

## Suspension by Melissa Kuipers

“Are you going to heaven?” the girl asked me after tagging me under the wooden suspension bridge.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to catch my breath. Was this part of the game of tag? I waited for her to run away so I could try to catch her, but her feet stood planted in the playground sand.

“Well, you *can* know,” she said, her dark brown eyes looking intently into mine. I was churched enough to know this look. Tag was over. She was ready to preach. “You just have to ask Jesus into your heart, and then you’ll go to heaven. Do you want to do that right now?”

My breathing was slowing now, but my heart was still pounding. I went to church. I loved Jesus. Why had no one ever told me about this eternal insurance prayer?

“Okay,” I said, though I wasn’t sure about the foolproofness of her plan.

Under the slated shade of the suspension bridge, smelling like sunscreen and dirt, she said a “Dear Jesus, come into my heart and save my soul” prayer, and ended with “Amen. Now you’re going to heaven!” and then ran off to resume our game of tag. I was familiar with the playground as a location where children exchange knowledge the hidden things of adults: periods, sex, dirty jokes, family secrets. But I was new to this revelation of spiritual truths in hushed tones. There was something coercive about it, like when the popular girls at school told me I had to tell them I had a crush on James, the boy with the undercut and freckles.

I, a child who went to church twice each Sunday and prayed every night before bed and read the children’s Bible with my family every evening after supper, wasn’t sure what to make of the whole thing, so I told my mom about it as we walked back to the campsite. I was surprised by the part of the story that surprised her: “Of course you’re going to heaven!” She seemed hurt that

I could doubt such a fundamental part of my upbringing, that I had somehow missed the whole promise of eternal life aspect of my faith.

I was raised in a very religious home, but not the soul-saving, sinner’s-prayer-saying kind of church. Ours was a faith of Election, of being Chosen, of infant baptism and tradition and believing from the moment you were cognizant of belief and never swaying from that. Unlike the “born again” believers, like the seemingly normal girl on the playground, we weren’t taught that every person needed a conversion experience—you were converted at three weeks old at baptism, or better still, in utero upon conception, through the faith of your parents.

We didn’t focus much on the afterlife either. Heaven was there, always a reality in the background. But we were an earthy people, a work-hard-now-with-what-you’ve-been-given group of Dutch farmers, people who felt strongly about the call to be fruitful and multiply, to tend to the earth and subdue it.

I stored the moment under the suspension bridge away as something I could draw on if ever someone asked me about my conversion moment, but I didn’t think too much of it. It was sometime after that prayer—and I don’t think at all because of it—that I became riddled with fear about my eternal dwelling place. It wasn’t that I had doubts about the tenants of the I was taught doctrine—it was a distrust in my future self and who I would become. I think I must have sensed even then that my mind wondered more than I thought it should, that I had a deep capacity for curiosity and that curiosity would eventually drive me towards guilt. It wasn’t a fear of God’s random smiting tendencies, but a fear of my random thoughts, of thoughts that might pop up unexpectedly.

This paranoia about eternity was inspired by many subtle influences: the sermon from our pulpit-smacking about how God does not love all people but only the chosen people, and my fear

that my future doubts would knock me off the chosen list; the bedtime prayer, “And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take,” as if my dreaming mind might somehow misstep and I might not wake up and the Lord might not my soul take; the garishly animated late 70’s version of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and the many characters’ constant propensity towards falling off the narrow path.

And so, at nine years old I developed insomnia, both because of a fear of hell and a distrust of what my wandering brain could do in dream mode. I would lie in bed unable to drift into peaceful sleep, and then I would see the hall light go off as my parents went to bed, and I would know I had stayed up way too late, and then I would feel even more upset as I dreaded the exhaustion I would feel in the morning. Or I would cry myself to sleep, agonizing through silent prayers that I would somehow be spared, and that God would pre-forgive whatever doubts or disbelief future me would encounter.

During the day the distractions of play and learning freed me. But as bedtime neared and my parents would approach my bed to tuck me in, the tightening in my chest would begin, and I would tell them, “I’m afraid.” They were gentle and compassionate, without really giving any answers to my questions, but as time went on, they grew frustrated, and would say, “Just stop thinking about it,” which of course, was the worst thing I could do, because to stop being vigilant would mean the great possibility of falling away.

So began a cycle in which I was exhausted by the possibility of hell, and my parents became exhausted from dealing with my exhaustion, and I became afraid to raise my fears with them, but didn’t know where else to search for peace.

I drew small comfort in finding out from my mother that several other children struggled with the same obsession: “Mrs. Harris told me that Cassandra was also afraid of hell,” she told

me, upbeat about the solidarity. “Is she still?” I wanted to know, by which I really meant the more important question I didn’t know how to articulate: how did she get better? How did she put her mind at ease? What was the magic answer that relieved her from guilt and sleeplessness and assured her of eternal salvation?

My parents eventually ordered a children’s book from a Christian publisher entitled *What’s Heaven All About?* It had lovely pastel illustrations of billowing golden clouds with soft edges, forming in the background a magnificent and inviting nebulous castle. It was written in a gentle, enticing tone which was just mature enough for me while maintaining a children’s lit reassurance.

I flipped through it, more interested in the techniques of the illustrations than the actual words on the page, the soft cross-hatchings of the pencil crayons. I was looking for some answer to the question, can you lose your salvation? or how do you know for sure you’re going to heaven? But the part that reassured me was the answer to the question, “Will there be pets in heaven?” The answer drew on the prophet Isaiah’s description of the lion and the lamb lying together in the new earth, a picture of perfect tranquility. “So we know there will be animals in heaven,” the text concluded. But more reassuring was the admittance that there was so much about heaven that we couldn’t know, so much human beings could not explain or understand, so much we would have to wait to realize. “Who knows,” the book suggested; “maybe we’ll be surprised to find a favourite furry loved one greeting us at the pearly gates. Whatever the case, we know there will be no sadness, no missing others in heaven.”

In the end I drew the most comfort from the unknown, from the gentle reminder that sometimes we must continue to live without clear answers about the future, that some things are

better not understood until we get there. It was a voice of mystery, of uncertainty that I had heard so little of in church culture, a voice that brought me peace.