

# 6

## The Nature of the Mind

### *Fiction: Life After Life*



My funeral was quite moving, I thought. I chose a spot at the front, next to the minister, so that I could observe the faces in the crowd while I listened to the eulogy. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. Reverend Franks reviewed my long career with the Omega Life Insurance Company, my "meteoric rise," as he called it, from messenger boy to president. He said I had always insisted that Omega sold insurance for living, not dying: insurance for the happiness of policyholders should they live full term, insurance for the happiness of the loved ones should they not. He was sure that Charlie—my name's Charles R. Smith, but everyone calls me Charlie, even my secretary—that Charlie would want his funeral conducted in the same optimistic, life-loving spirit with which he had conducted his business. That was a nice touch, I thought, and I hoped that the boys from the office were duly appreciative.

Death, said Reverend Franks, was, above all, the opportunity to reflect on life. Though I had lived but fifty years, everyone, he was sure, would agree that my life had been "full term" in the most meaningful sense. I had been not only a business magnate but also a Boy Scout leader, an Elk, and a church deacon. I had been the beloved husband of Ruth and the beloved father of Tim and Marcie, a good provider in life and beyond. I had been a

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man to whom any friend could turn in legitimate need; a man who could laugh with the fellows and cry, so to speak, for an unfortunate boy; a man who had a fifteen handicap as a golfer but no handicap as a human being.

I was feeling a bit smug at that point, I must admit, and I began to feel more so as Reverend Franks started to speak, somewhat uncomfortably, of his hope for "life after life." Our church has always been vague on that particular issue, tending to stress the vast potential for human moral development in "this life." But I knew now, of course, and he didn't. I knew there was life after this life. Or I guess I should say: life after that one.

In all honesty, though, this development was as much of a surprise to me as the next guy. When I got that fish bone caught in my throat and couldn't breathe, and everything started getting dark, I said to myself: This is it, fella. Nothing else, just: This is it, fella. And you know, in the back of my mind, I was a bit pleased with how it was ending. You spend a lot of your life worrying about death and imagining how awful it is going to be. But when the time comes, it's just something you go ahead and do, or rather something that gets done to you, like getting punched in the nose in your first fight. When it happens, it happens quickly, and you're kind of numb, and there isn't that much pain, or fuss, or fear at all.

Then I opened my eyes and I thought: I guess that wasn't it, fella. Ruth was kneeling next to me, wringing her hands and crying, and Tim, who'd been having dinner with us, was yelling into the phone. I said, "I'm all right, Ruth." But she kept on crying, and I realized she was sobbing too loud to hear me. So I got to my feet to show her I was okay. Even that didn't get her attention, so I put my hand on her shoulder. Only then I noticed there wasn't any hand. That was a shocker, I can tell you. I looked down at myself and there was nothing there—no hands, no arms, no feet, no legs, no nothing. I looked in the mirror over the dining room table, and there was nothing there either, just the image of the living room behind me. I looked at Ruth again and there, at her feet, was a body that looked just like mine, only the face was kind of waxy and blue. And I thought: This is too much. You're having some kind of weird dream. You're on the floor, unconscious, dreaming that you're moving around the room without a body. In a little while you're going to wake up in a hospital bed with your body connected to you the way it's supposed to be, and everything will be all right.

But if this was a dream, it was awfully vivid. Tim hung up the phone and helped Ruth over to the couch. He held her as she cried, and occasionally he glanced over her shoulder at the body on the floor, showing little emotion, just as I'd always taught him a boy should do.

And I thought again: Yes, this has to be a dream. You can't be dead. If you were dead, you'd be standing before Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, getting fitted for your wings, or something like that. But then I thought: Maybe it doesn't happen that fast. Your soul has just left your body. Maybe it takes the Lord a little while: After all, there are people dying in houses all over the world tonight. You could hardly expect the Lord to make the rounds of all those houses so quickly. You'll just have to wait your turn. And maybe you'd better get yourself ready. So I started in with "Our Father Who Art in Heaven" and when I finished that I started singing, "Nearer My God to Thee." Only no one appeared except for the policemen and the ambulance attendants. All that commotion distracted me, I guess: the sirens, the chatter, the neighbors gathered outside, the ride to the hospital.

At the hospital they pronounced me dead and gave Ruth a sedative. I wasn't all that concerned about Ruth. I don't mean to say I was unsympathetic. I knew how frightened and unhappy she was, and I knew it would be hard for her to get along without me. But I also knew now that death wasn't the end of everything. Ruth would have a few years of loneliness and fear, but then she would find out that life goes on and on, and she would be with me again. From where I stood, so to speak, that looked like a pretty good deal. Anyway, I had my own problems.

In the days following my death, when I wasn't diverted by my funeral arrangements, I was absorbed with the perplexities of my new situation. It was hard to get used to. Some friend would enter the house and I'd say "hi," and he'd walk right through me. I mean right *through* me. And then I'd look down at where my body had been, and I'd be brought back to reality—whatever that was.

My perception of things was much as it had always been, at least visually. I saw the same shapes, sizes, and colors, in the same three dimensions. And my perception of sounds was about the same. But I had no sense of touch, taste, or smell. I really regretted my lack of taste when I looked at a steak and a beer, not to mention my lack of wherewithal when I glanced at a naked woman. Still, I didn't have hunger anymore, and I wasn't in pain. I just missed those pleasures.

I wasn't able to move objects in any way, which is kind of puzzling when you think about it. Of course, my soul didn't have a body anymore. But if a soul can't move objects, how does it ever move a body? Some special kind of connection, I suppose. In any case, my connection had snapped.

However, if I couldn't move objects, I could move through them without difficulty. I would walk into a wall, get a quick impression of darkness, and then emerge from the other side. I found I was able to rise to a height

of about forty feet from the ground, and to move laterally at a top speed of ninety-five miles an hour. I checked that speed when I went into Los Angeles for a Dodge game, two days after the funeral. I had a great time. I was able to move around the infield, getting close-ups of the action, without fear of getting hit by the ball. I had the best "seat" in the house, and it didn't cost me one thin dime.

It goes without saying that I could go anywhere I wanted, unobserved, and observe anything I wanted. I didn't abuse that privilege. The naked woman I mentioned earlier was my wife. Any others I saw were by accident, and I departed almost at once. It was fun, at first, dropping by the office, or a neighbor's house, or Larry's Bar, listening to plans for an ad campaign, or to local gossip, trying to guess along with the fellows on the baseball pools. But as time went on, I found myself less and less interested in those conversations, I suppose because I was not involved in the things they were talking about. Occasionally I heard cutting remarks about me, and those hurt. But perhaps I felt even worse when they stopped talking about me altogether.

The real hurt was from my family. Tim took his share of the inheritance, bought himself a flashy SUV, packed it with surfboards, and left college for the beach. When a friend asked him how he got his money, he said, "My old man kicked the bucket." That's all. No fond recollections, no good words, just "my old man kicked the bucket." I never heard my daughter Marcie talk about me at all. I visited her college dorm once and only once. I mean, you teach a girl what's right and wrong, and how no one will buy a cow if the milk is free, and how pot leads to stronger stuff, and she says, "Yes, Daddy, of course," and then you see what she does when she's away. Just once. I wouldn't want to see anymore of it.

But my wife, Ruth, gave me the greatest pain—Ruth, with whom I spent all those years, Ruth, whom I trusted. My old friend Arnold kept dropping by to "pay his respects," which I thought was nice of him until I saw what his respects amounted to. I remember vividly that evening two months ago when Ruth was wearing her black dress, and Arnold was pouring her brandy to boost her spirits, and she started crying, and he hugged her, then kissed her, and she started muttering "No," and he said Charlie would want it this way, which, of course, I didn't, and later they started moving toward the bedroom. I was screaming at her at the top of my lungs, even though I knew she couldn't hear me. Then I turned and stomped out of the house. I haven't been back there since. I'm never going back there.

Later, when I calmed down a bit, I began to think things over. By this time it was obvious that the Lord wasn't coming. Maybe I'd always felt that

there wasn't anyone in charge of things—life, I mean—and I was pretty sure of that now. And if my fundamentalist friends had been wrong about heaven and such, I could count myself lucky that those Eastern religions I'd read about had been wrong too. I mean, at least I wasn't reincarnated and wandering around as a skunk or a radish. What was happening to me was quite natural, apparently, and uncontrolled. What I had to do was take things in hand and make my own way, just as I had in my former life. I've never been one to sit on my thumbs, I can tell you.

Now that all the people in my former life had become uninteresting or disappointing to me, it seemed that I ought to try to make some new friends among my own kind. There had to be a lot of other souls around, and surely I would get along with them just fine. I've always been great at making friends.

But the question was: How do you make friends with people who are invisible, untouchable, and make no sounds? All I could see when I looked around me were bodies, no souls. How to make contact? Obviously, I needed some good advice.

In hopes of finding an answer, I started taking some philosophy courses (unofficially, of course) at UCLA. They were no help. I did get a few proofs for the indestructibility of the soul, but that was the last thing I needed. What I needed was a suggestion about how to chat with silent souls and wouldn't you know those guys would have nothing to say about really relevant topics. I would have asked for my money back if I'd paid any.

After I'd thought about the problem on my own, it occurred to me that extrasensory perception might be the answer. But that didn't help much, considering I didn't know anything about extrasensory perception. The only thing I could think of was to act as if I were yelling to someone. So in my mind I said as forcefully as I could, "Hey there!" "Hello there, guys!" "Speak to me!" "Come in, souls, come in!" For the longest time nothing happened, and I tried everything. I "spoke" loudly and softly, at different times of day, facing in different directions. I would think of departed friends or relatives and speak their names. Or I would simply address myself to strangers. I tried visiting areas where it seemed logical that souls might congregate, such as churches, graveyards, and busy city streets.

Finally, I had some luck of sorts. I was sitting on the shore at Long Beach, watching the water and feeling kind of depressed, when I heard a buzzing, chattering sound, like you might hear over the phone. In desperation I cried, "Speak to me, speak to me!" and then, to my amazement, I heard a voice.

"Who's that?"

"I'm Charlie," I said, "Charlie Smith. Who are you?"

"I'm Mildred."

"Where are you, Mildred, in Long Beach?"

"Long Beach? Heavens no. I'm in Tallahassee."

"Tallahassee?"

It happens like that. You'd think that if you got through to another soul, it would be a soul in your own neighborhood. But that other soul can be anywhere. I remember a teacher at UCLA saying that a soul, being non-physical, would have no spatial location. I wanted to interrupt her and tell her how wrong she was. I mean, I was a soul, and I was right there in her classroom. But I must admit now that that kind of location doesn't seem to count for much when souls communicate with one another.

I had a pleasant chat with Mildred that day and the next. She invited me to visit her in Tallahassee, and I accepted. It was a pretty easy trip. I could move, as I've said, at ninety-five miles an hour and didn't need to stop and rest. I didn't have to worry about traffic jams or stop-lights, or winding roads. With a few side trips for sightseeing, and getting lost once, I made it in about a day and a half.

I guess I had the absurd feeling that I would see Mildred in Tallahassee. Of course, I couldn't. She was a soul and invisible, no matter how close you got. Our communications in Florida were still like phone conversations, only this time they were local calls. Still, we were able to share experiences and see the sights together.

The first few days were fun. Then Mildred reverted to her "normal" routine. It turned out that the only sights she really wanted to see and share were at the television department at Sears. Mildred loved soap operas. She was a real fanatic. When she wasn't watching the soaps, she would listen to women talking about them or peer over someone's shoulder at the pages of *Soap Opera Digest*. It was all too much for me. I wasn't about to spend eternity watching "The Guiding Light" and "One Life to Live." I thought I'd better find a woman with other interests. I'd made contact once, and I was sure I would again.

And I did—this time with Alice in Cheyenne, Wyoming. That visit went badly from the start. All Alice wanted to do was hang around her husband and spy on the women he'd taken up with after she'd died. I would have left right away, but I happened to see Alice's picture on the mantelpiece in her house. She was gorgeous, I mean really gorgeous. I'd never been with a woman who looked like that. So I tried to get her interested in me. I told her about my bad experiences with my wife and how I'd decided I should forget about my former life and associate with my own kind. I told her she should forget about her husband and try to have some fun.

I took Alice out on a couple of dates. Her mood seemed to be picking up, and she seemed to be getting to like me. One night I took her to a drive-in movie. We sat near the front, about twenty feet in the air, over the cars. It was a very romantic, sensual movie. I got really involved in the film. I began to feel a deep regret at not having a body. I was longing for some kind of human warmth.

"Oh Alice," I said, "I wish so much that I could hold your hand."

"It wouldn't be proper," she said. "I've only been widowed for five months."

That was the last straw. An hour later I was heading back to California.

That's the way it's been going. Every soul I meet seems to be interested only in the past. But the past is past, and you can't live on memories. On the other hand, what else can you live on? There doesn't seem to be anything interesting that you can do for, or to, or with, another soul. Or vice versa. It's not much fun floating around like a bubble, not able to do anything in the world.

What on earth am I going to do with myself? I don't know. I've got to figure out something. I've just got to. I'm bored as hell.

## Fiction: *Strange Behavior*

What first startled us about the civilization on the planet Gamma was not its strangeness but its familiarity. It was as if a piece of southern Europe from the year 2050 had been transported fifty years ahead in time, and millions of miles out into space, to that small planet. Of course, the similarity is not exact. The Italians of fifty years ago did not have quite the same enthusiasm for spherical constructions, nor for the colors pink and orange. Also, the brown-skinned Gammas are nine feet tall and hairless, and they hear through slits located just below their cheekbones. But with all the strange life forms recently discovered in the universe, these minor dissimilarities between the Gammas and the mid-century Italians go almost unnoticed. When we landed on Gamma, we felt as if we had stepped into a living museum.

The technological sophistication of Gamma is virtually the same as that of Earth fifty years ago. But there is one notable difference. The Gammas'

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