

# THE ROOM



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2007

For Kyle and Leah, my son and daughter  
They are my life. My hope is that my generation can  
finally learn to take better care of their planet.

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*The novel is set in the small town of Washingtonville, New York, in the lower Hudson Valley. The town stores and people in the novel are fictitious. All other landmarks and locations described in the novel are real.*

*Beth Quinn’s column, referred to in chapter two, does appear on Mondays in the *Times Herald-Record* newspaper, serving New York’s Hudson Valley and in the Catskills.*

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# Prologue

Science and philosophy have always asked the questions: “Why do we exist? How did we get here?” Philosophy probes these questions through thought, while science concerns itself with the mechanics of the cosmos. As history fades into the past we look back and know with certainty that many past philosophical ideas are just wrong, just as many theories in science are found to be wrong. But how can we find the answers to our existence without first taking into account all the things we learn about the cosmos? Philosophers like Daniel Dennett, armed with the latest science, are, for me, those on the right path. It’s a path that builds on an existentialist view.

Science itself takes a different approach, building on centuries of experience and correcting itself as progress is made. Scientists may search for the same answer in

different ways but as the truth is finally revealed, the remaining ideas will be dropped. Science is meant to be self correcting. During the 20th century we saw an explosion in knowledge and it continues today with incredible advances in physics, astronomy, chemistry and biology.

As we ponder our existence, we do a disservice to ourselves when we choose to ignore these discoveries. Still, there are even some with developed intellect who entertain the idea that there may have been an outside force that stirred the quantum pot just right. But the edge of scientific theory moves forward, shattering old barriers along the way. As technology advances, we find ways to test these new theories and put the wrong ideas to bed.

Leonard Susskind is a theoretical physics professor at Stanford University since 1978 and is one of the pioneers of string theory. Scientists like him are not satisfied to attribute the unknown to a conscious all-powerful being. Who created that being? To those who think as Leonard does, that path equates to quitting. If every scientist thought like those who were willing to just give up, what further advancements could we make?

In our place in history we now find ourselves at a new boundary. Once again we find that the mathematics and theories in the field of quantum physics are taking a new



leap from our ability to prove them in the lab. But this has happened repeatedly in our history. Many of Einstein's theories had to wait many years before they could be tested.

String theory is one such theory that breaks the current boundary of the ability to test using current technology. But it nonetheless holds great promise in revolutionizing the way we see the cosmos. The excitement is in the hope that we will finally find the theory of everything. The mechanics may soon enough be understood that will link quantum mechanics with Relativity Theory, the very thing that eluded Einstein. After decades of work, physicists working with strings had come up with five different theories. They focused on a cosmos consisting of as many as nine spatial dimensions plus a tenth, time. How could all five theories be right? But the introduction of M-theory revealed that maybe the differences in the five were not differences at all. They could be multiple ways of looking at the same thing. M-theory added one more dimension which brought it to 10 spatial dimensions and one for time, making eleven.

String theory itself portrays a cosmos where all matter and forces consist of vibrating strings of energy. If proven, it seems amazing enough but even more, it opens the possibility of infinite parallel universes.

Brian Greene, author of “The Elegant Universe”, a book on string theory, wrote:

*“And there's no reason to be disappointed with one particular outcome or another, because quantum mechanics suggests that each of the possibilities like getting a yellow juice or a red juice may actually happen. They just happen to happen in universes that are parallel to ours, universes that seem as real to their inhabitants as our universe seems to us.*

Leonard Susskind, in his book, “The Cosmic Landscape,” wrote:

*I am far from the first physicist to seriously entertain the possibility that reality – whatever that means – contains, in addition to our own world of experience, alternate worlds with different history than our own.*

Perhaps one of the most profound realizations is that this theory could finally hold the answer to why our universe is so finely tuned to support life. Infinite parallel universes would mean an infinite amount that would support life and an infinite amount that would not. It would make our universe not so special after all. We are just fortunate enough to be here and because we are here, we question.

It could answer the questions of how and why we are here in a way that's disturbing to those with philosophies that are

human centric. But I for one would like to know the truth, no matter where it leads.

I will not delve any deeper into the science but I recommend highly that you read both “The Cosmic Landscape” by Leonard Susskind and “The Elegant Universe” by Brian Greene. They reveal a cosmos far stranger and more exciting than any pseudoscience could ever hope to offer.

In “The Room”, I take great liberties in the use of string theory to explain the extraordinary event that engulfs Harry near the end of the book. Many would characterize this event as supernatural, but not Harry. His dedication to science leads him to explore the laws of physics in his attempt to find even a clue.

This event is used in an effort to tell the story about our path in life and how a single decision can determine the course of our future. “The Room” asks the question: What if parallel universes were true and somehow two of those universes could lightly touch, creating a bubble? In life we must all play the cards we are dealt. But what if in a hand of five, you were dealt ten?

Let me tell you a little about Harry. From the time he began choosing his own books from the library, he chose science. Harry believes, without exception, that for everything

existing, there is a natural reason. Harry is atheist, but more than that, he believes that when we're born, we're given only existence. Everything we do from there, what we learn and what we encounter, gives us value or not. Most of us have that choice and those who don't are the ones who need our help.

In Harry's world, the "room" of the title is a place of cosmic convergence, a repository of memory, and a place where pain and sadness resided and their memories linger. It's a place of both painful life and sad death that comes with regrets and desire for healing old wounds, or at least apologizing for old wrongs. The room is his mother's room, in a simple home in Orange County, New York. It's the place that Harry felt safest as a child, but as an adult it's where he's forced to relive uncomfortable memories.

Although Harry finally meets a woman who understands and truly loves him, the cosmos takes a different path. He's left to wonder if love can transcend a universe, and discovers that what goes wrong in life sometimes matters as much as what goes right.

This novel is intended as a work of imagination, but is not intended as a work of science fiction. In Harry's belief system, as in mine, science is not fiction. It is a reality of the most all-encompassing kind.

It concerns me at times about what kind of world we will leave our children. I worry about the growing influence of those who oppose new science. How they use their personal religious beliefs for their assertions, but then shun scrutiny. To talk about their religion is taboo. But religious groups that attempt to impose their beliefs on all of us, or influence government policies, are no longer off-limits. The very core of their beliefs is now open for debate.

My hope is that some day, those who believe in reason will be able to influence the course of history as much as those of faith.

## Chapter 1

It was difficult to get out of bed today, but because it's Saturday, at least I wasn't awakened by the alarm. I lifted the edge of the window shade but let it down again when the bright light hurt my eyes. Sarah was dropping Kaela and Lainey off in a couple of hours and I still hadn't thought of something for us to do. I needed to tell them today that their grandmother is dying. I didn't want the news to weigh upon their whole visit, so I decided I'd tell them later in the day. I wasn't sure how Kaela would take it but Lainey understood death in such a basic way that I assumed she'd be alright.

It was over a year since Sarah and I split up and the divorce was finalized just a few weeks ago. It stung again when it was final, but with Mom dying, it was a one-two punch. Although Kaela was only 8 and Lainey 6, for at least those years the girls were able to fill a void for Mom after my brother Malcolm left. The sicker Mom got, the more pissed I was at my younger brother. He could never justify becoming angry at Mom and me. Just before he left for good, he began to perseverate on things. When our father was out, Malcolm began to repeatedly point out how Mom named me Harry after her Dad, while he was named after our father's father. He complained that he always got the short end of the stick.

When we were little, Malcolm was so often afraid. But he always stuck with me when our father was abusive. We began to sense when that bastard was close to becoming physical, so we slipped upstairs to Mom's room. Her deep closet was the best place to hide until everything blew over.

Our father moved out of Mom's room long before we could remember, choosing to sleep in the small room downstairs. He had his couch, his TV, and kept all his hunting and fishing gear in there. It was such a relief when he stayed in there all day. My brother and I never went into that room, but passing by when the door was open, we could see a huge pile of hunting magazines on the floor by the door. They always looked untouched, not a crinkle. I wondered why he bothered to keep getting them when it was obvious that he never read them.

*Harry Ladd was finally able to get away from his father and make it upstairs. His father, Henry, was such an imposing presence when he was home. Everything had to revolve around him. When he was outside his room, he would walk around loudly, making sure that his presence was known. Even if Harry and Malcolm were talking, when Henry spoke, they stopped. No one in the house had anything more important to say.*

*Henry wasn't a tall man, thin build, but now with a larger waist and bottom compiled from years of sitting in his eighteen wheeler, as he transported goods around the county. He would shave, but only after the scruffiness was far too obvious and even then he would miss patches.*

*He had been on edge all day and Harry knew it was just a matter of time before there was trouble.*

*It wasn't even three o'clock and Henry insisted on having his dinner early. All it took was to have them all together at the table. His mother, Rue, was hurt but Harry couldn't stay around. He was afraid his father would remember why he got angry in the first place. But for the moment, his father was distracted. Henry was yelling at Rue about why it was her own fault that he pushed her down.*

*Harry was worried that his brother, Malcolm, might still be downstairs. But when he opened the door to his mother's closet, he saw Malcolm inside. He found him frightened and sitting in the back corner with the small battery lantern they always left in there. Harry crawled inside, closing the door, and sat against the wall. Malcolm was only ten years old and Harry looked out for his little brother as best he could. After all, Harry had two more years of experience with their father. But Harry could only do so much.*

*They felt safe for now. Their father would never find them in their mother's closet. They knew he never bothered to put in any effort once they hid. They could wait it out in there. The wooden floor even had a small gap between the boards where they heard sounds that carried up from the hall below. It was hard to make out words, but they could hear the intensity of the conversation.*

*"My stomach hurts," Harry said. "I didn't mean to waste my supper."*



*Malcolm, still shivering from time to time, just looked at Harry.*

*“I wasn’t talking back,” Harry continued. “I was just trying to tell him that I didn’t feel well. He pushed Mom down. She tried to stop him when he slapped me, and he just pushed her out of the way. He got me only once when he saw that he hurt her.”*

*Malcolm finally spoke.*

*“You have a red mark on your face.”*

*“He got me good with that one shot,” Harry said.*

*Harry put his hand to his face and flinched as he touched the spot where he was slapped.*

*“Why is he always mad, Harry?”*

*“I don’t know, Malcolm. I wish I knew.”*

*In a quiet moment they heard the smash of something being thrown against the wall downstairs.*

*Their father, Henry, was tired of blaming his wife, Rue, for what he had done so he threw his glass against the wall and stormed off to his room. It struck the framed photograph of Rue’s parents and cracked the glass from bottom left to top right. Earlier, she struck her leg on the table when he pushed her down. But the pain in her heart hurt worse when he split the glass covering that photograph.*

*She would later move it to the wall in her room, but would never get the glass replaced.*

*After the sound, Harry and Malcolm heard it go silent downstairs, so a short time later, Harry cracked open the door and peeked through the slit into the room. There on the wall he saw the photograph of Mom's parents. It was surrounded by light. He knew that it normally hung downstairs, but now it was here with a crack in the glass. They waited inside for a while, but once convinced their father had gone away, the boys came out and sat on their mother's bed. Harry looked toward the door and found it strange that the picture was gone, as was the light. They had only waited inside the closet for a few more minutes, Harry thought, there was barely enough time for Mom to remove it. Besides, they would have heard her on the stairs.*

*Rue struggled to clean up the mess in the kitchen, favoring her injured leg, but making it increasingly worse. She couldn't help herself. If Henry were to continue to walk past the mess, she knew he would take out his displeasure on the boys. When Rue finished, she took a small hammer from the drawer, removed the photograph from the wall, and pulled out the hanger.*

*The boys could hear their mother struggling to walk up the stairs. When she got to her bedroom, Harry saw her holding the photograph he saw hanging just minutes ago. Harry was puzzled as he watched his Mom hang it in the same spot. Rue finished hanging the photograph and put the hammer on her night table, then collapsed onto her bed. With the additional damage she had*

*done, the pain had gotten so great that she was unable to get out of bed for days.*

*“Harry, please go next door and ask Ruth to come by. Please tell her that I need her help,” Rue said. “You don’t have to worry about your father. He’s in his room.”*

*Henry knew he’d gone too far, so he decided he would make himself scarce for a few days, sleeping in the back room of the trucking office where he worked. His regret didn’t come from conscience. It was from a selfish fear he would cross a line, and lose the woman who waited on him hand and foot.*

I had finally been able to keep the bad parts of my past out of mind, but ever since Mom took a turn for the worse, I couldn’t help myself from dwelling on it. I put on a pot of coffee and looked into the refrigerator to see if there was creamer. I could smell stale coffee grounds permeating the area near the counter. It wasn’t like me to forget the trash until it was ripe, but I had so much on my mind. I meant to pick up groceries to make something for my daughters to eat, but sandwiches from the deli next door would have to do for supper later.

As the coffee brewed, I went to wash and get dressed, not paying much attention to what I wore. Although this apartment was supposed to be temporary, I hadn’t done well enough to move. I planned on renting a larger one when I could, so having the children stay overnight would be appealing to them. Perhaps the only redeeming qualities this place had were the people around

here and my view of the town center. I really enjoyed sitting at the window and watching the people.

Although my apartment was small, I loved living in this little section of town. The stores in a row were small businesses, some with apartments above, but they all had the look of old style homes and shops. Next to the tavern are a small gift shop, print shop, pizzeria and antique store. On the opposite side there's the car parts store, the deli, a bar in the basement below the parts store and the deli, and the computer repair shop under my apartment. In addition to the charmed feel of this small town center, there was the warmth of the people who inhabited the area's apartments, houses and businesses.

Sarah and I sold our home, which had far more room for storage, so I had to find places for all the possessions I'd accumulated. One was a large telescope I carried down and up and down again, to the small paved area in the back. The lot behind the stores is shielded from some of the street lamps, but the ambient light is still a bit strong to look at anything more than the moon and planets. When we were a family at home, I would ask the girls to look through the scope with me. Once, after several nights of calling them out to look at Jupiter and Saturn, they asked why I kept looking at the same planets. I explained about the movement of Jupiter's moons and how in awe I was looking at another world with my own eyes. I told them that it was all beautiful, but never as beautiful as them.

The night sky gave focus to so much vastness that it gave me a true sense of how really tiny we are. One tiny person on a small

blue dot circling an insignificant sun at the far edge of our galaxy, filled with billions of suns and a universe filled with billions of other galaxies. I find it hard to understand why anyone would think the cosmos cared about any one of us.

I enjoy talking with the girls about all of these things. No matter how young they are or how much they grasp, I always tell them what I consider to be the truth. I'm often surprised at how much they are able to understand and I want them to grow up with knowledge in science. My hope is for it to become so natural that they'd continue to have an interest and want to know more. Science has always been so important to me and is the first subject I look for when the girls bring their report cards to show me. Carl Sagan, my favorite scientist and writer, once said that we live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology. I wasn't going to let my girls end up like those people.

Sarah was picking up the girls at 9 PM as she does every other Saturday when they visited. She was prompt when getting them but the time she dropped them off would vary. Before the girls went home, I often explained to them how I would soon be doing well enough to find a place where they could have their own room. I could see in their eyes that they didn't believe I could, but they didn't want to dash my hope.

Sarah moved back with her parents in Westchester, who were only happy to give her and the children the lower level of their home and all the help they need. I'm happy that the children have good schools, nice things and a comfortable home. I pay what I can for

the girls and to Sarah, but her parents have much more to offer. Her parents are well off and when Sarah and I were together, they never hesitated to point that out. It was obvious they never thought I was good enough for her.

Her father especially dislikes me. Being a man of faith, he has no patience for my views. He insists that raising the girls without God is nothing short of abuse, but ignores that Sarah feels the same way I do. He attributes that to exposure to me.

As much as both her parents disliked me, I could only feel grateful that they were there to take care of the girls, even if they used it to show how little I had left to give. I can't accept that a person's monetary worth makes them who they are. Maybe I have an idealistic view, since I hadn't done as well as hoped, but knew I could do better. I would do better.

Sarah was doing well now. She finished the last few courses needed to complete her degree and took a job at a bank where she planned to work herself up to manager. She was always good with money, so thorough. I knew she would do alright without me. I heard from the girls that there was a man who came around recently and their Mom and he would go out for the evening. I told the girls that it was OK because their mother needs to have a friend to talk to, but you could see that it made them a little sad. I imagined why it would be hard for them. They loved both of us and innately felt the finality when they saw their mom with someone other than me. I tried to show them I wasn't hurt and that I was happy for their mom. But it did hurt, if even a little.

Lainey often asked me to come to Westchester so I could see her room. She was proud of the drawings she wanted to show me and didn't understand why I wouldn't go. She's just a little girl, learning about new things and I had to miss waking up with her on my shoulder, seeing her come home from school and watching her explore all the new things in her life. Kaela is my big girl, 8 years old and wise beyond her years. They are two sides of a coin, Lainey slowly developing a creative edge while Kaela is organized and practical. Whenever they visited, I was reminded of how much I missed being a family, but what could I do? Sarah believed that she did what was best for her and the kids and maybe she was right. It couldn't be good for them to grow up in a house where their parents had no real love for each other.

Before they were born, Sarah was my friend through all the rough times. I wasn't exactly sure when, but after we had the children we drifted apart. When she left, Sarah insisted that her energies would be better spent on just the girls. Although I had often been cold and sometimes angry, there were things about Sarah that I had to deal with as well. She instructed me at times about what or what not to say to the girls. It was continually pointed out that other friends of hers were doing better and had bigger houses. Anytime I made any progress or received a pay raise, it was never enough.

The people we were when we first met were gone. She became cold and I knew it could only go on for so long. I questioned, but never resisted her leaving because inside I felt that she was most likely right. We stopped giving each other what we needed, and I felt sorry that the girls had to be affected by it all. Sarah knew I

thought of her as a good mother; when it came to the girls she always put them first. After we separated, our conversations, although minimal, were nonetheless civil, just as long as we kept them to logistics. Still, as much as I wanted more details about the things the girls did, it was best that I just get that from them.

I had been daydreaming so long that it surprised me a bit when I heard the tap on a horn. When I looked out the window, Sarah saw me so she shuffled the girls out of the car and they ran up the creaky stairs to my apartment. I loved the sound of their multiple little steps as they came up. The girls had their small backpacks that I knew would be properly packed with lunch, healthy snacks, pencils, paper and other personal items. Sarah was meticulous about those things. She expected I would have forgotten to pick up some fruits and snacks for them.

When they reached the top of the stairs, I saw my girls with neatly tied-back hair and nice clean clothes. They had on the same style shirts, but Kaela had on light blue and Lainey wore red. Their jackets matched and both wore jeans and little brown boots. With the money I contributed, Sarah's salary and her parents providing the home, Sarah could finally give the girls the things she considered important.

"Mom said she'll be back at nine to get us," Kaela said, although it was the same each visit.

Lainey looked a little sad and I asked her why.



“I missed you Dad. My picture was up in the art show at school and Mom went.”

I bent down and looked at her.

“You know that I love you two and I would have been there if I could.”

Somehow it was enough for now and I watched her face change to a small smile as she pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from her backpack.

“I brought it so you can see.” She said smiling ear to ear.

It was a pencil drawing of a little girl and a man holding hands.

“It’s you and me, Dad.”

“It’s beautiful, Lainey,” I said as I turned and held it up toward the window.

I didn’t want her to see in my face that I felt sad she couldn’t see me all the time. From the day they were born, I maybe worried too much about the girls. When they were sick I always wished I could take it away, be sick for them. Maybe I was often too worried, but I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to protect them from everything, even though I knew deep inside that I couldn’t.

I could tell that Kaela also missed me but being the responsible one she already made herself comfortable on the couch and was

doing left-over homework. She pulled out extra school papers with red circled marks at the top, carefully spreading them so I would see. She wanted me to look at them, but was waiting for me to notice on my own. Kaela beamed as I picked up the papers.

“You are doing so well, Kaela.”

“Dad, I got all hundreds in math this semester,” she said. “My teacher said I was the only one.”

I sat down for a moment and looked over all the rest of her papers, acknowledging how well she did in all the subjects. I was so very happy with the way Kaela was growing up, how they both were. Since Sarah and I split, Kaela became more protective of her little sister. She held Lainey’s hand to cross the street, made sure she closed her jacket, and other things she saw her mom do. The girls were taking our divorce well and I was comforted by that. What I wanted the most was for them to be happy. I could deal with anything else if I knew they were.

I had put little thought into what we could do today as I was happy just to see them, but I knew that they were expecting some activity. I asked them if they wanted to hike in Black Rock Forest, knowing they loved it there.

“That would be great, Dad,” Kaela said, already beginning to stand.

Lainey agreed as well, so we packed up their lunches and a few of their snacks and started down the stairs to the car.

In late spring, the Hudson Valley had to be one of the most beautiful places on the planet. Hiking in Black Rock was awesome by itself, but we turned it into a science expedition by looking for little fossils in the rocks. The new leaves were so pure and the streams were full from melt off, making the waterfalls compelling. We sat on a large rock just talking as we watched the water crash white as it hit the rocks at the bottom. Something about the sound was soothing, peaceful. I got up to throw a few stones into the water while the girls continued to sit on the large rock and talk. I didn't know what the future had in store for them, but I could see that they would tackle it together. Malcolm and I had stopped talking. I knew that would never happen to them. They'll always have each other.

When we moved on, we came to the top of the hill where there was a small lake, so still and clear. Kaela reached in and cupped a salamander in her hands.

“You know, Kaela, it was your cousin three hundred and forty million years ago.”

“Oh, Dad,” said Lainey.

“No really, give or take a few million or so.”

I saw at first they were puzzled, but when Kaela gently placed the salamander back in the lake. I saw that she was starting to understand. I explained that we humans were the only animal on

earth that spends so much time and energy denying what we really are.

“We now know that we’re related to every bit of life on the planet,” I told them. “That’s why it’s important that we treat everything with respect. If you would like, some time I will tell you why even life itself owes its existence to long dead stars.”

Kaela said she would like that, while Lainey had gone back to picking up round stones to toss into the water.

We continued our conversation as we walked along the narrow road back to the car. I told them how their grandmother would bring Malcolm and me to these spots when we were little and how much fun we had hiking. Mom had gotten too old to hike the trails with us, but at least I continued the tradition. Although there were playgrounds in the county, there wasn’t a playground anywhere that compared to Black Rock.

“Are we going to visit Grandma today?” Kaela asked.

“Not today, sweetheart. She’s not feeling well.”

“Maybe we can cheer her up,” Lainey added.

“I’m sure of that,” I said. “But she needs to rest today”.

I would tell them soon enough, but it wasn’t the best time.

When we got to the stream that flowed along the top of the road, we side-tracked to walk on the rocks in the middle. The girls laughed when I lost my footing and plopped into the stream. It wasn't deep but my socks and shoes were soaked.

"Sure, go ahead and laugh," I said. "I meant to do that."

They laughed again.

"You're going to squish when you walk Daddy," Lainey said.

"Daddy wants to squish when he walks," Kaela added, and winked at me.

The road was a shortcut back to the lot but was worth taking because it had a distant view of the railroad trestle and the Moodna Valley at the north end of Schunemunk Mountain. The valley had turned a beautiful green and you could see the patterns made by tractors on the newly-seeded farms below. We could see a smattering of farm houses and the town beyond. With all the roads obscured by the trees, the farms were islands in a sea of green stretching far beyond what we could see.

On the opposite side of the road, there was a towering rock formation. I imagined that although created ages ago, it had barely changed in thousands of years. The dirt on each side was worn away from heavy rains that pour down from the mountain above. Some of the streams only appeared with spring melt off and the rains but you could see the channels they left behind.

They were often the best places to find fossils since they exposed the rocks in their path.

A short while later we reached the car and Lainey took a map from the pamphlet bin at the start of the trail. She did every time we came and made a small pile of them on the shelf in my apartment. Every so often, I would gather them up and bring them back with us so they wouldn't go to waste.

We took a moment to clean off the mud caking our boots before getting in. I kept a small brush in the trunk but I never worried too much about getting dirt in the car. It was old and I had given up on keeping it clean. As I left the lot, I could tell they had fun when they both turned back to stare as we drove away.

In the car, I saw Kaela looked a little puzzled, so I asked her why.

“Why doesn't Uncle Malcolm come to visit and why don't we get to meet Brian?” she asked.

“I wish I knew, sweetheart. There is a lot about your Uncle Malcolm I don't understand.”

“Can we call Brian?” Lainey asked.

“I'm not sure that's such a good idea and I don't have the number anyway,” I told them.

“Well, Kaela and I are always going to stay together,” Lainey said.

“I’m counting on it,” I told them. “I know you will.”

When we got back, we stopped at the deli next door to pick up some sandwiches and salads for dinner. The deli had been there for years, owned by Ben Cahill who took it over when his father passed away. Ben was the quintessential deli man with a large chest, full white butcher’s apron and a neatly cropped silver mustache.

The shop had wooden floors which he always kept clean. He left it old style, with hanging cheeses and the traditional long white refrigerated counter where he stored the daily offerings of cold cuts and other meats. There was the large walk-in refrigerator in the back with a big silver door and long chrome handle. To the side, he had a handful of small tables where his customers could sit and eat. As I approached the counter, the smell of the cheeses permeated my nose and made me hungry. Ben rang up the charge for a woman buying some meats and then saw us.

“Harry, you have such beautiful girls.”

“Thanks Ben. They’re growing so fast.”

“Hi, Mr. Cahill,” Kaela and Lainey said.

“Would you like the usual?” Ben asked the girls.

When they nodded, he began to prepare the food and they went over to one of the tables to sit and wait. It was funny how Lainey always looked to Kaela for guidance with everything, even down to

the food they both ordered. It would be two ham and American cheese sandwiches on plain rolls with just a little mayonnaise. They even both enjoyed the small tub of cole slaw Ben would give on the side. Orange juice for both to top it off. It made me happy they preferred that to soda.

“I’ll take a hero, Ben, Swiss cheese with all the veggies you have and a little mayo.”

“You got it, Harry. How is your mother doing?”

“As well as can be expected,” I told him.

Ben knew that Mom had been diagnosed with brain cancer and was not expected to live much longer, and he seemed concerned about how I was taking it. I told him that I was comforted by the fact she could stay at home and was provided nursing care so she wouldn’t have to spend her last days in a hospital. The doctors told me that all she had was a few days more, at most. I explained that I didn’t want the girls to see their grandmother as sick as she was, so I had planned to go and stay with Mom tomorrow.

I took the week as vacation so I could spend some time with her before she passed, but I needed today to tell the girls. The nurse was going to call me if Mom’s condition worsened. Ben was a good listener and he had dutifully taken on the job of town sounding board. He was the one who kept the neighborhood informed of anything any of us was going through.



When Ben finished getting our food he placed the bag on the counter.

“Here you go, Harry. It’s a shame about your mother.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

I handed him the money with an extra ten dollars.

“That’s the last ten I owe you for the food tab. I appreciate it,” I told him.

The girls saw that Ben was finished, so they came up to the counter.

“Thanks, Mr. Cahill,” the girls said.

We took our bag and left.

In the apartment, I removed a few items from the coffee table and put out mats so we could eat there. For the moment the girls seemed happy, as if we were a family in our home. We talked more about their school and I asked how their piano lessons were coming along. They were both more excited to talk about how their Grandpa Hanson bought them a new computer and gave each of them money to buy a game they wanted. I thought it must be nice to be able to give the girls not only what they needed but also some extra things they wanted. When we were together in our home, they seemed to be satisfied with what they had. Even

though I couldn't afford everything, they had my love. That was always enough for them.

"So are you happy?" I asked.

Lainey nodded and Kaela said, "Yeah, ah yes, Dad, we are."

"That's all I ever want for you two. I'm glad to hear it."

I realized that once the girls grew into their own lives, I would be more alone. I would have had Malcolm, but he had been gone for so many years. As I did, he hated our father but never forgave our mother for her inaction when he physically and verbally abused us. I never blamed Mom since she was a victim herself, but Malcolm did. It was hard for all of us to deal with, but had bitten him more.

I couldn't even imagine beating my children as my father beat us. At first I wondered what I did wrong, why I deserved to be beaten. As I got older, I realized that I hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, nothing wrong. Up to the day he died, I never was able to figure out what twisted reasoning he used to justify his actions to himself.

Malcolm, being younger, always seemed stunned by the actions of our father. I tried to intervene in the beginning, but when I did I only made things worse. Mom learned earlier not to interfere because it also led to more trouble for all of us. I was able to ignore the yelling. It was the beatings with the belt that angered me most. Malcolm couldn't blow off any of it and was always

frightened. I understood who to blame from the beginning, but Malcolm never did.

Since our father died six years ago, Mom began to regret that she stayed with him, that she lost Malcolm. I got a message to him when our father died but he never attended the funeral. I would have skipped it also if not for Mom. She needed me there. I only knew how Malcolm was through a couple of his old friends because he stopped calling me years ago. He realized I could never be angry at Mom for not removing us from the abuse.

Malcolm moved to New Jersey when he finished school, got a decent job in business and married a woman name Julia. They had a son, Brian, and I heard that they were happy. I imagined he lived in a tidy little house with a practical car on a tree-lined street in suburbia. Julia would be driving a minivan, shuffling Brian off to soccer. I pictured that their lawn would be properly tended to and inside the two-car garage, on the wall would be all the hanging tools Malcolm used to keep his yard nice.

I hadn't noticed the time until there was barely a half hour left before Sarah was picking the girls up and I needed to tell them about their grandmother. They already knew that she was sick, but they didn't realize how sick she was. I started by telling them how their grandmother was so happy watching them grow into wonderful young ladies.

"Girls, your grandmother won't be with us much longer," I told them.

“But Dad, where is Grandma Ladd going?” Lainey asked.

“She is dying, Lainey.”

“My teacher told me that when people die they go to heaven,” said Kaela. “Mom says she is not sure.”

“Well, your mom is right. Nobody really knows. Nobody is really sure.”

I explained that they should never believe someone who tells them that we live forever just because they say so. I needed extraordinary evidence for such amazing claims and never saw anything to convince me so far. There are some who believe that there are people with wings like a bird, a snake that talked and also relish in telling their children a story in which every species of animal on earth owed its existence to a man who built a large boat. To me, it was obvious that these stories were never meant to be taken literally.

“Wishing something were so, doesn’t make it so,” I told them.

I never believed in God, but when the girls were born, I stopped being silent. I was abhorred by the religious groups who professed to know all the answers and continually blamed those with my views for the ills of the planet. If they insisted on engaging in politics and influencing decisions that affect my children’s future, then there would be no hands off. The very core of their reasoning must be open to debate. Even so young, my girls knew that they would never hear any stories of myth from me. Even if religion

could provide some small comfort at times, I always believed it did more harm than good.

“What I do know is that it would be a shame to waste precious moments counting on another life while missing the beautiful one you already have,” I told them.

I let them know how much their grandmother loved them and about how thrilled she was when they were born. We talked about some of the good times we all had. Mom always made sure to bring the candies the girls liked when she came to see them in our home. She loved it even more when she had them for the day at her house. The way the girls described those days sounded as though they were full of thoughtful activities. Having had two boys, the girls were a whole new experience for her.

The girls never knew my father. He died just a month before Lainey was born and Kaela was too young then to remember him. I was relieved about that. Sarah and I would never have let the girls go to Mom’s house if my father was alive. Mom was crushed when Sarah left with the girls and she got to see them much less often. But I did my best to bring them by. At least they had their grandmother for the time that they did.

“She really loves you two so much,” I said.

Sarah pulled up and tapped the horn, so I helped pack up their things and gave them a hug.

“Girls, I love you both. I will send your love to Grandma Ladd. I am sorry you couldn’t visit with her today, but I didn’t want you to see her this ill. I’ll call you from there tomorrow, so you can talk with her.”

“I had a good time today. Thanks Dad,” Kaela said.

I walked them to the stairs and hugged them once more, lifting them up, and giving them a kiss. As they walked down to their mom, Lainey stopped on the stairs and turned to look at me.

“I’m sorry that Grandma is dying, Dad.”

“Me too, Lainey,” I said. “We will miss her.”

From the window, I watched them talking to Sarah as they were getting into the car. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but I guessed it would be about their Grandma Ladd. I saw Sarah get out and come around to take their shoes. She noticed they were still dirty from the hike and tapped them together to shake off the dirt before placing them in the trunk. As they pulled away from the curb, I saw Lainey turn and look up. When she saw me she waved goodbye and kept looking as Sarah drove away.

# THE ROOM

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No matter how hard we try, life doesn't always go as we plan. Just as Harry begins to pick up the pieces of his life, emotions once hidden away must be dealt with as old wounds are exposed. Although he finally meets a woman who understands and truly loves him, the cosmos takes a different path. He discovers that what goes wrong in life sometimes matters as much as what goes right.

An existential view of life with an extraordinary twist...

Author Ray Melnik has written lyrics, poetry, articles about audio engineering, home technology and other technologies. "The Room" is Ray Melnik's premier novel.



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