**Those Left Behind**

Samuel was the first to go, then little Elijah.  Leaving the biblical theme behind, Kylie was next and then Karen.  *Whoosh*, up they went in a blaze of white light and glory, leaving those still earthbound with mouths agape in wonder.  Of those left behind, half banged their school books up and down in riot and half huddled beside the radiator, terrified that they would be chosen next.  But what exactly were they so frightened of?  Wasn’t paradise supposed to await those who were taken up; a land of milk and honey?  Shouldn’t being sucked up into the heavens be exciting instead of terrifying?  From the look of it, it was like being inside a tornado, with the chosen victim whirling around and around as if they were inside a gigantic washing machine.  The teacher was struggling to gain control of the rioting kids.  She thumped her hand on the desk and called for silence.  Outside, in the Peckham street, the traffic tooted and people revved their engines as if they somehow knew what was going on inside the classroom.  The kids, who were around eight years of age, continued with their anarchy, slamming the lids of their desks up and down, running senselessly around the classroom, terrified in case they were picked next, yelling out to one another.  A few sat cowering in the corner, sucking their thumbs or wringing their hands; they had wet themselves from fear.  The teacher had no control at all over these youngsters who most likely thought they would be next in line to be sucked up into the heavens.  God only knew what was going through their minds at the time.

And those who really *did* make it to heaven - what were their thoughts?  It wasn't the peaceful, serene place that many on earth touted it to be.  Heaven was dark and full of storms.  God was thunderous and vengeful; a grumpy old man with a beard.  Who wanted to cohabit with Him?  The angels had departed years before, come down to Earth in disguise or gone to hell where there was more of a party going on and a bit of a sauna to boot.  Heaven's new arrivals felt disgruntled, cheated.  Back on earth they'd been sold dreams of a better life, of Elysian fields - their pastor had led them to believe that once taken up they'd reside in a world of soft fluffy clouds and sweet nectar but the real truth wasn’t like that at all.

They didn’t have bodies now, they’d left those cumbersome entities behind – they were pure spirit; clean and neat – feeling like a heroin addict after a fix or an anorexic on a starvation high.  They could be invisible at will.  They hung around, looking for harps (there weren’t any – more disappointment).  They got so bored they nagged God incessantly until he agreed to host a heavenly mini-Olympics complete with javelin, shotput, 500m, long jump, high jump and various swimming races.

Outside the pearly gates, which were not pearly at all but run-down and rusted looking (how had *that* happened) there was a rather long queue of people all clutching tickets and waiting to get into heaven. Every hour God would pick up his megaphone and bellow out instructions in a manner strangely reminiscent of Hi**-**de**-**Hi! and announce that it was time for the worship and praise session.

Now that those who had been taken up were angels, their main duties were to serve God and to pass his messages on to people who still lived on Earth.  God would whisper His message into their ear and then they would, in the wink of an eye, transport themselves to Earth in order to convey the message to its intended recipient.  The messages varied and were often passed on at night when the person was dreaming.  It could be a strong message that your life was in danger from another person, or it could be a more gentle hint that it was time to change job, or a whispered warning not to get on a certain aeroplane at a specific time.  Some people were more receptive to these messages than others, being more highly attuned.  Some people didn’t want to hear.  The spirits also provided food to some of the world’s needy, Mother Theresa style, and helped to keep people out of danger.  They would give warnings that would often take the form of premonitions.  These would occur when somebody was driving too fast, standing too close to a fire, or next to a faulty windowpane that was about to shatter and injure somebody.

As spirits it was also one of their duties to release people who had been wrongfully imprisoned, for instance journalists in countries such as Egypt, Iran and Israel – political prisoners, people who had done no harm other than speak up against oppression or practice freedom of speech in a country where no such freedom was allowed.  The spirits could pick locks, temporarily blind the guards, set you free in the dead of night.  They also visited psychiatric hospitals where they soothed distressed souls who were being restrained, secluded or forcibly medicated.  They worked wherever injustice was to be found.

God was a harsh taskmaster.  Anybody who could punish Eve just for taking a bite of an apple was not to be trifled with.  Why should too much knowledge mean pain in childbirth and instant obedience to a husband for ever after?  At the end of each day the new recruits had to make themselves accountable to Him by giving a summary of that day’s events; reporting back from the frontline.  You were fully answerable for your work.  The spirits were dutiful, full of praise and glory, bowing before God.

Back in the Peckham classroom the kids were still running wild.  The teacher was outside crying because she hadn’t been sucked up to heaven even though she’d been going to church all those years.  Seeing that there was no teacher in the room, half the kids in the class ran outside and down to the nearest estate where they picked up old cigarette butts and began smoking them.  Nobody missed the kids who had shot up to heaven.  They’d only been a bunch of bloody goody two shoes anyhow, two of them had been Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the other two were always reciting the bible, spouting God at you at every given opportunity.

The teacher called her husband to come and pick her up because she couldn’t cope anymore.  This was only her first month out of teacher’s college and it was all a bit much.  Her husband arrived and said gruffly ‘Are ya right, luv?’ He lit up a cigarette, and they shared it, trembling.  She vomited after the second puff, mostly from the strain of the day.  They left without letting anybody know, got in the car and pissed off.  Chaos reigned.

The bored kids in the other classrooms looked through their school window and saw the other children coming back from the estate, smoking and cried out to their own teacher.

“Hey Miss, those kids have got old fag butts hanging from their mouths.”

The teacher walked to the window to check, left her own classroom to find the other class empty and then went to tell the headmaster.  The headmaster summoned one of the older and more sensible children in the class to his office and asked for an account of what had happened.

That night there was a report on the 6 o’clock news.

*Today in Peckham, four children mysteriously disappear from a classroom.  Eyewitnesses from the scene say they were taken up ‘into the sky’ without leaving any damage to the classroom roof.  Chisha Lombe speaks from the scene of the incident.*

Footage of a chubby kid, clutching a doughnut came onto the screen.

*‘They just got sucked up, innit,’* he said and did the bunny fingers over the head of the kid standing next to him.

The parents, also hungry for their fifteen minutes crowded around the camera, nudging each other out of the way, vying for centre stage.  One of the mothers said,

“When he didn’t come home for his jerk chicken I got really worried.  I didn’t have a clue where he’d gone.  Nobody from the school even called me.”

One of the posher mothers who had recently moved to Peckham from Dulwich, her husband having lost his job in IT in the City, got on her high horse and said “My child has disappeared and nobody has a clue where she’s gone.  I want this thoroughly investigated.  Somebody has to be held accountable.”

The Minstry of Education said they would get involved, but in reality were completely ineffectual.

The following Monday two policemen came to the school. They talked to the teachers and several of the pupils. They entered the headmasters’ office and had a quiet word. They left none the wiser.

*An inexplicable mystery*, one of the cops wrote in his notes, but didn’t dare hand it in to his boss as an explanation.

An inexplicable mystery it was and an inexplicable mystery it remained, at least here on Earth. In the heavens they knew the answer, but God kept his secrets close to his chest and the new recruits worked in ways which seemed perplexing and strange.

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