

Heaven for Dortguller

By Richard Cahill

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Dortguller went to Heaven. His deceased relatives, even his mother, he thought, embraced him rather perfunctorily as he zipped through the tunnel of light. Presently, he came to halt before a low, long table. There was some literature on its glossy surface. The book of his life, he supposed. The chapters were rather uneven, morally, he suspected. He tensed himself for judgment.

No judge appeared, however. There was a fluttering behind him, and a hand tapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Dortguller?"

"Yes."

"Eric, here. Your OA."

In life, Dortguller had spent two unhappy months in the service, before developing a hernia that had secured his release. The military habit of communicating in brisk acronyms had always confused him. Was it going to be like that here? Eric was youngish and quite human looking. He seemed impatient, as if he were a salesman with a customer he had already decided wasn't buying anything. Dortguller glanced over at the papers, wondering what the powers had made of his life.

"Don't bother with the brochures. They're a bit out of date, anyway. Let's go, shall we?"

"Where are we going?"

"Your place here, naturally." Eric led him off. They came to a precipice filled with clouds. Eric sprouted wings the moment he stepped off. Dortguller did not, but Eric took him by the hand and he trailed along weightlessly. They flew until the clouds parted. Beneath them Dortguller could see row after row of identical buildings separated by swimming pools and tiny greenswards. It looked like Southern California from the air. They came closer to the ground without decelerating, but touched down lightly on a sidewalk that seemed equally to glow goldenly and to be as solid as concrete. Eric glided

to the nearest doorway. In the mailbox was a key. The key, at least, was Heavenly quality, about nine inches long, made of what appeared to be cut emeralds, and hanging by a platinum chain. Eric hung it around Dortguller's neck.

"Welcome to eternity," he said. He turned as if he intended to flap off.

"What a minute," Dortguller said.

"Of course." Eric looked annoyed, despite his acquiescence. "I do have the right soul, don't I? Dortguller. Died in your sleep, luckily enough. Fifty-eight, wasn't it? Bit young to make the grade in your century, but all the better for you. Indifferent Christian was your religious style. You're going to love your neighbors. We're organized according to religious belief here. Himself doesn't like a lot of theological bickering anymore, so the sects are encouraged to keep to themselves. There's a Baptist neighborhood across the valley. Lot of singing and praising over there. You can hear it clearly when the wind blows a certain way. Please don't complain. You were led to expect that sort of thing here."

"But this is a condominium."

"And?"

"In the Bible it says 'In My house there are many *mansions*.'"

"We really don't favor people quoting the Bible to us here. Do you remember any other parts of the Bible, except those relating to real estate? The Commandments, for example. How many of those did you actually keep?"

Dortguller realized he could barely remember the Commandments.

"The one regarding adultery you were particularly weak on. And coveting. You were a ferocious coveter."

"But I've been forgiven, otherwise I wouldn't be here, right?"

Eric snorted.

"I am in Heaven, aren't I? It doesn't seem at all like the other place."

"You're in Heaven, right. It's just that there have been a few changes. He Who Is Who Is, or God as you like to call Him, would apologize for the accidental misrepresentation, except that, being the Alpha and the Omega, the First Cause of the entire Universe, He doesn't have to apologize for anything, since none of us would have

any existence without Him. You can see His point, I imagine. Let's go inside, I'm supposed to show you the floor plan anyway. Go ahead, use the key."

"Thank you. I'm sorry to be difficult. You do seem in a hurry."

Inside the condo was fantastically clean and modern. The kitchen boasted every conceivable appliance. An enormous flat screen TV dominated the living room.

"Hurry doesn't describe it. We orienting angels are inundated by a cloudburst of souls every moment of eternity. Do you have any idea how many people die every day on your planet?"

"No."

"A shitload, if I may use one of your expressions. Humanity wasn't supposed to go on this long. That's the reason for the overcrowding, which has led to the land-usage issues. Those of us who just work here have been praying, and that is the precise word, for the end of your world for what seems like an eternity. Team Armageddon has been on high alert for nearly two thousand years, but He won't give the go-ahead. He's too fascinated by the goings-on on your world. First the ancients, then the Romans, then the barbarians, then the Crusades. He was on the edge of His seat for World War II. Then you invented television. We all thought He'd pull the plug after the last season of the Sopranos, but that came and went and Earth is still there, still spewing forth dead souls like a landfill popping out maggots."

"It's awfully uncharitable of you to compare human souls to maggots," Dortguller said, surprising himself with his boldness. Then he realized he had no reason to be afraid. He had it made. Achieved the ultimate prize. They couldn't kick him out.

"Don't talk to me about charity!" Eric snapped. "Can we finish here? Refrigerator fills itself. Manna and a gallon of mead...the official food and drink of Heaven are available at all times, of course, but there's also cheese, most kinds of meat, and fresh vegetables as well. No ham, I'm afraid. We're still officially kosher. Relic of earlier, better days. No doubt those rules will be relaxed soon.

"Cable is free. Over a billion channels, and more coming every day." Eric handed Dortguller a piece of equipment covered with buttons and the size of a milk crate. "Only disadvantage to that is the remote's rather unwieldy."

"That's what I do? For eternity? Eat, drink, watch TV?"

"It's what you did on Earth. Stick with what you're good at."

"What about sex?"

"It's allowed, but be careful. Remember, all of your wives and lovers, plus all of their spouses and lovers, are going to be here eventually, if they're not already. Stick with TV, is my advice. You can smoke weed if you want to-it's legal here. The atheists grow the best. It's okay to go to that section in the daytime, but stay away at night. The atheists are a little ticked-off about having an eternal existence after spending their mortal lives ridiculing the notion, so there's always heavy drinking and sometimes a bit of crime that goes on there."

"Crime? Atheists? How did they end up here? Isn't there, you know, the other place for them?"

"Hell? Don't start in with any of us about Hell, is my advice. Hell is the other component to the Big Problem, in the opinion of most angelic beings. Hell has managed to make itself quite exclusive."

"What?"

"A regular gated community. The Other He long ago got sick of the drearying flood of regulation human souls. Being evil incarnate, he simply slammed the door. You have to really be someone special to go to Hell nowadays. Slobodan Milosevic was the last person you might have heard of that officially made it. The Other He is very snobbish. We nearly got stuck with Darwin, for His sake! Other souls that clearly belong in Hell-Hemingway, Eva Braun, Lyndon Johnson-they're here. There's no appeal. It's quite loathsome."

A fly buzzed around Eric's head. He waved it away fussily. Dortguller was hit with the sudden impression that Eric was gay. He had read once that all angels were male, so that made sense. Then another thought occurred to him.

"Was that a fly?"

"Yes, obviously."

"There are bugs in Heaven?"

"Yes, but that's one of the features you'll like. There's spray, a swatter, and some flypaper under the sink. Have at them." Something chimed, and Eric pulled out a device that looked like a Blackberry, except for the rather ostentatious halo about it. "Yes, yes,

I'm on my way," he barked into it. He turned back to Dortguller. "While we were having this little chat, the line in the Tunnel of Light has backed up with a regular traffic jam of dead souls," he said. "You must be having another one of your dramatic little conflagrations. Won't He be pleased! If you have any more questions, there's a customer service number, but please check the list of FAQ's on the back of the hall closet door before you ask anything really obvious. And we prefer e-mail."

Dortguller adjusted. He found a channel where his hometown football team won the Super Bowl every year. Since his hometown football team had actually never won the Super Bowl, this enthralled him for what seemed like forever. When he got tired of the flavor of mead, he found that if he merely concentrated for a few seconds, the mead started tasting exactly like his favorite beer. No matter how much he drank, and where he wandered intoxicated, he always woke up in his own Heavenly bed, without a trace of injury or hangover.

Dortguller's neighbors were mostly retired salesmen and their wives. Eric had been right about the complications of sex in Heaven. One glance at his neighbors' domestic situations was enough to convince him of that. An unfortunate named Kleiberg on the next block over was forced to cohabit with all three of the wives he had outlived, at least one of which he had apparently poisoned. Kleiberg looked drawn and haggard. Perpetually. And he still had one wife left on Earth. Dortguller shuddered to think of what eternity was like for the man, but Kleiberg put up a brave front. Dortguller's neighbor had given him an important tip regarding his own sex life.

"Don't take up with any of the local girls," he said. "You never know when one of their ex-husbands or boyfriends is going to buy the farm and come romping through the door, looking for everlasting bliss with the only woman he ever really loved and be mighty disappointed to find you on top of her. Go to the Buddhist areas; the women are skilled, and they're much more relaxed about that sort of thing."

So he did. Kleiberg was right. Dortguller wasn't the only soul in need of love. A bit of a sex tour business had sprung up to the Asian sections. Dortguller, who had always been uncomfortable with foreign travel, found that the best thing for him was to sign up with one of the charters. Dortguller always figured that when his own wife died, he'd

become domesticated again, but when he was called to welcome her through the tunnel, she brushed right past him and took up eternally with a recently deceased Dish Network technician whom she had apparently started having sex with right after she ordered Dortguller the Dish Network for one of his birthdays.

Dortguller was feeling put out about that one afternoon, lying on the couch with his usual mead. The fact that his team was throttling the hated Cowboys once again did little to dispel his anhedonia, as it merely reminded him that his original reason for wanting the Dish Network was so that he could catch all of his team's games. A fly alighted on his coffee table, right underneath his nose. Dortguller slapped it out of existence.

It let out a tiny squeak before it died. That was odd. The sound the fly made had conveyed an emotion, too, and the emotion, unless Dortguller was mistaken, was *gratitude*.

Dortguller got a microscope out of the closet. This was a function of it being a Heavenly closet; Dortguller could get pretty much anything he wanted out of it, even a thing he had never put in there or felt the need of before, like a microscope. He scraped the remains of the fly onto a slide and adjusted the lens.

The fly was Bates. Bates had been in the year ahead of him in elementary school, a primordial bully whose style was subterranean punching and kicking. He had assaulted Dortguller every day of Dortguller's fifth grade, usually following up the beating with a few disparaging remarks about the size of Dortguller's genitals as Dortguller lay clutching them on the school playground.

Bates was squashed himself now. A look of unutterable peace rested on his tiny face, completely familiar to Dortguller except for the multifaceted insect eyes.

Dortguller was dumbfounded until he remembered the list of FAQ's. There it was, in the tiny glowing, Gothic letters Heaven favored for missives:

THE INSECTS IN YOUR HEAVENLY MANSE: Are all souls you know! Due to the recent adaptation of the universal admissions policy, a place had to be found for souls that would otherwise not be considered suitable for eternal salvation. The entomological solution came down from the Highest chamber. Doomed to watch you, the

Heavenly elect, enjoying the fruits of eternity while they scuttle about consuming each other's droppings, their personal Hell lasts until you release them by swatting, spraying, or trapping them. Each of the bugs in your kitchens is a soul that sinned against you in your mortal life. End their suffering quickly, or trap them and pull their legs off one at a time-it's your choice! And don't get caught up in the moral ambiguity of the situation, for His sake! You're in Heaven-anything you do is OK!

By the way, some of the souls we were forced to let in don't even deserve to be insects. Other solutions have been devised for them. Simon Cowell, for example, is going to be a tapeworm. So is Courtney Love.

It didn't take long for Dortguller to recognize his insects. The fruit flies that buzzed his bowl of bananas were Altimer and James, who had blackballed his acceptance into the fraternity of his choice in college. In the course of his life, he had long ago forgotten that slight, but in the hindsight of eternity, he realized that had he been allowed to join that frat, he would have had connections that would have resulted in him becoming a state senator. The old moth that fluttered against the windowpane was Tidwall, the supervisor who had refused to promote him and eventually discouraged him into leaving a job that eventually would have led Dortguller to the company presidency. The cockroach was Burton, who used a wit Dortguller never could seem to combat and a crowing sense of sexual superiority to make every sales meeting Dortguller ever attended, in the dead-end job Dortguller eventually settled for, an occasion of Dortguller's humiliation.

Dortguller found the spray the most useful, although it did kill the fruit flies rather quickly. By limiting himself to controlled bursts, however, he could stun Tidwall and Burton, leaving them legs up and twitching, while he went about his day's business. When he returned at night Burton would have recovered enough to be crawling in dazed circles on the kitchen counter and Tidwall would be fluttering crookedly against the window.

He began to take pictures when he went on his sex sprees in the Far East of Heaven. He left the snapshots on the counter, and invited Burton to scuttle over them and weep.

That came to an end when the sex tours were banned. Eric arrived to deliver the news personally. "Basically, it's selling souls, the AA's concluded."

"AA's? What are AA's?" Were they going to outlaw beer, too? Dortguller clutched his mead.

"Attorney angels. Can't traffic in souls here, at least not so openly. The Other Place has a monopoly on that practice." Eric rolled his eyes. "Though He knows, we'd all be sooo grateful if the Other He would resume that custom. So the tours are out. If you want to go there on your own, I don't imagine anyone will stop you."

Dortguller didn't want to. The Asian side of Heaven was scary; milling, strange music and languages, sly Oriental souls who wished him no good, at least in his imagination. He could not imagine going there without a phalanx of mead-swilling, blustering buddies at his side. He fell unwillingly into celibacy. His mood suffered. Kleiberg offered him the company of one of his wives, but it was the one he had poisoned, so Dortguller refused. He wrote a letter to his own wife, asking for a least a weekend once in a while, but was curtly turned down.

He caught Burton waving his antennae sardonically at him one night, in a manner that Dortguller interpreted as ridiculing his lack of sex, so Dortguller crushed him out of existence with his bare hand, and then rinsed Burton's eternal soul off his palm in the sink. The tiny act of violence galvanized him into action. There must be a partner for him, in all of eternity.

He thought about all the women in his life. Sadly, it did not take long. In the long years of his marriage, he had only had one affair, with the wife of a neighbor named Horgan, while Horgan was recovering from a heart attack. When he got well enough to investigate, Horgan had found out, and the affair came to a bloodless end after a few months. Dortguller wondered why he had never seen either of the Horgans in Heaven.

Apart from that, all of his adulteries had been accomplished with prostitutes when he was at conventions. Before he had gotten married, there had been girlfriends, of course. Not many, and not all attractive, he had to admit. He had long ago lost track of most of them. The only one he was certain hadn't got married to someone or other was Melanie.

Melanie had been a squat brunette with a largish nose, a library science major Dortguller had fallen in with during his last year of school at a drunken party and kept company with for the better part of a semester. He did his best to conceal the affair from his male friends, who let him know they thought of Melanie's appearance in canine terms. It was a tough line to walk, relationship-wise, pretending to ignore Melanie in public while keeping the flame burning in private, and Dortguller was quite clumsy at it, but Melanie tolerated that. Dortguller had no idea why. In their moments alone, when Dortguller was able to relax in the absolute certainty that no one else would find out about their dating, Dortguller found Melanie witty and sexually original.

The affair came to a bad end when a California girl named Pamela appeared on campus as soon as Dortguller's final semester started. Wild and blonde and bikini-waxed, she had been shipped out of state by her parents to broaden her cultural horizons. Even though she was only a sophomore, she was so far out of Dortguller's sexual league that when she attached herself flirtatiously to him at a party, Dortguller had known at that moment that she was bound to be his personal emotional wrecking ball. Her pug nose and tanned skin, which she displayed daring amounts of even in the clothes she wore to class, made Dortguller's foreboding irrelevant. He wanted her, and every once in a while, in a reflexive way, Pamela seemed to want him.

He dropped Melanie and made it permanent by saying some things about her that were extremely unkind and it was certain she would hear. He pursued Pamela in every way a near-adult man could, which it turned out were not enough ways, until a linebacker that Pamela had never mentioned dating, mentioned to Dortguller that he was dating Pamela and told Dortguller if he didn't stop making an idiot of himself regarding her, Dortguller would be injured, possibly seriously.

Melanie had taken her own life, not then but some years later. Dortguller heard of the tragedy at a reunion, when he still attended them. He ascertained that it was long enough past college that the interpersonal brutalization she had endured at his hands couldn't possibly have caused it, and had forgotten about Melanie until this moment. After a long afternoon of meditation, while Tidwall continued to flutter against the panes, Dortguller concluded that Melanie might have been the perfect mate for him. Dortguller hadn't seen any examples of mistakes in life that had been rectified in the afterlife. Doing

so would put him in the unfamiliar role of a trendsetter, but he decided that he had to locate Melanie. The cosmetic flaws that had made her too embarrassing to be seen with at the age of twenty were bound to be exceeded by the flaws that a longer life had inflicted on Dortguller's own corporeal being. Besides, everyone looked a little bit better in Heaven. It was one of the qualities of the place.

Most importantly, Melanie had never mentioned any desire for any employee of the Dish Network. Now Dortguller could approach her with the wisdom of a life (and a death). They would have an eternity to meld their souls together. That would make up for Dortguller's youthful cruelties, and Dortguller's wife would surely be irritated about him finding himself a younger woman.

Dortguller concentrated on Melanie's memory, and suddenly, because things happened like that in Heaven, he could see her. She still appeared sweet and youthful. She was standing in the kitchen of her Heavenly condo, which was quite like Dortguller's own, perhaps a little more lived-in. Dortguller's soul grew wings, and buzzed towards hers. In his eyes, Melanie suddenly separated into many images, all desirable. She turned, and her eyes fixed upon him.

He never saw the swatter.

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Shorter works by Mr. Cahill have been published in the Pebble Lake Review, Quiet Feather and Firstwriter.com Magazine.

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This story is dedicated to my son Drake.