

Spirit Journey

I don't remember much about how I died. It was all of a sudden, really. There was my sad excuse for a life, and then - bam - I was dead. Besides, I don't like to talk about the details. There was an accident. That's all you need to know.

So after I died, my spirit ascended, and I met the big man. No, not God; his bouncer, St. Peter. He wore a simple robe, nothing extravagant. On either side of him was an angel. St. Peter observed me for a moment. I knew in my gut - so to speak - that he was going to ask me a tough question, like, "What did you do with your life?". At least that's what I'd heard.

"Kiy-lee Phearson, what do you believe?"

His question startled me. I didn't know what to say.

What did I believe? Honestly, I never put much thought into it. I had a hard life, so I guess I might've thought that God didn't exist. He never stepped in to help, and the people of the church nearby were all hypocrites and old people. I never prayed or went to church. Religion was in the back of my mind.

The big man must've read my thoughts.

"I see," he murmured.

Then one of the angels turned and whispered in his ear. He looked concerned.

The angel turned to me.

"Do not be afraid, Kiy-lee," he said.

That phrase rang a bell.

"Gabriel?" I asked.

He smiled. Wow, Gabriel - the Messenger of God.

"Kiy-lee, the Lord has requested that before you enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you take a spiritual journey."

I was completely bewildered. "Why?"

"Why do you think?"

I was ashamed to realize I could think of many reasons why I would need a lesson. I had been an angry, violent, sinful person in life. To be honest, I was surprised I ascended and not descended after the accident.

Gabriel broke my thoughts. "You understand. Now, Kiy-lee, before you begin, I want you to know that the Lord loves you very much. He's only doing this because of love. He sees great pain, anger, and confusion in you and He wants to heal that."

It was strange to hear that God loves me.

"Ok, sure," I shrugged. "Let the Lord's will be done."

Man, did I totally not see what was in store for me.

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The first thing that I realized was that I was standing in a great field of long grasses. The wind blew and they danced. The sky expanded like a great blue blanket over my head and the sun shone brightly. I could see for miles.

I was corporeal again! I touched the grasses and inhaled deeply. The air was so fresh and clear. It was so beautiful to be alive. I hadn't truly appreciated it when I was.

A hawk called and circled above my head. Suddenly, it swooped down and transformed into a woman. She was native, I realized from the golden yellow fringed dress. Her hair was black as midnight and she was decorated with beads and colour. She wore no moccasins, though.

I was speechless and gaped stupidly.

She followed my gaze.

"Oh, that," she laughed. "It's springtime, and Mother Earth is pregnant. My people don't wear shoes in spring so as not to harm her."

She had been a hawk a moment ago. "How did you-?"

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Singing Bird, a shape-shifter, and a Shaman to my people. At least, I was in life," her voice was mystical, but kind.

"Oh, hi. I'm Kiy-lee," I introduced myself. "I'm dead, too."

We laughed at the irony.

"What am I doing here?" I asked her.

She tilted her head to the sky, "The Great Spirit and I thought you might like to start your spirit journey with some girl time, so I was chosen as your first guide!"

"Great Spirit?" I wondered.

"I believe you call it God?" she winked.

Her calloused hand grabbed mine and we ran, then spread our arms and lifted into the air.

I shouted in surprise and then laughed. It was so exhilarating to fly - so impossible!

"Nothing is impossible for the Great Spirit," Singing Bird said.

We flew. Land lay far below us like a quilt patterned with grasses, dirt, trees, and rivers. Mountains stood in the distance.

We flew closer to earth and truly saw Creation. There were deer and buffalo, foxes, rabbits, and in far greater numbers than I had ever seen.

"My people believe that all life is sacred," Singing Bird spoke. "Animals, trees, plants, people... we all have souls and we are all connected."

I nodded.

"I want you to meet them!" she grinned, and we flew towards a cluster of teepees by a river. For being dead, Singing Bird was certainly lively.

We landed. To be polite, I took off my shoes as well. A deer pranced by and seemed to nod its head at me.

"She says 'hi'," Singing Bird said.

I heard music. A drum like a heartbeat, flutes, and singing.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"The Sweat Lodge ceremony is about to begin!" she exclaimed, and pulled me towards a hut. "I have to conduct it."

We crawled in through the door. More than a dozen Great Pains Natives were inside, sitting around hot stones. An old lady poured water over them and steam erupted. It was like a sauna.

I sat down beside Singing Bird.

"The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is for spiritual and physical cleansing," she explained.

I got the cleansing part. I was already beginning to sweat. Not only that, I was beginning to feel something far greater than I understood in my heart.

The ceremony included prayers and singing. Singing Bird sung a haunting song about the Great Spirit always being with us. Then the sacred pipe was passed around. As a man - a warrior by the looks of it - took a breath, Singing Bird explained,

"The smoke is a visual prayer. It rises to the sky, see?"

I nodded and took a puff.

After the Sweat Lodge Ceremony, Singing Bird looked up at the sky. When she looked back at me, her eyes were clouded over.

"Your time here is at an end," she spoke softly, so I leaned in to hear. "You must continue your spirit journey."

Then she was her bubbly self again.

"It was so wonderful to spend this time with you," she said.

I felt sad at the thought of leaving my new friend, and though I didn't have time to register everything yet, I never wanted to forget the experience. It was one of the best of my, well, death.

She took my hand and was suddenly serious. With her other hand, she traced a cool finger over my bare shoulder. There was no pain, and miraculously, when she drew her hand away, a tattoo was etched in my pale skin.

It was a circle divided into four equal slices. Each quarter was a different colour : white, black, red, and yellow. From the center hung two eagle feathers.

"Thanks," I stammered, still in shock. "It's beautiful."

"It is our circle of hope. It represents the equality of all mankind - white peoples, black peoples, yellow peoples - or Asians, and red peoples - like me! The feathers symbolize the equality of man and woman. Remember this as you continue your journey."

I smiled in appreciation. Then she disappeared.

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Suddenly, I was in a desert-like place. The sun beat down and sucked the moisture out of every tiny plant and even the ground itself. I glanced around and my eyes befell an old man taking water from a well. He turned and I could see him fully.

The old man wore simple brown robes, and a long beard. His face cracked into a smile when he saw me.

"Well, hello, child," he greeted me.

He motioned for me to come closer, and I did, cautiously.

"I won't hurt you, Kiy-lee. I am your second guide. The name's Abraham."

"Abraham... I've heard of that name... aren't you...?" I wondered.

"The father of Judaism? Why, yes, I do believe I'm called that. Now why don't you come inside? You must be famished."

He leaned on his staff and motioned to a shelter. I followed him inside where he sat me down at the table.

"Abraham, could I ask you a question?" I spoke up.

He was gathering a plate for me, but he stopped.

"Of course," he replied.

"Why am I on this spirit journey? Why do I get guides and get to do impossible things? Gabriel said God's doing this because He loves me, but I don't understand why."

The old man nodded and looked me straight in the eye.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, Kiy-lee. Why, he asked me to go to the desert, and without knowing where to go, or how to get there, I just got up and went."

He had the aura of an old man telling a story.

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

"Because I trusted Him and I do His will," he said.

"Because you were forced to?"

"Because I want to."

He placed a platter before me and a glass of cold water. The plate had strange foods on it. Abraham had his head bowed and his hands held in prayer.

"Gracious Lord in Heaven, we thank you for this meal. Please be with Kiy-lee throughout her journey. Amen."

"Amen," I repeated, just to be polite. I hadn't prayed in, well, ever.

"This is the Seder Feast - and it's all kosher!" Abraham grabbed two forks.

Then he pointed to each food in turn, "That there's charoset, that's parsley, that one you probably recognize - a roasted egg. That's a turkey bone and those are bitter herbs, but they're not that bad, really."

I ate quickly. It was pretty good. With a mouth still full of food, I asked, "What's kosher?"

"Kosher is proper food. The short version is that it's humanely slaughtered animals, no blood, and no meat and dairy consumed together."

When lunch was about finished, a mangy dog appeared, and when Abraham wasn't looking, grabbed the turkey bone from his plate.

"Scruff! Bad dog!" Abraham scolded. Then he sighed and allowed the dog to trot off and eat it.

"Scruff knows he's not allowed to do that, but he does it anyway. It must be how God feels when people sin, you know? We know it's wrong, and yet sometimes, we do it anyway."

That made sense. I finished my meal and thanked him.

"So what does the meal commemorate, or whatever?" I was more curious lately, I realized, than I had been in years.

"Passover. Long ago, my people were slaves to the Egyptians. We never really have a great history, do we?" he added thoughtfully. "Anyway, slave life was terrible... building those pyramids. Alas, it seems we are always suffering for mankind."

"What do you mean?"

"We Jews believe we are God's Chosen People, because God appeared to me, and promised I would father a great nation." He chuckled. "I thought I was much too old for that."

"Suffering... I understand that. But your people - you're always discriminated against, but I don't understand. You're the first one I've met, and you're nice."

He chuckled his old-man laugh in gratitude.

What Abraham said earlier about trusting in God really stuck with me. I couldn't get it out of my head. So we walked, and he told me many stories.

His wrinkled eyes squinted when he smiled.

"Sadly, Kiy-lee, my time with you is through."

He took my hand, and with the other wrinkled hand he sketched a six-pointed star below my Circle of Hope. This time there was a little pain, but I remembered Abraham's stories of the Holocaust and kept my mouth shut.

"This is the Star of David. You know of King David and Goliath?"

I nodded.

"Well, King David did not defeat Goliath with his own strength, but rather with the strength of the Lord. The Star of David is his shield. It means putting faith and trust in the Lord."

"Thank you so much."

I've always been a sucker for tattoos.

"Good-bye, Abraham. I hope we meet again," and he disappeared as well.

I got a final glimpse of our footprints in the sand. There was a third pair.

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This time I appeared in a busy town beside a river. I heard chanting and singing in a foreign language. A young man bent down by the river and lit a corpse on fire. The dead man's face resembled his. It must be his father, I thought.

People stood solemnly. When the body was completely burned, the ashes were

scattered on the river.

"His earthly life is finished. Now, he will either be reborn or reunite with Brahman." I heard a voice explain close by.

The speaker was a little brown man. He seemed oddly familiar.

Then he said something that sounded like "Namaste" and bowed to me.

I bowed back.

"I bow to the divine in you," he translated and his smile lit up his face.

Where did I know him from? The white loincloth, the big glasses, the sad eyes...

"Gandhi?" I guessed.

"Yes, and you are Kiy-lee, both divine and earthly. Brahman is within you - in the form of Atman."

"Brahman?" I blinked. "Atman?"

"God, and your soul, respectively."

I added those words to my mental dictionary.

"There's divine in me?" I asked, astounded.

"Yes, God is within you and I," Gandhi replied.

I touched a hand to my chest. All this time, God was within me?

"What's this river?" I asked curiously, watching the people come and go. A lady offered flowers to it and they drifted away with the current.

"This is the Ganges River," he explained. "We Hindus believe that it is a sacred river that carries our dead to either rebirth or unification with Brahman. That's the goal."

I nodded, understanding.

"Come," Gandhi offered, and I followed.

The place we were was so colourful and the people moved as one. India.

We walked out of the town and towards the woods.

"Oh, Mr. Gandhi?"

"Yes, Kiy-lee?" Wow, did everyone know my name?

"I gotta say, it was really cool how you stopped the violence. I wish I had known you in life. Sorry you got assassinated."

He simply chuckled in response.

Underneath a tree, Gandhi sat down and I followed suit. Before us lay a panoramic view.

"Would you like to meditate with me?" he offered.

"You mean, like, ummmmm?" I hummed.

"Almost," he smiled kindly.

Gandhi sat with a straight back and crossed legs. He placed his hands comfortably on his lap and closed his eyes. Then he commenced breathing through his nose.

I did the same.

"Meditation is used to connect with Brahman," Gandhi said slowly. "Keep your mind calm and clear."

For the first time since I started this journey, I had the opportunity to collect myself. So much had happened to me. Just like my death, it was all so fast.

I thought long and hard. I'm not sure if it counts as meditating, but I was never one

who could keep my mind still.

Gandhi broke me out of my reverie.

"Kiy-lee, it's time for you to continue your journey."

"What?" I protested. "That was so fast, though! I don't want to say goodbye!"

His small hand held my shoulder.

"It's not goodbye. Soon, you can visit me whenever you like. There are no goodbyes in this world." he said. "Oh! I have a gift for you as well."

Sweet, another tattoo!

This one looked like a swirl with a number three.

"This is AUM," he told me.

"Aummmm," I repeated.

He smiled.

"It is a sacred syllable used to call upon God. He is always with you, Kiy-lee. He is the creator, the destroyer, and the preserver."

"Thank you," I murmured, fingering the beautiful mark on my skin.

When I looked up, Gandhi was gone.

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I cried out in shock. I was suddenly on top of a mountain. Clutching a rock, I peered out in all directions.

A strange man's voice said, "This rock you are clutching is Mt. Nur. Welcome, Kiy-lee."

Slowly this time, so as not to fall, I turned.

The speaker was a dark man with cloth on his head and a sword at his belt. Shamefully, my first two reactions were fear and mistrust. Then I remembered Singing Bird's message and I shook off the feeling.

"Hi, I'm Kiy-lee. I recently died and am currently on a spirit journey," I said by way of introduction.

"Shalom, Kiy-lee," Shalom means peace. Yay, points for me! "My name is Muhammad. I am your guide to Islam."

The breeze blew his robes and my dress.

"This mountain is where Gabriel appeared to me," he said.

"No way! God's mailman visited you, too? He sure gets around!"

Muhammad smiled, revealing startling white teeth.

"Gabriel told me to lead the people to believing in Allah - the one true God."

Allah. It all fell into place right then and there. Allah - the Great Spirit - Brahman - the Lord God - they were all God! Slightly different views of the same higher power. These people were talking about the God. My God.

Muhammad sat down and delicately laid his sword beside him. I sat on his other side, and he took out a large, old book.

"This is the Qur'an; sacred scripture that Gabriel told me, and my assistants recorded." He smiled at a memory, his dark eyes flashing.

We read a portion together. The pages got progressively darker and tinted orange in the setting sun.

"Soon you will be in Paradise," Muhammad whispered.

Then my heart jumped. My whole life/ death changed.

In that moment, I jumped up, forgetting my fear of falling.

"I believe in God!" I shouted off the mountain, and then giggled with joy.

Muhammad unsheathed his sword, "May I?"

"Be my guest," I offered him my arm.

Muhammad drew in a complex, yet beautiful language.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"'There is no God but God'. It's part of the Shahadah. You have learnt so much, Kiy-lee. We are so proud of you."

Then, he too, disappeared.

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The last place I materialized to was a hard-packed slope. Before I had time to take my bearings, a huge weight fell upon my shoulders.

I struggled to hold it. The strain was causing my arms to shake.

It was a cross. A heavy wooden cross engraved with my sins. Each chunk of the wood held something I had done wrong in my life; the stealing, the drugs, and the violence.

I gritted my teeth with determination. The top of the hill was in sight and I had this insistent intuition that I was meant to reach it.

Each step was so difficult, and it took everything within me to place one foot in front of the other.

When I was about to collapse, the weight was suddenly much lighter and bearable.

Someone was helping me carry my burden.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. It's heavy!" he had a beautiful laugh.

"No, I mean, you're -" I was speechless.

"Yeshuah. It's great to finally meet you in person, too, Kiy-lee."

Soon, we reached the top of the hill. Jesus lifted my cross off my back and caused it to disappear. My sins. He made them disappear. Just like that.

Faster than I could blink, the scene changed. The sky darkened and three crosses stood before me.

Jesus hung from the middle one. I gasped. He was beaten, bruised, and bleeding. He was suffering!

It was a horrific sight. I began to cry. When Jesus died, the earth literally shook. I fell over and didn't get up. Neither did I stop crying.

Then it was over. Jesus helped me to my feet.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I repented and spluttered.

"I know," He said kindly, and in my heart I knew that He did.

Before Jesus let go, I felt the holes in his hands. I knew, those were the kind of scars that didn't go away.

I wiped my tears away and braved a smile. Then I hugged him earnestly.

"I did this for you," he whispered in my ear. "I love you, Kiy-lee."

"I love you too, Jesus," and I was surprised at my own conviction.

This time, I drew the tattoo myself. I traced a simple cross with my finger, but it turned out ornately decorated with roses.

Then my God led me into the Kingdom of Heaven. It's kinda funny. After I died, I truly lived.