

I think that most people tend to meditate more on What Comes Next as they get older, and since I'm now in my late sixties, I qualify in that regard. Several of my short stories and at least one novel (*Revival*) have approached this question. I can't say 'have dealt with it,' because that implies some conclusion, and none of us can really draw one, can we? Nobody has sent back any cell phone video from the land of death. There's faith, of course (and a veritable deluge of 'heaven is real' books), but faith is, by its very definition, belief without proof.

When you boil it down, there are only two choices. Either there's Something, or there's Nothing. If it's the latter, case closed. If it's the former, there are myriad possibilities, with heaven, hell, purgatory, and reincarnation being the most popular on the Afterlife Hit Parade. Or maybe you get what you always believed you would get. Maybe the brain is equipped with a deeply embedded exit program that starts running just as everything else is running down, and we're getting ready to catch that final train. To me, the reports of near-death experiences tend to support this idea.

What I'd like – I think – is a chance to go through it all again, as a kind of immersive movie, so I could relish the good times and good calls, like marrying my wife and our decision to have that third child. Of course I'd also have to rue the bad calls (I've made my share), but who wouldn't like to reexperience that first good kiss, or have a chance to relax and really enjoy the wedding ceremony that went by in such a nervous blur?

This story isn't about such a rerun – not exactly – but musing about the possibility led me to write about one man's afterlife. The reason fantasy fiction remains such a vital and necessary genre is that it lets us talk about such things in a way realistic fiction cannot.

## Afterlife

William Andrews, an investment banker with Goldman Sachs, dies on the afternoon of September 23, 2012. It is an expected death; his wife and adult children are at his bedside. That evening, when she finally allows herself some time alone, away from the steady stream of family and condolence visitors, Lynn Andrews calls her oldest friend, who still lives in Milwaukee. It was Sally Freeman who introduced her to Bill, and if anyone deserves to know about the last sixty seconds of her thirty-year marriage, it's Sally.

'He was out of it for most of the last week – the drugs – but conscious at the end. His eyes were open, and he saw me. He smiled. I took his hand and he squeezed it a little. I bent over and kissed his cheek. When I straightened up again, he was gone.' She has been waiting for hours to say this, and with it said, she bursts into tears.

Her assumption that the smile was for her is natural enough, but mistaken. As he is looking up at his wife and three grown children – they seem impossibly tall, creatures of angelic good health inhabiting a world he is now departing – Bill feels the pain he has lived with for the past eighteen months leave his body. It pours out like slop from a bucket. So he smiles.

With the pain gone, there's little left. His body feels as light as a fluff of milkweed. His wife takes his hand, reaching down from her tall and healthy world. He has reserved a little bit of strength, which he now expends by squeezing her fingers. She bends down. She is going to kiss him.

Before her lips can touch his skin, a hole appears in the center of his vision. It's not a black hole but a white one. It spreads, obliterating the only world he's known since 1956, when he was born in the small Hemingford County Hospital in Nebraska. During the last year, Bill has read a great deal about the passage from life to

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death (on his computer, always careful to obliterate the history so as not to upset Lynn, who is constantly and unrealistically upbeat), and while most of it struck him as bullshit, the so-called 'white light' phenomenon seemed quite plausible. For one thing, it has been reported in all cultures. For another, it has a smidgen of scientific credibility. One theory he's read suggests the white light comes as a result of the sudden cessation of blood flow to the brain. Another, more elegant, posits that the brain is performing a final global scan in an effort to find an experience comparable to dying.

Or it may just be a final firework.

Whatever the cause, Bill Andrews is now experiencing it. The white light obliterates his family and the airy room from which the mortuary assistants will soon remove his sheeted breathless body. In his researches, he became familiar with the acronym NDE, standing for near-death experience. In many of these experiences, the white light becomes a tunnel, at the end of which stand beckoning family members who have already died, or friends, or angels, or Jesus, or some other beneficent deity.

Bill expects no welcoming committee. What he expects is for the final firework to fade to the blackness of oblivion, but that doesn't happen. When the brilliance dims, he's not in heaven or hell. He's in a hallway. He supposes it could be purgatory, a hallway painted industrial green and floored in scuffed and dirty tile could very well be purgatory, but only if it went on forever. This one ends twenty feet down at a door with a sign on it reading ISAAC HARRIS MANAGER.

Bill stands where he is for a few moments, inventorying himself. He's wearing the pajamas he died in (at least he assumes he died), and he's barefoot, but there's no sign of the cancer that first tasted his body, then gobbled it down to nothing but skin and skeleton. He looks to be back at about one ninety, which was his fighting weight (slightly soft-bellied, granted) before the cancer struck. He feels his buttocks and the small of his back. The bedsores are gone. Nice. He takes a deep breath and exhales without coughing. Even nicer.

He walks a little way down the hall. On his left is a fire extinguisher with a peculiar graffito above it: *Better late than never!* On his right is a bulletin board. On this a number of photographs have

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been pinned, the old-fashioned kind with deckle edges. Above them is a hand-printed banner reading COMPANY PICNIC 1956! WHAT FUN WE HAD!

Bill examines the photographs, which show executives, secretaries, office personnel, and a gaggle of romping kids smeared with ice cream. There are guys tending a barbecue (one wearing the obligatory joke toque), guys and gals tossing horseshoes, guys and gals playing volleyball, guys and gals swimming in a lake. The guys are wearing bathing suits that look almost obscenely short and tight to his twenty-first century eye, but very few of them are carrying big guts. *They have fifties' physiques*, Bill thinks. The gals are wearing those old-fashioned Esther Williams tank suits, the kind that make women look as if they have not buttocks but only a smooth and cleftless swoop above the backs of their thighs. Hot dogs are being consumed. Beer is being drunk. Everybody appears to be having a whale of a good time.

In one of the pictures he sees Richie Blankmore's father handing Annmarie Winkler a toasted marshmallow. This is ridiculous, because Richie's dad was a truck driver and never went to a company picnic in his life. Annmarie was a girl he dated in college. In another photo he sees Bobby Tisdale, a college classmate back in the early seventies. Bobby, who referred to himself as Tiz the Whiz, died of a heart attack while still in his thirties. He was probably on earth in 1956, but would have been in kindergarten or the first grade, not drinking beer on the shore of Lake Whatever. In this picture the Whiz looks about twenty, which would have been his age when Bill knew him. In a third picture, Eddie Scarponi's mom is baffing a volleyball. Eddie was Bill's best friend when the family moved from Nebraska to Paramus, New Jersey, and Gina Scarponi – once glimpsed sunning herself on the patio in filmy white panties and nothing else – was one of Bill's favorite fantasies when he was still on his masturbation learner's permit.

The guy in the joke toque is Ronald Reagan.

Bill looks closely, his nose almost pressing against the black-and-white photo, and there can be no doubt. The fortieth president of the United States is flipping burgers at a company picnic.

What company, though?

And where, exactly, is Bill now?

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His euphoria at being whole again and pain free is fading. What replaces it is a growing sense of dislocation and unease. Seeing these familiar people in the photographs doesn't make sense, and the fact that he doesn't know the majority of them offers marginal comfort at best. He looks behind him, and sees stairs leading up to another door. Printed on this one in large red block letters is LOCKED. That leaves only Mr Isaac Harris's office. Bill walks down there, hesitates, and then knocks.

'It's open.'

Bill walks in. Beside a cluttered desk stands a fellow in baggy, high-waisted suit pants held up by suspenders. His brown hair is plastered to his skull and parted in the middle. He wears rimless glasses. The walls are covered with invoices and corny leg-art cheese-cake pix that make Bill think of the trucking company Richie Blankmore's dad worked for. He went there a few times with Richie, and the dispatch office looked like this.

According to the calendar on one wall, it is March of 1911, which makes no more sense than 1956. To Bill's right as he enters, there's a door. To his left is another. There are no windows, but a glass tube comes out of the ceiling and dangles over a Dandux laundry basket. The basket is filled with a heap of yellow sheets that look like more invoices. Or maybe they're memos. Files are piled two feet high on the chair in front of the desk.

'Bill Anderson, isn't it?' The man goes behind the desk and sits down. There is no offer to shake hands.

'Andrews.'

'Right. And I'm Harris. Here you are again, Andrews.'

Given all Bill's research on dying, this comment actually makes sense. And it's a relief. As long as he doesn't have to come back as a dung beetle, or something. 'So it's reincarnation? Is that the deal?'

Isaac Harris sighs. 'You always ask the same thing, and I always give the same answer: not really.'

'I'm dead, aren't I?'

'Do you feel dead?'

'No, but I saw the white light.'

'Oh yes, the famous white light. There you were and here you are. Wait a minute, just hold the phone.'

Harris breezes through the papers on his desk, doesn't find what

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he wants, and starts opening drawers. From one of them he takes a few more folders and selects one. He opens it, flips a page or two, and nods. 'Just refreshing myself a bit. Investment banker, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Wife and three kids? Two sons, one daughter?'

'Correct.'

'Apologies. I have a couple of hundred pilgrims, and it's hard to keep them straight. I keep meaning to put these folders in some sort of order, but that's really a secretarial job, and since they've never provided me with one . . .'

'Who's *they*?'

'No idea. All communications come via the tube.' He taps it. The tube sways, then stills. 'Runs on compressed air. Latest thing.'

Bill picks up the folders on the client's chair and looks at the man behind the desk, eyebrows raised.

'Just put them on the floor,' Harris says. 'That'll do for now. One of these days I really am going to get organized. If there *are* days. Probably are – nights, too – but who can say for sure? No windows in here, as you will have noticed. Also no clocks.'

Bill sits down. 'Why call me a pilgrim, if it's not reincarnation?'

Harris leans back and laces his hands behind his neck. He looks up at the pneumatic tube, which probably *was* the latest thing at some time or other. Say around 1911, although Bill supposes such things might still have been around in 1956.

Harris shakes his head and chuckles, although not in an amused way. 'If you only knew how *wearisome* you guys become. According to the file, this is our fifteenth visit.'

'I've never been here in my life,' Bill says. He considers this. 'Except it's *not* my life. Is it? It's my afterlife.'

'Actually, it's mine. You're the pilgrim, not me. You and the other bozos who parade in and out of here. You'll use one of the doors and go. I stay. There's no bathroom here, because I no longer have to perform toilet functions. There's no bedroom, because I no longer have to sleep. All I do is sit around and visit with you traveling bozos. You come in, you ask the same questions, and I give the same answers. That's *my* afterlife. Sound exciting?'

Bill, who has encountered all the theological ins and outs during

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his final research project, decides he had the right idea while he was still in the hall. 'You're talking about purgatory.'

'Oh, no doubt. The only question I have is how long I'll be staying. I'd like to tell you I'll eventually go mad if I can't move on, but I don't think I can do that any more than I can take a shit or a nap. I know my name means nothing to you, but we've discussed this before – not every time you show up, but on several occasions.' He waves an arm with enough force to cause some of the invoices tacked on the wall to flutter. 'This is – or *was*, I'm not sure which is actually correct – my earthly office.'

'In nineteen eleven?'

'Just so. I'd ask if you know what a shirtwaist is, Bill, but since I know you don't, I'll tell you: a woman's blouse. At the turn of the century, I and my partner, Max Blanck, owned a business called the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Profitable business, but the women who worked there were a large pain in the keister. Always sneaking out to smoke, and – this was worse – stealing stuff, which they would put in their purses or tuck up under their skirts. So we locked the doors to keep them in during their shifts, and searched them on their way out. Long story short, the damned place caught fire one day. Max and I escaped by going up to the roof and down the fire escape. Many of the women were not so lucky. Although, let's be honest and admit there's lots of blame to go around. Smoking in the factory was strictly *verboden*, but plenty of them did it anyway, and it was a cigarette that started the blaze. Fire marshal said so. Max and I were tried for manslaughter and acquitted.'

Bill recalls the fire extinguisher in the hall, with *Better late than never* printed above it. He thinks: *You were found guilty in the retrial, Mr Harris, or you wouldn't be here.* 'How many women died?'

'A hundred and forty-six,' Harris says, 'and I regret every one, Mr Anderson.'

Bill doesn't bother correcting him on the name. Twenty minutes ago he was dying in his bed; now he is fascinated by this old story, which he has never heard before. That he remembers, anyway.

'Not long after Max and I got down the fire escape, the women crammed onto it. The damn thing couldn't take the weight. It collapsed and spilled two dozen of em a hundred feet to the cobblestones.

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They all died. Forty more jumped from the ninth- and tenth-floor windows. Some were on fire. *They* all died too. The fire brigade got there with life nets, but the women tore right through them and exploded on the pavement like bags filled with blood. A terrible sight, Mr Anderson, terrible. Others jumped down the elevator shafts, but most . . . just . . . burned.'

'Like nine-eleven with fewer casualties.'

'So you always say.'

'And you're here.'

'Yes indeedly. I sometimes wonder how many men are sitting in offices just like this. Women too. I'm sure there *are* women, I've always been forward-looking and see no reason why women can't fill low-level executive positions, and admirably. All of us answering the same questions and sending on the same pilgrims. You'd think that the load would lighten a little each time one of you decides to use the right-hand door instead of that one' – he points to the left – 'but no. *No*. A fresh canister comes down the tube – *zoop* – and I get a new bozo to replace the old one. Sometimes two.' He leans forward and speaks with great emphasis. 'This is a shitty job, Mr Anderson!'

'It's Andrews.' Bill says. 'And look, I'm sorry you feel that way, but Jesus, take a little responsibility for your actions, man! A hundred and forty-six women! And you *did* lock the doors.'

Harris hammers his desk. 'They were stealing us blind!' He picks up the folder and shakes it at Bill. 'You should talk! Ha! Pot calling the kettle black! Goldman Sachs! Securities fraud! Profits in the billions, taxes in the millions! The *low* millions! Does the phrase *housing bubble* ring a bell? How many clients' trust did you abuse? How many people lost their life savings thanks to your greed and shortsightedness?'

Bill knows what Harris is talking about, but all that chicanery (well . . . most of it) went on far above his pay grade. He was as surprised as anyone when the excrement hit the cooling device. He's tempted to say there's a big difference between being beggared and burned alive, but why rub salt in the wound? Besides, it would probably sound self-righteous.

'Let's drop it,' he says. 'If you have information I need, why not give it to me. Fill me in on the deal, and I'll get out of your hair.'



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'I wasn't the one smoking,' Harris says in a low and brooding tone. 'I wasn't the one dropped the match.'

'Mr Harris?' Bill can feel the walls closing in. *If I had to be here forever I'd shoot myself*, he thinks. Only if what Mr Harris says is true, he wouldn't want to, any more than he'd want to go to the toilet.

'Okay, all right.' Harris makes a lip-flapping sound, not quite a raspberry. 'The *deal* is this. Leave through the left door and you get to live your life over again. A to Z. Start to finish. Take the right one and you wink out. Poof. Candle-in-the-wind type of thing.'

At first Bill says nothing to this. He's incapable of speech and not sure he can trust his ears. It's too good to be true. His mind first turns to his brother Mike, and the accident that happened when Mike was eight. Next, to the stupid shoplifting thing when Bill was seventeen. Just a lark, but it could have put a hole in his college plans if his father hadn't stepped in and talked to the right person. The thing with Annmarie in the fraternity house . . . that still haunts him at odd moments, even after all these years. And of course, the big one—

Harris is smiling, and the smile isn't a bit pleasant. 'I know what you're thinking, because I've heard it all from you before. About how you and your brother were playing flashlight tag when you were kids, and you slammed the bedroom door to keep him out, and accidentally cut off the tip of his pinky finger. The impulse shoplifting thing, the watch, and how your dad pulled strings to get you out of it—'

'That's right, no record. Except with him. He never let me forget it.'

'And then there's the girl in the frat house.' Harris lifts the file. 'Her name's in here somewhere, I imagine, I do my best to keep the files current – when I can find them – but why don't you refresh me.'

'Annmarie Winkler.' Bill can feel his cheeks heating up. 'It wasn't date rape, so don't get that idea. She put her legs around me when I got on top of her, and if that doesn't say consent, I don't know what does.'

'Did she also put her legs around the two fellows who came next?'

No, Bill is tempted to say, *but at least we didn't light her on fire.*

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And still.

He'd be squaring up a putt on the seventh green or working in his woodshop or talking to his daughter (now a college student herself) about her senior thesis, and he would wonder where Annmarie is now. What she's doing. What she remembers about that night.

Harris's smile widens to a locker-room smirk. It may be a shitty job, but it's clear there are a few parts of it he enjoys. 'I can see that's a question you don't want to answer, so why don't we move along. You're thinking of all the things you'll change during your next ride on the cosmic carousel. This time you won't slam the door on your kid brother's finger, or try to shoplift a watch at the Paramus Mall—'

'It was the Mall of New Jersey. I'm sure it's in your file somewhere.'

Harris gives Bill's folder a get-away-fly flap and continues. 'Next time you'll decline to fuck your semicomatose date as she lies on the sofa in the basement of your fraternity house, and – big one! – you'll actually make that appointment for the colonoscopy instead of putting it off, having now decided – correct me if I'm wrong – that the indignity of having a camera shoved up your ass is marginally better than dying of colon cancer.'

Bill says, 'Several times I've come close to telling Lynn about that frat house thing. I've never had the courage.'

'But given the chance, you'd fix it.'

'Of course – given the chance, wouldn't you unlock those factory doors?'

'Indeed I would, but there are no second chances. Sorry to disappoint you.'

He doesn't look sorry. Harris looks tired. Harris looks bored. Harris also looks meanly triumphant. He points to the door on Bill's left.

'Use that one – as you have on every other occasion – and you begin all over again, as a seven-pound baby boy sliding from your mother's womb into the doctor's hands. You'll be wrapped in bunting and taken home to a farm in central Nebraska. When your father sells the farm in nineteen sixty-four, you'll move to New Jersey. There you will cut off the tip of your brother's little finger while

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playing flashlight tag. You'll go to the same high school, take the same courses, and make the same grades. You'll go to Boston College, and you'll commit the same act of semirape in the same fraternity house basement. You'll watch as the same two fraternity brothers then have sex with Annmarie Winkler, and although you'll think you should call a halt to what's going on, you'll never quite muster up the moral fortitude to do so. Three years later you'll meet Lynn DeSalvo, and two years after that you'll be married. You'll follow the same career path, you'll have the same friends, you'll have the same deep disquiet about some of your firm's business practices . . . and you'll keep the same silence. The same doctor will urge you to get a colonoscopy when you turn fifty, and you will promise – as you always do – that you'll take care of that little matter. You won't, and as a result you will die of the same cancer.'

Harris's smile as he drops the folder back on his cluttered desk is now so wide it almost touches the lobes of his ears.

'Then you'll come here, and we'll have the same discussion. My advice would be to use the other door and have done with it, but of course that is your decision.'

Bill has listened to this sermonette with increasing dismay. 'I'll remember nothing? *Nothing?*'

'Not quite nothing,' Harris says. 'You may have noticed some photos in the hall.'

'The company picnic.'

'Yes. Every client who visits me sees pictures from the year of his or her birth, and recognizes a few familiar faces amid all the strange ones. When you live your life again, Mr Anders – presuming you decide to – you will have a sense of *déjà vu* when you first see those people, a sense that you have lived it all before. Which, of course, you have. You will have a fleeting sense, almost a surety, that there is more . . . shall we say *depth* to your life, and to existence in general, than you previously believed. But then it will pass.'

'If it's all the same, with no possibility of improvement, why are we even here?'

Harris makes a fist and knocks on the end of the pneumatic tube hanging over the laundry basket, making it swing. '*CLIENT WANTS TO KNOW WHY WE'RE HERE! WANTS TO KNOW WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT!*'

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He waits. Nothing happens. He folds his hands on his desk.

'When Job wanted to know that, Mr Anders, God asked if Job was there when he – God – made the universe. I guess you don't even rate that much of a reply. So let's consider the matter closed. What do you want to do? Pick a door.'

Bill is thinking about the cancer. The pain of the cancer. To go through all that again . . . except he wouldn't remember he'd gone through it already. There's that. Assuming Isaac Harris is telling the truth.

'No memories at all? No changes at all? Are you sure? How can you be?'

'Because it's always the same conversation, Mr Anderson. Each time, and with all of you.'

'*It's Andrews!*' He bellows it, surprising both of them. In a lower voice, he says, 'If I try, really try, I'm sure I can hold onto something. Even if it's only what happened to Mike's finger. And one change might be enough to . . . I don't know . . .'

*To take Annmarie to a movie instead of to that fucking kegger, how about that?*

Harris says, 'There is a folk tale that before birth, every human soul knows all the secrets of life and death and the universe. But then, just before birth, an angel leans down, puts his finger to the new baby's lips, and whispers "*Shhh.*"' Harris touches his philtrum. 'According to the story, this is the mark left by the angel's finger. Every human being has one.'

'Have you ever seen an angel, Mr Harris?'

'No, but I once saw a camel. It was in the Bronx Zoo. Choose a door.'

As he considers, Bill remembers a story they had to read in junior high: 'The Lady or the Tiger.' This decision is nowhere near as difficult.

*I must hold onto just one thing*, he tells himself as he opens the door that leads back into life. *Just one thing.*

The white light of return envelops him.

The doctor, who will bolt the Republican party and vote for Adlai Stevenson in the fall (something his wife must never know), bends

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forward from the waist like a waiter presenting a tray and comes up holding a naked baby by the heels. He gives it a sharp smack and the squalling begins.

'You have a healthy baby boy, Mrs Andrews,' he says. 'Looks to be about seven pounds. Congratulations.'

Mrs Andrews takes the baby. She kisses his damp cheeks and brow. They will name him William, after her paternal grandfather. When the twenty-first century comes, he'll still be in his forties. The idea is dizzying. In her arms she holds not just a new life but a universe of possibilities. Nothing, she thinks, could be more wonderful.

*Thinking of Surendra Patel*