

## INTEGRATION

Since you might hope to carry some part of your identity into the next life, other folks will probably feel the same way. Given the opportunity, we would all preserve what we consider our most admirable traits and package them into a version of ourselves no one else could recognize.

The heaven we aspire to might be distorted by similar incongruities. Imagine yourself, a virtual paragon, surrounded by treasured family, friends, and beloved pets. Uncle Woody is there without his cane, without his distinctively tobacco-flavored breath, and without the interminable stories of his youth in Ohio. He could bore a dog to sleep, even if he were simultaneously scratching him above the tail. Your grandma would be there, only without the fresh-baked cookie smell and the comfortable shoes. She would have perky breasts, bright lipstick, and the salacious smile that drove the village swains wild as she bent over the milking stool.

Since many distinctively human qualities like warts and underarm hair will be absent, how will we know one another? All friends and family will be like Teflon simulacra. Even the pets may lose their individuality. They can be surgically, if not genetically engineered like odorless dogs or hypoallergenic cats to fit into their new surroundings.

This rosy picture can only apply if heaven is highly compartmentalized. Intruders from other strata might clash for any number of reasons. Since most of our collective experiences are within a twentieth or twenty-first century context, we moderns will be ill-prepared to deal with the residents who may have preceded us by thousands of years. There is evidence of controlled fire, which anthropologists believe is a sure sign of humanity, from more than 50,000 years ago. The ignorance of the primitives, however, should not preclude their access to opportunities like heaven.

The gossamer tier of paradise that we will occupy may be overrun by knuckle-dragging, mouth-breathing, foul smelling, excessively hirsute anthropoids (and I'm just talking about the females) who were kind and just in life. We have no control over that velvet rope, so don't expect the character of the gentry to conform to your naïve preferences. That barking you hear outside might not be your golden retriever; it might be the neighbors making love.

*“Somewhere, and I can't find where, I read about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest, “If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?” “No”, said the priest, “not if you did not know.” “Then why” asked the Eskimo earnestly, “did you tell me?”*

*Annie Dillard*