

NATHAN BALLINGRUD

SHE FOUND HEAVEN

She found heaven lying like a crippled animal by the side of the road. It was small and glowing, and looked rather like a phosphorescent armadillo in the deep-morning darkness. She got out of her car to examine it. She looked up, but the sky was a vast desert of stars, and she could not see the place from which it fell. She poked it with her finger, and it rolled slightly, although she felt no physical substance beneath her touch. She did, however, feel a warmth that coursed through her bones and her blood, and she caught a scent of Ireland, a place she had been once as a child and had never forgotten. She gathered it up in her arms and brought it to the car. She stuck it in the glove compartment so that its light would not reflect off the windshield and interfere with her driving; but the light that bled out around the edges of the glove compartment door, silver and wavering, with the oily ripples of gasoline or of heat rising off pavement, proved to be equally distracting, and she almost died twice when the temptation to gaze upon it stole her attention from the road. * * *

A week later she placed an ad in the St. Petersburg Times; although her first inclination had been to keep the piece of Heaven (and she was convinced it was only a piece; she could not fathom a Heaven so small and disposable), she felt that it probably belonged to somebody who lost it on the freeway, and she did

not want to incur the wrath of God in only her first week in Florida by stealing it.

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FOUND:

One piece of Heaven, about a
foot long, slightly crumpled;
call Sally Baxter at 555-8264

Since the Heaven had been found only an hour out of town, she hoped its owner would see the ad and call her. In the meantime, she folded it in half and set it in an old shoebox, which she stored in her closet.

Sally had moved down from Virginia to Florida because she wanted a taste of what she called "real life." She had no solid idea of what this "real life" entailed, but she knew that it must be dirty and filled with Cuban drug dealers. She was twenty-four years old, fresh out of college, and filled with a righteous flame that compelled her to repair all that was damaged in the world. Florida seemed as good a place to start as any, and the beaches didn't hurt.

Hello, you've reached the horn e of Sally Baxter. I'm not in right now, but if you leave your name and number at the sound of the beep, I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

Beep!

Yeah, uh, this is the lady with the Heaven, right? I'm the guy who lost it. It's like what you said in the paper, it's all crinkled up, and it 's pretty short, but still it's mine and I'd like to get it back. My name's Lance Washington, and my number's 555-9038. Call me back as soon as you can, 'cause I need it pretty bad.

Her apartment was small, but it had a large picture window that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. She kept the window open to admit the ocean breeze, which rolled into her apartment carrying the scent of distance and the speeches of pelicans and seagulls. Evening came, and she reclined on her couch so she could watch the changing colors of the sky. As it turned from red to purple, and as the first of the stars lit up behind the clouds, she closed her eyes, and it seemed to her as though the physical fry which bound her to the earth fell away in great clumps, and she rose off the couch and drifted out into the night. She floated above the waters, her nightgown billowing in the sky like diaphanous wings, and it was only the light spray of the ocean on her face that kept her from wheeling away into the stars.

Beep!

Yes, hello, my name is Ruth Landis, I'm calling about your ad. I live in a rest home here in northern Tampa, and a friend of mine showed it to me the other day and said I should call. You see, my husband died last month, and I've lost my faith in God. I haven't been able to pray or even read the Bible for weeks now,

and when I pass by the church on my way to the store I get to feeling cold. I think you have my Heaven. Please, call me at Westlake Rest Home, and ask for Ruth. They know I'm making this call. They're good people, and they hope I can get my Heaven back, and I just know you were sent from God to give it to me. I almost believe again, just seeing that ad. Call me. I'll be waiting.

Beep!

Yeah, this is Lance Washington, I called yesterday? Maybe you didn't get the message. That Heaven you have is mine, I just know it is. And you know it's not just me, it's my wife and kid too. It's kinda like a communal Heaven, you know? We share it between us, and now we're all without. My kid, she's only seven years old, and she don't understand why her daddy can't get no job. How do you explain that to a seven-year-old kid? All she knows is her daddy goes to the unemployment office every day. And I been married to Alice going on six years, and she ain't once backed down from my side, she ain't once accused me of being a bad father, even though sometimes I gotta do questionable things just so I can put some food on the table, and keep the bills paid up. But she ain't invincible, she can't put up with all this forever. Please, Ms. Baxter, call me back. My humber's 555-9038, and I'm desperate. If you want me to beg it from you, I will. If you want money, I'll get together what I can. I'm here most of the day. Please call me. I don't know how much longer we can hold out.

Beep!

Um . . . is anybody there? Um . . .

Beep!

Is anybody there? Um, my name's Paul, and am . . . do you still have the Heaven?

It might belong to More, 'cause she's crying all the time now, and I'm pretty sure if she had it she'd stop. She doesn't know I'm calling you, so don't tell her. She might get mad. Right now she's at the store, um, buying something to drink, so it's okay ff I talk for right now, only don't tell her. I think my dad stole the Heaven, and he prob'ly just threw it out the window of his truck, 'cause that's what he does with all his trash. More says he's a polluter. Ever since he left all she does is cry, though, and she won't even talk to me anymore, so I think if she could have it back everything would be okay again. It was hers anyway, Dad shouldn't a taken it, but he does stuff like that sometimes. Um . . . if you could bring it over sometime today, that would be good. Um . . . bye.

Sally lay naked atop the sheets of her bed, staring at the ceiling. It was night, and it was hot.

There had been fourteen messages on her answering machine that day. She was sweating profusely, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Sometimes it seemed as though other people were in her room, but she could not tell who they were or how long they stayed; they remained a series of vague recollections that dissipated under prolonged scrutiny.

The most insistent of these memories was that of a young woman sitting at her bedside, reaching over occasionally to sprinkle Cold water onto her forehead. She was dressed oddly, in long brown rags and white cloth, and she smelled vaguely of manure, but she had a kind, radiant face, and her smile was beautiful. As the woman leaned over her, Sally detected a silvery shine to her cheeks, but she did not know if these were tears or the light of the moon reflecting from her face.

At some point in the night Sally arose from her bed and walked to the small window tucked away above her bureau, and she looked out at the city sprawling below her. It blazed hotly in the darkness, but with a different kind of light than she expected; it was possessed of a frantic radiance that suggested fevers or great holes punched through the crust of the earth. And as she looked more closely, pressing her forehead against the cool glass of the windowpane, she saw that these were not city lights at all, but a long, winding procession of torches, each held aloft by a stumbling bearer, tracing a crooked path through the rain.

"Westlake Rest Home."

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Ruth Landis, if I may."

"Oh, yes, hold on one moment. Is this Sally Baxter?"

"Yes."

"Hold on."

Then:

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Landis?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sally Baxter, I had the ad about the Heaven."

"Oh, yes! I called you!"

"I know, I --"

"Do you need directions? Would you like me to meet you somewhere? Or would you rather just mail it? No, I think I'd feel safer if I took it straight from your hands, that way I could thank you in person!"

"Uh, Mrs. Landis --"

"Call me Ruth."

"Okay, Ruth, look, I'm not sure it belongs to you yet."

". . . oh."

"I'm sorry, but I've been getting a lot of calls for it, and I need some more information before I can figure out who lost this particular piece. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I suppose so. You can't go around giving it to just anybody." "No. So, could you, uh, could you describe it to me?"

And she did. She said it was small, about a foot long (she was only an old woman and didn't need much space to move around in), and it had big green winds and smelled of lilacs. It made you feel warm to touch it, she said, and yes, it had probably suffered a little crumpling when it had fallen out of her husband's body, along with his spirit.

Sally sighed and said, "Ruth, I'm not sure this is yours. There aren't any big green winds, and I smell no lilacs. On the contrary, when I smell it, I smell Ireland. Have you ever been to Ireland, Ruth?"

"No."

"Oh, it's a lovely place. I was only there once, a long time ago. But this just brings it all back. I remember a house on the beach, and there were big gray rocks all around, and it was always raining. And there was fog every- where. It

was really quite beautiful."

"It sounds desolate to me."

"Well, it's all a matter of perspective, isn't it?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"But the winds of Ireland are gray and chalk-colored, not green." "You don't smell the lilacs?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Well."

"I'm sorry, Ruth."

"That's . . . that's all right. It was silly of me to begin with. I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"Oh, you di --"

Click.

And later:

"Hello?"

"Hello, my name is Sally Baxter, I'm calling for Lance Washington."

"Who's this?"

"This is Sally Baxter. Is Mr. Washington there, please?"

"This is his wife."

"Oh, you must be Alice!"

"Why don't you tell me what the hell this is all about before you go usin' my first name."

"Didn't he tell you? I'm the one who placed the ad in the paper."

"I don't read no paper. Lance is the reader in the house. What ad are you talkin' about?"

"The ad about the Heaven? He didn't mention it?"

"No. He ain't said nothin' bout no Heaven."

"May I speak to him, please? He called me and left a message on my answering

machine."

There was a pause.

"Mrs. Washington?"

"He ain't here."

"Well, is there a good time to call him back? He was pretty intent on talking about it."

"He ain't gonna be back. He got busted last night."

"Oh . . ."

"They caught him sellin."

"Oh, I'm . . . I don't know what to say."

"Lance done what he had to do. Now I guess I will too."

"Well, I, I'm sorry I bothered you. Good-bye, ma'am."

"What was that ad about, anyhow?"

"Oh, I uh, I found a piece of Heaven lying by the side of the road about a week ago, and I'm just trying to find out who it belonged to. Your husband seemed to think it might be yours."

"Mine?"

"Well, yours and his, and your kid's...the family's."

"He did, huh?"

"Yes. Did you lose Heaven, Mrs. Washington?"

"Yeah, I reckon we did."

"Well maybe it is yours. Can you tell me what it looks like?"

"Oh, now, I don't know . . ."

"You have to try, Mrs. Washington. Otherwise how will I know?"

The woman was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, she spoke tentatively, as though she were unused to expressing abstract thought: "It's solid," she said, "good and solid. It feels like the earth, like roots and leaves and hard-packed dirt. If you set it in your lap, it makes music, like drums, like oh, hundreds of drums hidden behind the trees, and if you close your eyes it takes you away, it lifts you right out of your body and brings you to where the drums are, and

there's dancing, and laughing, and the sound of bodies touching in the nighttime."

She fell silent.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. Oh yes, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Washington."

The others fared no better. She was cried to, cursed at, and begged, and when she was through she collapsed to the floor, the receiver resting loosely in her slackened fingers, and her chest burned with futility. She tried to cry, but there were no tears to be had. She was exhausted. The light was growing dim; the setting sun cast its red glow into her apartment.

She looked toward the closet, where the Heaven sat safely tucked into the shoebox. She was afraid to go to it.

Somewhere between the sun's immersion in the sea and the moon's rise to its zenith, where it hung like a cold stone, she drifted into sleep. When she awoke, the stars gazed in through her window, and the sea was painted over with the pale white color of bones. Someone was knocking at her door.

Sally pulled herself to her feet, grimacing at the aches that rioted in her joints, and padded to the door. She glanced at the digital clock next to the couch: 11:47.

"Who is it?"

"My name is Lucas."

"What do you want?"

"I'm here about the Heaven. Please. It's important."

Sally thought for a moment. She did not have a gun. She could not defend herself. She should just turn him away and go to bed.

But she found that she did not have the strength to turn away another person.

Through telephone conversations she had denied Heaven to more people than she cared to count, dangling it over their mined lives like a taunt, pulling it away when they began to hope. She felt poisoned. She could not do it again.

She unlatched the door and held it open. Lucas was an average man in every sense of the word: a little under six feet; light brown hair, brushed off to one side; an open, pleasant face. He wore a light brown sports jacket and tan slacks. He looked to be somewhere in his forties, but he wore his age comfortably, like a favorite hat. He held out his hand, and she took it.

"Thank you," he said. "I was afraid you'd turn me away. I know it's an odd time to come calling."

"How did you know where I live?"

"There aren't too many Sally Baxters in this part of town. Two, in fact, and the other one's an invalid."

"Oh."

"May I see it?"

She went to the closet and withdrew the shoebox. It was almost hot in her hands.

She gave it to him, and he removed the lid. The light sprang forth and bathed his face in a warm, white glow. It seemed to work a kind of magic on him: it filled in the lines on his face, softened the hard line of his mouth, darkened a gray streak in his hair.

He looked at her. "Oh, thank you," he said. "Thank you."

"That's all right. Take it."

"I'm afraid I don't have any money..."

"I don't want a reward. I'm just glad to be rid of it."

Lucas removed the Heaven from the shoebox and crooked it under his left arm. He let the shoebox drop to the floor. He looked at her, and smiled.

Sally was surprised as a great well of sorrow suddenly opened within her. Tears sprang to her eyes. "I just wanted to help people," she said. "I wanted to make them happy. Instead I only made things worse."

"I know," he said. "But at least you tried." He paused, and then said, "So why did you give it to me?"

She raised a hand helplessly, let it drop. "I don't want to be an arbiter anymore. I just want you to be happy. I should have given it to the first person who called, and had done with it." She closed her eyes. "I tried so hard."

"Too hard, maybe," said Lucas. "Maybe Heaven's a lot simpler than you're letting it be."

She looked at him.

He hugged it to his chest. "Anyway," he said, "I'm glad you gave it to me. I think I can iron out the wrinkles."

"I hope so."

"Good-bye, Sally. You are a good woman."

He went to the window and slid it open. A cool blast of ocean wind charged into the apartment and scampered about, upsetting papers, riffling through the leaves of paperback books. It carried on its back the scent of a great cold vastness, and with it a kind of magnificence. Lucas kicked away the screen, and it turned end over end in the darkness, falling to the ground hundreds of feet below. He climbed onto the ledge and leaped off, and the flapping end of his jacket transcended the boundary of itself and became instead two great wings, and he was flying, higher into the distance, a globe of light clutched tightly in his hands, and as he went more deeply into the night, and as she watched him from her window, the light grew smaller and smaller until it merged completely with the spinning lights of space, one more pinpoint of brilliance in a drifting sea of stars.