it for the right reasons. There's no point doing something just to improve your chances of gettin' in, see? Because you can't fool *yourself*. You can lie to yourself, but it's not the same thing. Deep down you'll know."

My head drooped. "Okay, now it sounds really really hard."

"You got it. The key is, don't be so hard on yourself. You always were, ya know. It held you back." She grimaced. "This is gonna sound like a self-help seminar, but whatever. The secret is: stay in the moment." She spread her hands. "You look back, you regret what you didn't do, you get depressed, you go to Hell. But don't look too far forward either. Anticipating good stuff brings expectations you can't live up to; anticipating bad stuff leads to worry lines. Either way, you're screwed."

I touched my cheek. It felt as smooth as satin. I had a feeling that worry lines were something I might have to start worrying about.

“You might want to check out Mindfulness,” Margaret said. She stood up. “If you can get past the mumbo jumbo that usually comes with—it’ll help you avoid the kind of negative mindset that leads you-know-where.”

I surged to my feet, swaying on unfamiliar high heels. “I still don’t get this—what am I supposed to *do*? Hit the pop-psych section of the bookstore? Or join a church and find Jesus?”

“A church? Why would you wanna do that? For the company? If that’s what you want, please yourself—although your mileage may vary. Careful of the company you keep.” She waved her hand. “As for religion of the organized variety—steer clear, my friend. Avoid the preacher-types and their dogma like the plague.” She paused, eyeing me suspiciously. “You doubt?”

I shook my head, feeling miserable. I’d never paid much attention to what went on in churches before, but now that I knew Heaven was real... why not bet the field?

“Wise up,” Margaret said. “Rules and rites and commandments exist for only one reason: to make you feel like ya have to stick with that religion, whichever one it is, in order to get through the Pearly Gates. All the big-name religions are really good at making folks feel like they don’t measure up, that they ain’t good enough—that’s why Heaven is almost empty. Take it from me: stick with Mother Nature.” She sauntered toward the front door.

I staggered after her. “Hey, where’re you going? I don’t even know where I am!”

“You’re in Doc Bundolo’s condo,” she said breezily. “He’s Monique’s therapist. The two of ‘em were about to start a torrid love affair when she snuffed it. Timing is everything, right?” She jerked a thumb toward the master bedroom. “He’s in there, on the phone with his wife in Florida, telling her now’s not a good time for him to fly down. She’s a decent sort, ya know. Took time off work to take care for her ailing mother. You’re free to do whatever, but if ya really want to improve your chances? You might want to re-think the affair. Although,” she mused, “the doc *is* kind of a hottie, so I get that.”

With a final flick of her wrist, she stepped through the door—without opening it—and disappeared. When I rushed over and yanked it open, the front walk, the tiny yard, the sidewalk, the street—all empty. It was nightfall.

I turned around and there *he* was, waiting. “I’m all yours, babe. All night long.”

My feminine instincts kicked into gear. My breath fluttered and I went all weak at the knees. The guy was seriously cute. Maybe just—one for the road? ■

BONUS CAPTION

It has nothing to do with the story!

