

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz
4110 Faith Ct.
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 472-6463
mtravies@gmail.com

840 words

Life in Heaven

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

When a man, filled with a mixture of reverence and bewilderment, asks, "What on earth does this all mean?", a child will answer him with the fourth movement [of his Fourth Symphony]: "This is the life of the Kingdom of Heaven."
Gustav Mahler

For many, the word "heaven" evokes images of fluffy clouds on azure skies, transparent beings floating about displaying beatific smiles on their incorporeal faces, sometimes playing the harp or blowing on fifes. However, if that idea of heaven had been presented to twelve-year old Tim, he would have rejected it as laughable. If there was a heaven, he would have retorted, it would be a place where he would no longer experience hunger or cold and would be free from mistreatment and physical abuse. It would have to be away from the fetid alleys where he and other guttersnipes lived, and would have to be free of trash, vermin, and stray animals. It would have clean water and places to eat good food that was unspoiled. Beyond that, Tim's imagination did not stretch, for he lacked comparison points: he could not visualize any improvements beyond deliverance from the ills of his environment.

When Tim's body was struck by a runaway cart killing him instantaneously, his soul was left without a defined destination. Was he to ascend towards the upper reaches of the sky, or sink under the dirty soil, or just curl into a ball at the place of impact and await further developments? He could sense his body become cold and stiff, no different from the cobblestones on which it rested, and then felt it detach from him. In a moment, what had been an inextricable part of

himself became strange and unwelcoming, like a closed door through which he could no longer enter. He felt a pang of grief, but somehow realized he had to move on.

Then, the entire world around Tim melted away and disappeared. He found himself in a dense, impenetrable fog, floating on a bed of nothingness, with no obvious orientation. There was no up or down, near or far; he wondered if he could have touched at once everything that still existed, if he only had hands. He became confused and a bit afraid.

He felt vibrations around him that could have been sounds, had he had ears to retrieve them. Slowly, these vibrations became a strange song, one he had never heard before:

“No worldly turmoil is heard in heaven; we all live in sweetest peace!

“We lead an angelic existence, and so we are perfectly happy!

“We dance and leap, and skip and sing;

“For all things awake to enjoy!”

Tim somehow understood the words but they made no sense to him. In his short life, he had never experienced joy, nor had he danced or leapt. The sentiments the song conveyed seemed silly, almost trivial. *“Is that all there is?”* he mused.

And then he thought he understood. He had been perfectly innocent at birth, but the process of living as an orphaned pauper had managed to peel away his innocence and left behind only a sad and suffering being. Heaven was the place in which innocence was regained and all the negative lessons of life were forgotten.

Tim’s soul rebelled at the idea. His life had been miserable, and he derived contentment from knowing that all his suffering was now in the past. Yet, there had been moments of enjoyment amidst the pain. The nuns at the convent not far from his hovel had always been kind to him and had often given him a piece of tasty fruit cobbler or some freshly baked bread; they had allowed him to play in their garden, where he would smell the blooming roses and the lilacs and pick peaches from their tree. Sometimes he had walked to the river’s edge and spent hours watching the boats go by and an occasional fish jump out of the turbid waters. In the long days of summer, he had witnessed many spectacular sunsets, always wondering who could come up with

those extravagant shades of pink, orange, red, and mauve. He did not know how to read, but had memorized the lyrics of some of the songs the street artists of the neighborhood sang to solicit alms from passersby, and had uttered the tunes to himself many times. In all, there were a handful of small islands of pleasure in the troubled sea of his life, and he was loath to give those up and return to the complete innocence of his earliest hours.

But then he realized that the innocence of babies is based on their not being serious about the world around them. They are just playful, as the song said. They do not have disturbing thoughts. Perhaps he could retrieve his lost innocence by adopting a positive outlook that shielded him from entertaining memories of the negative experiences in his former life. Perhaps the innocence that he would regain would not be based on banishing the past, but focusing on the joyful, eternal present.

His soul gravitated towards the source of the song and, finding it, joined the company of the blessed spirits and added itself to their playing and dancing. In fact, it soon learned to play the fife.

END