

The Test

by Carlo Kennedy

“So this is what it’s like to die...” he thought. He looked up at a face he’d looked into for fifty years. The face was more wrinkled now, but he didn’t see that. He saw the face of a girl he fell in love with, married, and lived with as partner and best friend for five decades. And now he would leave her alone. That was the hardest part. All along he had told himself that he had no right to complain, that he’d lived a good long life, and although it was cancer that was taking him, he was old enough that it could have been anything else, the result would be the same. Everyone has to leave this earth some time, he’d said to himself. He even said it out loud once, but it sounded too cold, so he never said it again.

He looked around the room, taking it all in, trying to hang on as long as possible. No longer able to speak, and numb from morphine, his eyes were the only remaining link to the physical world. The shiny stainless steel bars on the hospital bed. The pale peach colored walls. The television set suspended near the ceiling. The clipboard hanging on the door. And back to his wife, her favorite old floral print dress, and her wrinkled hands stroking his head. He wished he could tell her one more time that he loved her – but she knew. He made sure to say it every day of their life together. In the center of his field of vision a pinpoint of light slowly appeared. It was soft, yet bright, and he couldn’t help himself but to look directly into it. As the pinpoint of light grew, it stole his attention away from his surroundings, drawing him inward, taking him away from the hospital room... from his wife... from the world. The light grew into a kind of out-of-focus circle, growing bigger and consuming his sight, and eventually edging out his vision of all that he knew to be real.

As the world he knew faded into white light, all he had left was thought. He wondered if that would fade, too. But if so, then what? He wondered what life after death would be like. He had never doubted that there would be an afterlife, but now as it seemed to be approaching, the doubts came flooding to his mind. What if there was no afterlife – what if he just faded away and ceased to exist? Worse yet, what if there was an afterlife, but he was excluded from it? He had learned about God, and he had learned about heaven. And until now he had never dared to doubt. But at this very moment, he felt

for the first time as though he didn't dare *not* doubt – that somehow he *must* doubt. He must have his doubts and deal with them quickly before the end came. He urgently struggled to answer the questions in his mind, racing against time itself, terrified that he would die with unanswered questions and that the questions would condemn him. He was gone from the world now, and as the priest was giving him his last rights, in his mind he was praying.

Had he been good enough to get into heaven? He tried to think of the good he had done in life, and he knew he had done some good. But all that came to mind were the petty acts of selfishness that he had hoped no one would know about. And yet, he remembered hearing something about salvation by faith, not by good works. He had faith. But did he have *enough* faith? Or the right *kind* of faith? Or faith in the right *thing*? And how much is enough? And if there's a minimum requirement, doesn't that make having faith a kind of good work? He prayed for help, because that was all he could think to do, and he raced through the prayer because he began to fear that if he kept praying too long, he would fade away into nothingness.

He opened his eyes. At least in his mind he opened his eyes. Oblivious to the fact that he was no longer in control of the body that housed him for over eighty years, he opened the eyes of his mind, and he became aware of a new environment.

There were no walls, or boundaries of any kind, and yet there was perspective – a kind of horizon that led to infinity. He felt as though he could see forever, but there was nothing to see. There was no floor or ground, and yet he seemed to be standing on something firm. There was definitely something solid about this place, and yet it was clearly not the physical world he was used to. There were no definite shapes, but there was substance, and there was color, though the colors were pale and greyish, as if affected by an overcast rainy sky. And then he realized that he was not alone. A shadowy figure stood in the distance. It was somehow hidden from him, though there was nothing in between them. It was too far away to make out a clear outline, but it was close enough to speak without shouting. Of course in this place, ears are irrelevant. But the shadowy figure spoke just the same.

“Well done, you passed the test.”

“I did? What test?” He surprised himself by responding so quickly.

“THE test. You lived a good life, you learned how to love... you passed. Now your test is over, and it will be someone else’s turn to be tested.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Are you an angel?”

“Yes... Sort of. You see, every soul is tested, and after the test, each soul that passes the test participates in the tests of other souls. Now that your test is over, you will take part in the tests of others. Just like others took part in your test.”

“Others? Took part in my test? What others?”

“Everyone,” the angel answered. “Everyone you knew in life, every acquaintance, everyone down to the person who walked by once in the corner of your eye, and you never saw him or her again – they were all there just for you. In fact, the whole world as you knew it existed just for your test. You were, quite literally, the center of the universe.”

It took him some time to get his mind around the concept. If he had still had a mouth, it would have been hanging open. “You mean...? Even my wife?”

“Yes. Your wife, and everyone else you knew in life. They had already had their tests, and they passed. And so they helped you pass your test. You owe them all a great debt, for the few who don’t pass the test... well, let’s just say they cannot go on to the next stage of life.

“You mean they go to hell?”

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“No, there is no hell. Even if one went to hell one would continue to exist. It will take time for you to understand, but now you must let go of what you knew of the world, because it was a world that existed only to provide a laboratory for the experiment that was your life. The universe is not what you think – it’s nothing like what you were taught by the scientists and teachers in your test. That was all for the sake of the test. It’s all irrelevant now.”

“I don’t understand.” He was upset, almost sad. The fact that he had passed his test should have made him happy, and yet the very idea of the test was so unexpected and unsettling that he was mentally and emotionally frustrated by it. He was almost angry at the prospect of being put through a test without understanding the rules.

“You will,” the angel said. “You will understand. But it will take time. It always takes time. I will leave you now – leave you to your thoughts. When I return, you will go on, and you will help another soul pass the test.” With that the angel was gone.

“Time...” he thought. *“It always takes time...”* But what is time without the sun and moon to measure it by? “

“How could it be true?” he thought. “How could my whole life have been contrived – a game that everyone else knew they were playing... How could I have been the only one in the whole world who didn’t know? If I knew it was a test, it would have been easier. But then, I suppose it had to be this way to be a true test.”

There was no way to know how much time went by. There was nothing to measure time, but even if there was, he was much too busy trying to understand what the angel had told him. He wondered if he should pray some more, but somehow that seemed redundant. The line between thinking and praying had already been blurred so far as to be non-existent. Eventually he understood. Though he could not put it into words to explain it to himself, he finally came to understand enough to get to a point of acceptance. And then the angel returned.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” he lied.

“Well, ready or not, the time has come to take part in another soul’s test. Your first time will be easy. You won’t have to interact with the test subject much at all. Just live in the background while the test goes on. Be part of the population of the test world. Later on, after you’ve been in the background of a few tests, you can have a more active role in the lives of the test subjects.

“Who’s the subject?”

“Don’t you worry about that. What’s more important right now is that you prepare yourself for the test environment – the world in which you will live. It will be very different from the world of your own test.”

“How will it be different?”

“Remember I told you that you will have to let go of everything you think you know about the physical world. That world was for you. The next world you live in will be for someone else. Forget about all the so-called laws of physics. They no longer apply.”

Then, as if on cue, everything around him began to change. He could feel it changing, though he still had no body. It felt as if he had fallen into a swimming pool filled with Jello. He felt surrounded and in a vacuum at the same time. The solid surface dropped away and he felt as though he were on a roller coaster. The concept of gravity became obsolete in one terrifying instant. The horizon seemed to invert itself as all perspective became distorted. Somehow the shortest distance between two points was no longer a straight line. The pale grayish colors that made up the background of the place exploded out from the center, and were replaced by bright primary colors and shapes, until he felt as though he were in

a Salvador Dalí painting. Fear overtook him as he tried to look down to see himself. He tried to put a hand in front of his face to get some kind of reassurance that he was not going to be blown to bits in one great colorful disintegration. But there was no hand. And even if there were, he would not have been able to move it. He was still in the Jello, or so it felt, and he was utterly helpless. In life, he would have screamed, or cried, but neither was possible. All he could do was ride it out.

The colors continued to change, and new colors emerged that he had never seen before. Colors unlike anything in the visible spectrum of the world he had known all his life. He could see beyond infrared, and beyond ultraviolet, and yet there was no pure black or pure white. There were sounds, too – sounds that went with the colors, and he realized that everything he could see, he could also hear, and everything he could hear, he could also see. Sight and hearing were one. He also began to realize that he was feeling stronger than he ever had before, at least that he could remember. He was revitalized, and the surrounded-by-Jello feeling eventually gave way to a feeling of overwhelming freedom. He found he could move with the speed of thought. There was no clumsy one-foot-in-front-of-the-other business. There were no feet to move. Movement was effortless and immediate, and yet it felt reckless and out of control.

Everything seemed so tentative, as if teetering on the edge of existence – as if the last thread holding the fabric of the universe together had been pulled, and everything would unravel any second. And yet it stayed together, as if only by chance. Though he now knew he could move, he felt afraid to, as if the slightest movement would send everything exploding out in random directions, torn apart by the same forces that once pulled on that last thread. It was as if he was stuck in that moment of time after the coyote has run off the cliff, but before he starts to fall, when the realization hits that the situation is hopeless and the spine becomes liquid – all shivers and waves. If he had still had a bladder, he would have lost control of it, as everything he once knew as muscle was both stressed and released at the same instant.

But the fabric of the universe did not rip apart – it held. No unseen forces tore the universe away from him. And then he came to realize that there *were* no unseen forces. Now everything was apparent

to the senses – every sound cast a shadow, and every feeling was visible as his vision adjusted to bring every wavelength into focus at once. Magnetic fields were red and stringy and looked like exposed muscled on the bones of the solar system. Colors seemed to have an aftertaste, like the metallic tang of cilantro, but sweeter – and the colors he thought of as warm had a spice to them that seemed to make him sweat if he looked at them too long.

As if this weren't strange enough, there were objects moving all around him now, changing position, shape and direction, and as each object moved, it seemed to emit an odor: objects moving quickly by left behind a smell he would never be able to describe, since it was like nothing he had ever smelled before; but the slow-moving objects had a smell that lingered in the atmosphere around him – a smell that could only be described as something very close to apple pie. Some objects seemed to increase in speed as they moved, and as they did they also increased in size. Other objects collided, and when they did they did not exhibit any of the behaviors he expected. They did not bounce off of each other with an equal and opposite reaction, or with an angle of reaction that equaled the angle of incidence. Rather they defied the law of inertia, and seemed to anticipate the collision, slowing down before impact and stopping on a dime.

After some time he became self-conscious, and spoke. “Tell me,” he said to the shadowy figure, “what's it going to be like?” The shock and frustration were giving way to a combination of excitement and fear, like the anticipation of riding a thrill ride or watching a horror film.

“It will be so different from your previous experience that I cannot describe it to you in words you will understand. But you will get used to it.”

“It's amazing,” he whispered to himself, “that God would create a world just for me, and then create another for someone else.” Then he blurted out, “Are there as many different worlds as there are souls in the universe?”

“There are as many different universes as there are souls. But you are forgetting what I told you. Let go of what you know from your experience. Everything is different now. And *God* doesn’t create each new universe. In a way, each soul creates its own universe. In fact, in the world you are about to inhabit... there is no God.”

“What?”

“There is no God. God was a concept created for your test. A motivator for good behavior, and a model for love, to be sure, but completely imaginary. In the next test, there will be other motivators and different models. But no God.”

“Are you telling me that even God does not really exist?”

“God. Gravity. Air. Friction. They were all just part of your test, and none of it will exist in the next test – it will all be replaced by other things you couldn’t even dream of.”

“I can’t believe it,” he said, stubbornly. “I mean... I’m not sure I can let that go. I believe in God. I *believe* in God. I can’t un-believe in *God*.”

“You believed in gravity didn’t you? And now where is it? How strongly did you believe that the color gray existed? Your experience told you that it did. And yet look around you. Your experience now tells you that it no longer exists. Anyway, you don’t really have a choice.”

The fleeting moment of excitement was gone. The frustration was back, and the fear. “Well, can’t I just believe in God and keep it to myself? I mean, won’t there be any worship of anything in this new world?”

“No, and no. Look, you can’t bring elements of the previous world into the next. You just can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t understand. It doesn’t work that way. You will ruin the test if you refuse to accept the test environment. You won’t be allowed into the new universe.”

“OK, can I sit this one out?” he asked innocently.

“SIT THIS ONE OUT?? NO, YOU CAN’T SIT THIS ONE OUT!” the angel was losing his soft-spoken cool. “Don’t you see, if you refuse to accept the new test environment, you can’t go on? You’ll be like those who never passed their own test. You must cease to exist.”

“What?” If he had still had a stomach, he would have felt like throwing up. “So that’s my choice? Give up my belief in God, or cease to exist?”

“It’s hardly a choice. You *have* to participate. We can’t lose you after you just passed your own test.”

“Well. You’re right about one thing. There is no choice to be made. It was hard enough to give up everything I know from my life – even harder to accept that everyone I loved, including my wife of fifty years, was some kind of plant, placed there to be actors in a stage play I didn’t even know I was in. But I can’t give up my faith. I won’t.”

“What are you saying?” the angel whispered. “Do you have any idea what you’re saying? To cease to exist is to be annihilated. You will be... dead.”

He did not respond to the angel, but let the word sink in to both of their minds.

The angel paused for a long time, longer than the last time, when he was left alone to try and understand the concept of the test. That seemed like forever in the past. The angel waited for him to

change his mind, but he didn't. He waited for the angel to speak again, but he didn't. Then finally the angel resigned himself to the fact of the situation. “So be it,” he hissed. And he was gone.

The colors faded back to pale grays. The horizon straightened itself, and the solidity came back, and with it came that stuck in Jello feeling. But this time the sensation of being trapped increased until he felt as though he was being crushed. A pinpoint of pitch darkness slowly appeared in the center of his field of vision. It gradually grew in size until all was dark.

The fear was overwhelming. He did not want to cease to exist. He did not want to be annihilated and fade away into nothingness. Suddenly he knew that it was not too late. He could change his mind. He felt the presence of the angel, and though he could not see the shadowy figure or hear the hushed voice, he knew that if he cried out his change of heart the angel would hear him.

Perhaps it was his stubborn refusal to believe that his life was a fake. Maybe it was the fact that, although the angel could show him that gravity no longer existed, he had not been shown that God did not exist. Whatever it was, he did not cry out to the angel. Instead he prayed, and as he prayed a calm came over him. It wasn't a flowery religious-sounding prayer. And it wasn't a desperate prayer for deliverance. It was a prayer of resignation. He simply said, “I've made my choice... and God damn it, I'm sticking with it.”

He opened his eyes. He couldn't see much, but he could see enough to know that he had not ceased to exist. “I think, therefore I am...” he thought.

And then he heard a voice. Not the hushed harsh voice of the angel, but a comforting calming voice. He could not see where the voice came from – in fact it seemed to come from all around him. The voice simply said, “Well done. You passed the test.”