

Now I Lay Me

There is a young girl right now struggling for her life – let’s call her Keisha. All of her life, in fact, has been spent in hospitals and sterility, and in the tender care of foreign, gloved hands. She expends every atom of endurance and courage on each prolonging hope in procedures, medicines, and faith in a just outcome. Her family doesn’t want to let her go, so she smiles through it all to encourage them. She knows that there are no more treatments – there is no more hope. She knows what must happen, and her tired body is not reluctant for relief, although it is the calamity she has steadfastly resisted.

Outside her room, the doctor turns away with a sigh. “I’m so sorry.” Hearts faint with the extinction of all hope.

As part of the inner-circle, the family has invited you to speak with their beloved Keisha at this threshold of her approaching death. Honored, you enter her room, sit near the bed, and slip your hand under hers. She looks into your face, the gleam in her bright eyes already beginning to dim of life, and she smiles resignedly with chapped lips, “I know. You don’t have to say it.”

You brush away the tear slipping from the corner of her eye. “You’ve been such a brave girl. The bravest.”

“I tried. I tried my best. I didn’t want to let my family down.”

You marvel at her caring maturity and strength. “Oh Honey, they love you so. You couldn’t disappoint them. They are thinking of you, and how hard it has been, and how much they want you to stay.”

“I know. But I don’t mind now. It’s time to go soon. It’s just that my life has been so hard. I have never enjoyed a normal life. I didn’t have a chance to dream about the future, or to find out who I am, or who I will be. I have never had peace without pain or worry.” She pauses, hopefully and looks at you.

“When I die, do you think I will have those things in Heaven?”

You squeeze Keisha’s hand with a little smile and soothingly reply, “No Honey, there is no Heaven. I’m sorry. This is all there is.”

Her eyes widen with panic. “What? No Heaven? What do you mean? How do you know?”

“Well, science has proven that the universe made itself, and that life spontaneously generated from chemicals on the earth, from which all the plants and animals and even humans eventually evolved.”

Gently, you begin to explain the truth about the naturalistic origins of the universe, hoping to enlighten her from the religious mythological dogma that is corrupting her with an irrational cosmological perception of life.

You notice her heart monitor increase in activity. In shock and confusion she gasps, "What does all that mean?"

Knowing that it is best for her to know the truth, you kindly explain the implications. "It means that science has proven that there is no God. You see, it is a fact that these things happened by themselves, without the help of god, so there is no need for a god – no place for him and those old-fashioned superstitions. If there's no God, then certainly there is no heaven to go to when we die. You see?" You smile patiently, encouragingly.

"But then what will happen to me when I die?"

"It depends on your belief system. Some people think that when you die, that is it. Your life ends. All your pain will end too, so that's good." Your smile broadens, as you pat her hand. Keisha pulls it away, surprising you. You are a little offended, but you decide that she is just trying to adjust to the truth.

"But then will my mind end? Will I just stop existing?" She shrugs her shoulders in a gesture of futility.

You see she is getting overwrought, and offer her a cup of ice chips. "Yes, but then of course you won't be aware that you no longer exist, so it won't matter." She refuses the ice chips, and crosses her arms determinedly.

"But I can't believe that my life, *my whole being*, will just end!" You sense her hostility is directed at you, and briefly remember why you have always advocated the abolition of any and all religious contamination in the public school system and in all government affiliated organizations, to avoid the emotional and illogical confrontations that arise from this scientifically and socially aberrant view.

You try to assuage the tension with a bit of interesting trivia. "Actually, in the old days it wouldn't be the end of your *whole* being. It used to be that you would be buried, and as you decayed, the life force, so to speak, of your body would go into the environment and other forms of life would benefit – like trees and beetles and such. But now we embalm our bodies and hermetically seal the coffins so that nothing can get out or be used as nutrients for another life."

Keisha's mouth has dropped open, and she stares at you with a sense of stunned incredulity. "So you are saying that my life is so meaningless that it will not even benefit beetles?"

A little uncomfortable, you awkwardly concede, "Well, many people believe that your essence leaves your body and becomes one with the cosmos."

"What do you mean *one with the cosmos*? Will I still have my own thoughts? Will I even *know* that I am *one with the cosmos*?"

You chuckle a little at the absurdity of the idea. "I suppose *some* people think so. We don't really know, then do we? That is one of the great mysteries in life . . ." You notice Keesha's lips are swollen, and her eyes are bloodshot as she stares at you, gasping each breath trying to stay focused on the import of the discussion.

You continue ". . . however, without the use of your highly evolved brain, any kind of mental activity wouldn't be viable."

"MOM!!!" suddenly Keisha erupts with a strength you thought was impossible. Her mother rushes into the room, startled at the heartfelt cry.

"What is it, Honey! What's going on?" She cradles and rocks her daughter sobbing exhaustedly in her arms. The mother looks at you confused, not sure if this is a reaction to the news that the last treatment has failed, or something else, since Keesha has always seemed emotionally prepared for the possibility.

"MommMMM . . ." she wails "There's no Heaven? You always said there's a Heaven, and that God loves me, and that someday I would be with Him . . ."

Her mother pierces you with anger, and then her fiery eyes grow cold. You feel a chill, and wish that people wouldn't get so over-emotional at times like these. "I think it's time for you to leave," she says evenly, controlled. "My daughter and I have some things to talk about, and she needs her rest."

You get up to go, but the little girl whirls her face from her mother's breast, and cries out "No, I can't rest. I can't even close my eyes. I might not wake up!" She turns to you. "Stay. You have to stay! I can't rest until I figure this out." She turns back to her mother, "Get me some coffee. I want coffee."

Her mother begins to protest, thinking, you imagine, that it is not good for her, but evidently reevaluates the circumstances, and goes to flag down a nurse in the hall. You hear several excited voices, raising, then hushing, and what sounds like a brief, muffled argument. You get up, stretch your legs, check your phone for messages to avoid the tempestuous gaze of young Keisha, and soon her mother returns with coffee. You sit back down in the chair nearer the door at the foot of her bed as they fuss for a moment with adjusting the coffee temperature, and her mother quietly, calmly, offers advice for improving the taste by experimenting with cream and sugar levels. Keisha takes several large swallows, commenting with a nod that it is good.

"I want to thank you," she begins, returning her focus to you. "You know, I was so careful all my life. . . I have never had coffee before. I like it. I want to thank you for that." Keisha's Mom is half sitting on the bed, which is now upright, and her arm is draped over the back of Keisha's pillows in a posture that suggests in one sense, loving companionship, and in another, a ready protector.

You are not sure how to respond to the incongruous gratitude. "Look," you begin, searching for an amiable exit "I should just go. Our conversation has obviously upset you, and I don't see how I can be of any help. . ."

"No, you have to stay," Keisha interrupts with resolve. "You started this—you have to see this through with me, or I can't rest."

Deciding it is better to concede at this point than to belabor this unwelcome reality of life, you (rather graciously you think) acquiesce, "Keisha, you're probably right. Everyone has a right to hold their own views, and it sounds like yours are very important to you."

She takes another gulp of coffee and searches to set it down as her eyes meet yours. "Oh, no. You can't just say all that, and then try to get out of it. You said there's no Heaven, and there's no God, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"And that's what you *truly* believe, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is the logical conclusion of all the evidence. I don't *believe* it. It is simply *true*."

"Ok, well I've been thinking. I've been thinking, and I don't think you know what you are talking about."

"Well, I am sorry you feel that way. But that's fine. I should probably go."

"No, don't you understand what you've done to me? Do you even have any idea what it is like to face your own death with your only hope burst in front of you like a balloon? You are like those mean kids that go around popping all your party balloons, and when you get upset with them, they say, 'What's the big deal, they don't last forever!'"

You make another, heartfelt attempt to extract yourself. "I don't think there is anything I can say that will help this situation, Keisha."

"Yes there is. You are going to help me figure this out. I only ask one thing of you, and you have to promise me, ok? You have to promise me that you will answer me honestly."

You hesitate, integrity on the line, "Ok. I will."

"Promise."

"Yes, I promise."

"Ok. Now, do you know these science things are *true*?"

"Yes, they are. I wish they weren't, but they are." You determine that absolute honesty is the best approach for the situation.

"Do you *really* wish they weren't true? Because to me it sounds like you don't *want* God to be true. Have you spent your whole life believing that there is no God?"

"Well, I wasn't always *sure*, but yes. Once I heard the evidence, I *knew* there was no God. It is the obvious conclusion." You actually thought there was a god for some time in your childhood, but that was a foolish period, which produced no rewards for your naïve devotion.

"Ok, well, I spent my whole life believing there *is* a God. *Knowing*, there is a God."

"That's fine." You decide that if you were going to be completely honest, you needed to challenge her childish presumptions. "But can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Did you grow up believing in the Tooth Fairy? The Easter Bunny? In Santa Clause? I bet your Mother told you they were real too right?" Yours certainly had. Even when you had certain questions about how Santa went around the whole world in one night, or why he didn't seem to give much to the poor kids, your parents attempted to perpetuate the ruse with "magical" or other tenuous explanations.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well, *are* they? Do you think *they* are real?" You press in, preparing the logic trap.

"No, I don't. Not anymore."

"Well, it's the same with God. It is a nice story that makes us feel good about life. We used to not know about the universe and the science of evolution, and we wanted to explain these mysteries, so people invented a higher being to explain where everything came from. Many people don't want to believe the truth, though, and they still hang onto that explanation, even though it has been disproven the way Santa and the Tooth Fairy have been." Your rationale is irrefutable.

"I know you think that God is the same as Santa and the Tooth Fairy, but *I* never thought they were the same. Even when I believed in them, I knew that they were not the same as God. I never thought that they were like God at all, and I knew that if they existed, it was because God made them. To me it is *obvious* that God made *everything*."

"But He didn't." You are disappointed that she has refused to accept your clear logic.

"Ok, then where did everything come from?"

"The Big Bang. It is an established fact." What more needs to be said? After all, everyone knows about the Big Bang.

"Ok, then explain the Big Bang."

You begin to formulate the concept, and realize it is not easy to explain in simple specifics. Hesitantly, you simply explain, "It's complicated."

"Try."

Wanting to make it easy for a child to understand, you begin to explain the entire process. "Ok. All the matter in the universe came from this great explosion. . ."

"What exploded?" she interrupts.

Uncertain of the exact contents of the Big Bang, you hope to gloss over it. "It's complicated."

"Try."

Remembering something you heard explained on one of those nature specials, "Scientists call it a singularity, which is this point of energy that exploded and spread out throughout the universe which then began to form into matter, like stars and . . ."

"So *something* blew up, right?" she interrupts again.

"No . . ." you try to grasp the sense of the thing.

"You mean *nothing* blew up? I don't understand. Is that possible? Can *nothing* blow up?"

Seeing the confusion, you retrace. "No, no . . . it was something. It was the *singularity* . . ."

"Ok, so something *did* blow up?"

"Yes, the singularity . . ." You sense you are on a roll now.

"Where did it come from?"

"What?"

"The single thing. Where did *it* come from?"

Where did it come from? Where did *it* come from? You can't quite get ahold of . . . "Well . . ." You are suddenly confused about how to answer the question. "It was just *here*."

"So you are saying that the universe was created when something that was *always* here blew up? How does that explain how *everything* got here?"

You think she is focusing on the wrong part of the concept. The singularity was really the whole interesting discovery. "What it explains is how matter was spread throughout the universe . . ."

"But it doesn't seem to explain *where* that stuff came from. I mean, it is a *lot* of stuff. Isn't it? I get that you are saying that it blew up, but that just doesn't explain the stuff to begin with. Do you see what I am saying?"

"Yeesss . . . well, no. I mean, when it blew up, *that's* when matter began to form."

"When what blew up?"

You are stumped for a while. You had it clear in your mind before. You feel that in trying to simplify the concept, you left something out, but you can't put your finger on it. As Keesha is waiting for your answer, you notice a little smile begin to form in her mother's eyes. You are trying to remember the last question, and the thread of thought that you were working through, when Keisha continues.

"You see, to me it makes more sense that *God* created everything. Everything began when *He* made it, and before *He* made it there was nothing because everything has to come from something."

Now you have it—"Right, and you can't explain where God came from!" You are probably a little too triumphant in your declaration, but you still haven't worked out the last question, or untangled it, and the word *singularity* keeps echoing in your mind, but the thought leads nowhere.

"I don't *have* to explain where God came from. God isn't a thing. He is a person. He *always* existed and he can do anything. Everything came from *Him*."

"But you see, you have the same problem I do. *You* can't explain where *God* came from."

"It's *not* the same problem. That *is* the answer. God has *always* existed. You are trying to explain everything *without* God. You can't say that everything has *always* existing, even if it blew up. That doesn't explain *anything*. You are really just saying that everything was *always* here, it just blew up. That doesn't make any sense. How can they say they *know* there is no God when they can't even answer where everything came from? It either was always here, or it came from nothing. That's dumb. Even *I* know that's dumb."

"It's not. It's scientific. I just haven't explained it well." Flustered, you try to work it through, but Keisha goes on.

"You know I saw a magician once. He made all kinds of things appear and disappear. It was really cool. I don't know how he did it, but even *I* knew it was a trick. Things don't just appear out of nothing. Is that the kind of *scientific* you mean?"

"No. It's just more complicated than that." If you just had a minute to think it through, it would make sense.

"I bet it isn't." Keisha slides down in her bed, and brings the covers higher. Her mother tucks them around her body, smiling.

You are still processing how things got all twisted up in your mind when she begins again, a little more softly this time. "Tell me about how they say animals and everything got here after the Big Bang."

You clear your throat, pausing to get the concept straight in your mind before you explain it. "Well, after the earth formed and cooled, there began to be some special chemical interactions that, over a long period of time, gradually formed into a single living cell, which reproduced, and gradually changed into the different animals we see today."

"Hmmm . . . Some chemicals made themselves into a living cell. Why would they do that?"

"It was just a chance event. Just the right circumstances."

"So scientists have *seen* this happen in nature?"

"Well . . . not yet, but . . ."

"But they figured out how to do this *themselves*? Turn chemicals into a living cell?"

"No, no, they can't do that, but . . ."

"They haven't *seen* it, and they can't *do* it? I don't understand. What is the proof that it happened?"

"Well, they know it is *possible* . . ."

"*How* do they know? I am really confused."

"It's complicated. Too complicated for a little girl."

"Maybe it is, but if you are going to say it is a fact, then I want to know at least that *you* understand it."

"Well they *know* because . . . because everything evolved, and that's the logical way it would have started. There just is no other way."

"Look, you say everything came from one thing that no one has ever seen happen. I mean, I can't believe you said there was *no God*, and you are sitting here telling me that no one has ever seen this *thing* that happened that all life came from!"

"But it's true!"

"Do you hear yourself? You just *believe* it, even though you've *never* seen it—no one has! That doesn't sound scientific. Are you telling me that you honestly believe that something living can just *pop* out of some chemicals?"

"Well, not just *POP*, but . . ."

"So like maybe that magician I saw really did just make a dove appear out of just some chemicals in his hat . . ."

"No that's ridiculous. That could never happen. It was just those special . . ."

"I can't believe that things aren't popping up all over the place. I mean, it sounds like that sort of thing should happen regularly, don't you think?"

"Maybe it does, but we just haven't seen it yet." You think this is a reasonable, and clever answer.

"Isn't that the problem? You believe it is a *fact*, but *no one* has ever seen it. Never seen anything like it. . ."

Keisha trails off as she finishes her thought and closes her eyes with a little faint smile on her chapped lips.

"Not once. Crazy."

There is silence for a few moments. Keisha's mother strokes her hair, humming. You are about to get up when, very quietly now, eyes straining to open, she finds your face and begins halfway through a thought. "Do you?"

"I'm sorry Keisha, what?"

"Said, I bet you don't believe Jesus rose from the dead after three days. Do you?"

"No, I don't. That's scientifically impossible."

"That's funny. Lots of people have said they saw people raised from the dead. All of His apostles said they saw *Him* raised from the dead. It changed their lives. It changed mine too. You don't believe that could happen, but you believe that chemicals got together and formed all life, and no one ever saw any such thing."

Her mother kisses her forehead and whispers in her ear for a moment. Tears are forming in her eyes. Keisha whispers back faintly, smiling, "I know, Mama. I love you with all my heart." Her mother steps out of the room.

Keisha continues speaking very softly, eyes closed, with long, pauses in between.

"I *know* God.

That's the thing.

I am sorry I doubted for even a second Lord.

I have *known* Him all my life." Her smile broadens.

Her Mother and family members begin to enter quietly, tearfully. They surround her bed and all touch her in some way.

"He has held me in all my pain.

He is *always* with me,

comforting me.

Ever since I was so little,

He has been there for me.

I *know* Him. "

Her family, surrounding her, all begin to speak to her,

"We're here Keesha, we love you."

Each one quietly declares their love. She tries to look at each one, and whispers back their names, "I love you too. You all are the best family ever."

You get up to leave, and the space you occupied fills without a word to you. It is their moment now. Their time. With your hand on the door handle, you hear a sudden change in Keisha's voice, startling you.

"Ohhhh, do you see Him?" The room hushes at the sound of her awesome wonder.

"He's beautiful!

Oh, He came for me!

Jesus came for me himself!

Oh, Jesus.

Oh, Jesus.

Are we going to Heaven now?"

As you step out of the room, there is a crushing sensation in your chest. You try to walk away from it—from that moment, and begin trying to reconstruct the answer you were working on earlier. In the parking lot, you think you catch a piece of it, and you turn back toward the room, when you remember. The idea dissolves anyway, and you get into your car, wondering what that feeling in your chest is as you drive away.

Wendy S. Scott