

I'm not sure what you believe happens after we die, whether it be we float up into a glowing kingdom and are sung to by golden angels as we walk into a cloud palace, or if we just float among the stars for the rest of time, but I can tell you that it is nothing like you think it is. I'm not sure what I expected, but what I got doesn't conform to the mortal mind. Part of me hoped that I would become some sort of guardian angel and fly around Earth and take care of people, but I didn't get that. Another part of me hoped that I would end up at some old diner where eccentric people sipped Shirley Temples and ate greasy cheeseburgers while trying to 'move on'. There I would find Lewis and we would romp off to heaven together like in the books I read. I didn't get that either. There was no river of souls or three headed dog or God dealing out eternal judgment.

You know what I got? I got dropped onto the cracked sidewalk outside my Los Angeles apartment building on the corner of Maple Ave and Torrance St with no white robes, no halo glowing around my head, and no brilliant wings sprouting from my back. The only thing that was remotely strange was the fact that the street was completely empty. This wasn't normally an exceptionally busy area, but there were always cars zipping by and couples trotting by hand in hand. I had grown used to the constant noise, and now, in the silence, I felt oddly exposed. I was lying face-down on the sidewalk, my arms tucked under my body and legs spewed out on the sidewalk. I slowly pulled my hands from under my body and pushed myself into a seated position. The street was horribly silent; there wasn't even the slightest breeze or loose paper fluttering across the street.

Slowly, I stood up and turned around to look around. My apartment building towered over me, and I shivered a little under its shadow. When I was younger and it was just me and mom and dad and my brother living in our little room in the building, I used to like to lay down on the sidewalk with Lewis and look up at the building and giggle and tell him that if we were to climb all the way to the top we would reach the sky. We would be free of this life, and we would have diamond necklaces and shone-black shoes. Lewis was only 2 years younger than I, and he believed everything I said. I guess he wanted to touch the sky like I told him about, because one day, when I was 8, I was at

school, Lewis tried to climb to the top of the building. He made it five stories up before he slipped.

*One time, when I was 10, I broke a lock to get onto the roof of our apartment building. Mom and Dad were at work and Selene was too busy watching Anthony and Carlton to pay any attention to me. Anthony and Carlton had this habit of trying to light each other on fire, so I knew that Selene was busy for at least a half hour. I had given the duo a book of matches and told them to run. I think they ran toward the local liquor mart, so I went fast. I took my chance and ran. Up, up, up five flights of stairs before I paused, just for a second, to touch the windowsill before continuing up. I wanted to see if I could really touch the sky, I wanted to see if when I got to the top there would be my diamond necklace and if there would be a pair of shone-black shoes, just in my size, glittering in the smoggy air and waiting for me to pick them up and slip them on my feet and dance. Waiting for me to dance all day and dance all night until my feet hurt because the shoes pinch in the wrong spot and my neck hurts because the necklace is too heavy. I made it to the top of the tenth floor and was about to open the door to the roof when I stopped. The building was silent, holding its breath and singing songs of bated heartbeats. My fingers reached out to touch the doorknob, they were shaky and cold, not at all like Selene said a 10 year olds fingers should be.*

The street was far too silent. It was strange, being dead, and I decided that I didn't like it all. There was no one around, but I didn't want to go into our apartment building. I'd had enough of that place. So I started walking, slowly albeit, toward the liquor store at the end of our block. Angel's Liquor, it read, in fading neon lights that flickered and buzzed all day and all night. We used to go in there to buy candy bars with recycling money that our parents told us to save for new shoes and clothes. But what kid wants to save their change for boring old clothes? Not us, that's for sure. Lewis and I would always get a Snickers bar and share it, partly because we did everything together and partly because I always put a couple of cents into my pocket and told Lewis that we could only afford one. Anthony and Carlton always split a package of Skittles, a Hershey's bar and sometimes a soda and would argue about who ate all the red Skittles and who drank more soda. That's how they were, always bickering about this and that

when they weren't trying to light something on fire. Selene always got a York mint patty. Just one and she ate it slower than the rest of us. She said she liked to savor it while we gobbled ours down like barbarians. Selene would always laugh when we tried to grab a piece of her candy, but since she was taller than us, we could never reach.

I looked at the ground the whole time I was walking to the liquor store. I watched the cracks on the sidewalks race by, the same as any other day except now I was dead and for some reason, the weeds in the crack were still alive. Why were the weeds still alive and I wasn't? I stopped walking after a few paces and just lay down on the sidewalk. There were no people, no bikes, no cars darting here and there to run me over, so I just lay there and watched the weeds. They didn't say much, but I remember the one time that they did.

*It was summer, and I was 7. I was wearing a green floral shirt and a pair of pants that had been sewn out of some drapes my mom had found in the trash. Mine fit funny, but Lewis' fit funnier. Mine were too short in the leg and too loose at the waist, but Lewis' were too skinny at the waist and too long and the leg. For how often we were together, we sure were opposite a lot. The weeds were in the lot behind Mr. Albony's house. He was young and full of loud noises and wild gestures. He spent a lot of time shooting baskets in his front yard and yelling to himself "Albony does it! Albony does it!" I don't think I ever saw the man in his backyard, and since he was just a few houses down and half-blind or something, we would just sneak on into his yard and sit back there.*

*Lewis and I were playing marbles by ourselves because Selene was watching Anthony and Carlton, Lewis and I were expected to take care of each other. I was winning, because Lewis was 5 and he didn't know what we were doing. I was just a dusty twig of a kid, cheering and gloating about how I was beating him again when Lewis shut me up by waving his hands and pointing to the ground. I looked down, and all there were a bunch of scraggly old weeds and a couple of bottle caps. But then Lewis put his head down to the ground and started grinning and smiling, so I did too. At first, I didn't hear anything. The only thing I could hear was the sound of crazy Mr. Albony, Lewis' laughter and the dry, crackly heat of the California sun, but then it came.*

*It came slowly, the way clouds come rolling in, gently and smoothly, creeping so slowly you're not sure they are really moving until they are there and you realize they've been rolling in the whole time, you just haven't sat down and watched for them. The weeds started whispering in their quiet way, and I heard it all. Mr. Albony was the star in a basketball game, the games like the boys at the civic center played that I always walked by on the way home from school. They shot balls into rusting old hoops and yelled and sweat out the inherited filth in their blood. Mr. Albony was in one of those games, except there were thousands of people there and they all cheered the same thing – "Albony! Albony does it! Albony does it!" Over and over and over again until it was the only thing I could hear – the roar of the crowds, more people than I ever knew existed, and I laughed. Mr. Albony was shooting the ball into the basket like he did every single day in his front yard, except instead of the peeling and cracking ball that and always bounced to the left, it was dancing under his fingertips like an enchanted sun. I never thought that Mr. Albony was a sane man, until the weeds told me that he was leaping and running and throwing balls in front of so many people. Then I knew he was insane.*

*So I grabbed Lewis' hand and pulled him to his feet. He groaned something about the weeds, how the weeds told him everything, and how he wanted to stay and chat, but I was scared. Scared, scared, scared, just like a rabbit coming out of its hole to see a hawk watching him with beady black eyes. Mr. Albony was still screaming and his ball was still bouncing. I could still hear the roar of the crowds in the whispers of the weeds, and I was so scared I didn't think twice. I didn't stop to ask the weeds what they meant by their whispers, I just grabbed the marbles off the ground, stuffed them in the pocket of my awfully-sewn pants and took off running for all I was worth with Lewis bouncing and hollering behind me, and I didn't look back at that dusty old yard. I didn't look back at the whispering weeds under the cackling California sun, and I certainly never listened to them again.*

I was still standing on the sidewalk when I heard the neon buzz at Angel's Liquor start humming again, and it shook me out of my trace. I stood up and started walking past the apartment buildings and the little houses shoved in between, because that was

the cheapest place to put them. Where I came from, you lived where you lived, and that was it.

*There was a little boy who lived in between the apartment building next to Angel's Liquor and ours. I don't know how old he was, because I never talked to him. Lewis used to try to talk to him though, he would sit down next to him and try to talk to him for hours, but the boy never said anything. I don't think he ever even looked at Lewis, just rocked back and forth on his heels and sang theme songs to TV shows. Well, we didn't have a TV, so I didn't know any of them, but I knew they were TV theme songs because the boys at school ran around and sang them. But Lewis was so nice, he just sat there and hummed along because after a few days, Lewis knew them all too and he would hum them all the time. I would try to get him to shut up, but Lewis would just laugh and always go back to sitting with the boy. I never talked to the boy, but the way that Lewis would tell us all about him over dinner, how the boy hummed great and how he always rocked in tune to the music made me wish that I had. But I never did, and I would always glare at Lewis and tell him to hush up when we were at the table because dad was trying to get some peace and quiet. Neither mom nor dad ever said anything, and then we would just eat in silence. My father was in a cage and I sparsely heard him talk, ever. Then one day, the boy was gone. We never saw him again, and when Lewis asked mom where he went, she gave him the glare that could melt anything and they never talked about the boy again.*

As I stumbled toward the liquor store, I imagined my feet as heavy blocks, thick, black, lead blocks that taped me to the ground and didn't let me jump up to the sky. I used to believe that clouds were made of cotton candy. I always thought that when I died, I would live on top of cotton-candy clouds and eat them all day. I thought that when it rained it was just the drool of all the people slobbering on their cotton candies. That's why I never went out in the rain – because I didn't want to be drooled on.

*It was around 2 pm when it started raining, which was a problem. I was 9 years old, a skinny kid with stringy hair and knobby knees who talked too loud, out of turn, and far too often to be healthy. I was at school when the downpour began, and oh it rained, complete with wind and the occasional rumble of thunder. Living in LA, it hardly ever*

*rained, so when school let out kids began rushing into the drip-drop drool spitting from the sky laughing and splashing, I paused at the doorway and tried to calmly explain to my teacher why I couldn't go out in the rain. She looked at me funny, real funny, and then knelt down to my level and took my face in her hands and said, real slowly; Rain is water. Water. Not drool. Now hurry and go home, I have places to be. And that was all she said. But I didn't run off, didn't go home, because I couldn't get Lewis' voice out of my head, agreeing completely when I told him the dead people were drooling on us. I heard Lewis and his steady stream of words, chanting yes, yes, yes. Yes, dead people drool on us. They drool on us, yes. Yes, yes yes. I couldn't go out there in the rain. The teacher stood behind me and gave me a gentle push on the shoulder, but I stood shock still, just like the toy soldiers Anthony and Carlton played with, and watched the kids run amok with my breath stuck in my chest. The teacher asked me if I had an umbrella, and I said no. She sighed and walked away. She didn't come back. So I stood there, in the doorway of the crumbling old school building, and watched people jump in spit puddles until Selene came to get me and picked me up and carried me, screaming, into the rain and all the way home.*

Standing there, staring up at the sky, I noticed that it didn't hurt my eyes. The sky, it used to burn, like all that vast space was exploding my eyes from the insides out.

*I hated the feeling, but I used to drag Anthony and Carlton and Selene onto the ground to look up at the sky and told them to look for Lewis. Anthony and Carlton would complain, but Selene just put her hand on them and they quieted down. And we would stare at the sky, and after a little while I would ask if anyone had seen Lewis, and Anthony and Carlton would always start to say no, but Selene would always nod and smile a little bit and cut them off. Yes, she told me, he's right there. Right where? I'd ask, and she would raise a lazy finger to the sky and point into the great unknown beyond. Right there. He's waving, look, he's waving! I would laugh and Selene and I would wave back, the sun shining on our sweaty faces and making the dust stick to us until it formed a protective cocoon. Anthony and Carlton didn't ever wave. They just laid there, shoulder to shoulder and poked each other until I had waved hello to Lewis. And then we all got up and went to get candy from Angel's Liquor. I never got candy*

*anymore, because I had no one to share it with. Anthony and Carlton got less candy than they used to, because the bottles they brought to the recycler were shattered more often than not and he wouldn't give them money for broken bottles. So they got less candy, and I never got any, and Selene always got the same thing. e pretended like we didn't notice when she took a nickel or two from our coin pile for her own when she took the money from the recycler. Selene was the oldest, and we never questioned her.*

*The thing I remember most about Selene was her dancing. You see, as much as I grew up with her, and as many times as I saw her grinning at a joke or guffawing at something one of us had done, I never saw her happier than when we were dancing. On late summer nights, the warm lazy kind that made me want to sit around and drink lemonade from a tall glass, we used to drag every radio we could find and set them all to the same radio station as loud as they could go. The result was a ricochet of sound blaring all down the street. And then, we would step into the street and dance around the cars. Just the five of us, dancing and laughing and spinning around and around in the street, accompanied by only the croon of age old voices and the imperious honks of cars who didn't appreciate our fun. The songs were vibrant and loud and fast. They were the kind of songs that made you kick your feet across the cracked pavement. The sort of songs that got stuck in your head and echoed day after day. But after Lewis, the radio only sang sad songs, the crooning kind that made my lay my head against Selene's chest as she spun me, again and again, but this time slower and slower until the music finally stopped and the radios went away. But even during the slow songs, Selene was always smiling. She would lean down and whisper in my ear and ask me if I liked dancing. I didn't really, but I always told her yes, very much so, and she would laugh and spin me again while whispering so do I, so do I. By the end of our dancing session, my head was always twirling from all the spinning Selene and I had done, and Anthony and Carlton were bickering about who was supposed to spin who, but what mattered most was that Selene was happy, because I didn't get to see her smile much, but when she did she lit up the whole street.*

I approach Angel's Liquor slowly, taking in the buzzing neon lights and the weedy sidewalk before stepping up one crooked step to peer in the grimy window. At first, I

think the store is empty, I think the whole world is empty and I'm the only one left. Left here with my dusty memories and broken glass and whispering weeds that won't ever stop talking, but then I hear voices coming from down the street. And then a breeze picks up and ruffles my hair, ever so softly. And then I hear the growl of a passing car and the chatter of the old married couple taking their leisurely stroll through the street. I step down and look around. There are people, people I haven't seen in what feels like a lifetime cruising down the street, scowling and laughing like I remember. And the streets are just as dusty as I remember, and the buildings just as towering, but they are no longer as threatening. And then I see them.

In front is a girl with her chin pointed defiantly to the sky, ratty socks pulled up to her knees and skirt hiked up high because she tells us that's what famous rich girls do. She's walking in front of four smaller children, and the two directly behind her are pushing each other back and forth while bickering about what sort of candy they want today. Their eyes are sharp and bright, despite the fresh scars on their backs and the ringing of shattering glass in their ears.

And behind them, behind them walks two more kids. One is slightly taller than the other, and holds the smaller's hand tightly as if he would wander away like a balloon without a string if he let go. The smaller child, however, is pointing toward the tops of the buildings and asking if he can climb them? Can he climb them? And the taller child is pulling on the little boy's hand and telling him to hurry along, but the little boy is still pointing at the tops of the buildings and his voice is getting more and more frantic.

Can I climb them? I want to climb them. What's at the top? What's at the top? Can I climb them? Can I climb them?