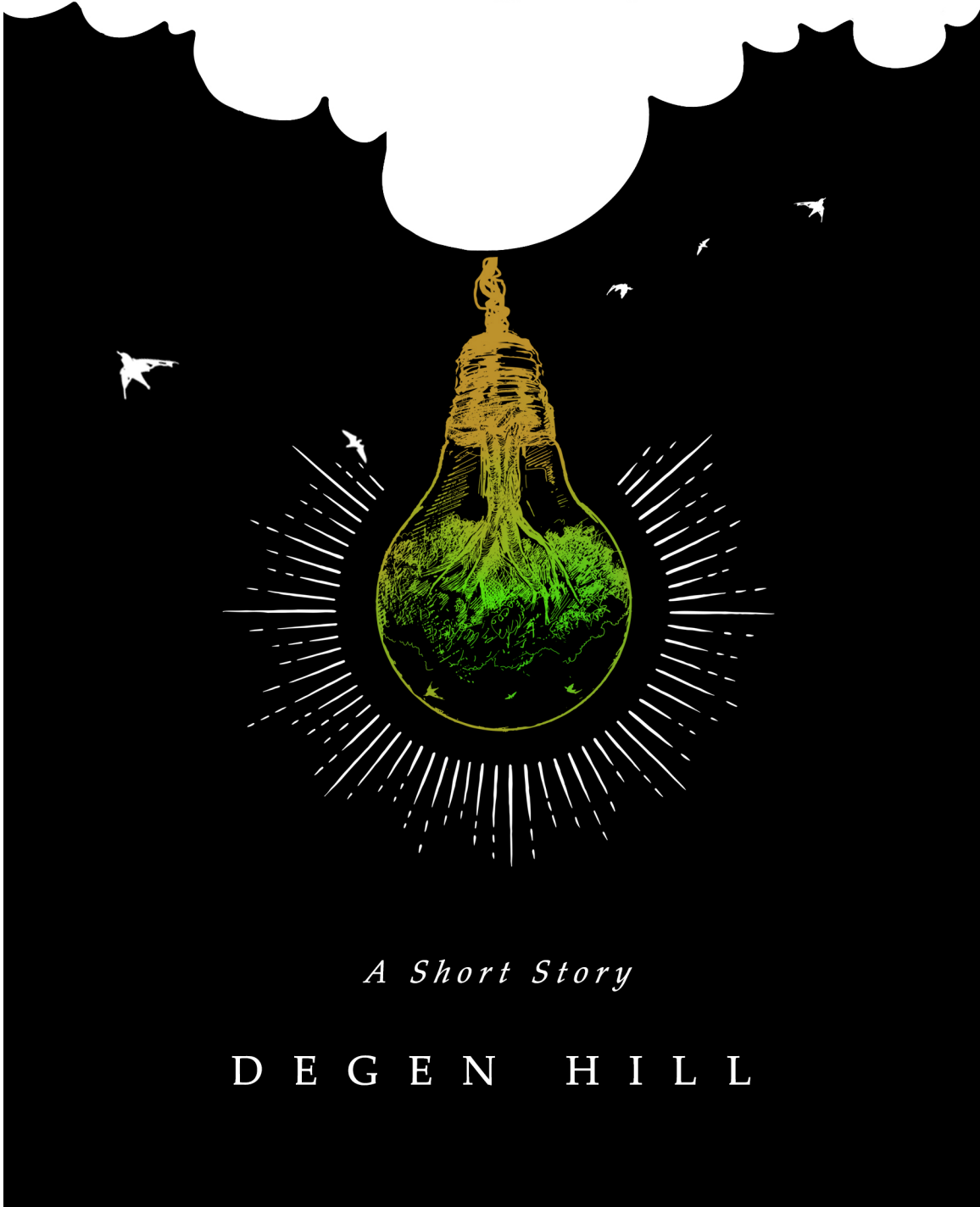


THE PLACE BEYOND



A Short Story

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About 800 words

The Place Beyond

By Degen Hill

"There's gotta be something else, you know, like something after we die."

"Dave, not this again..."

"You can't tell me you haven't thought about it. Life after death. Everyone thinks about it at some point or another."

"Can we just drop this?"

"What if we get reincarnated? You know, like come back as something else? That would be exciting."

"Even if that were true, you'd have no memory of your past life, so this version of you who thinks it's exciting wouldn't even be able to appreciate that you're living a new life."

"Maybe, but the idea of it is pretty wild. Reincarnation, a new life, maybe as a dog. I'd love to be reincarnated as a dog."

"I have nothing further to add to this conversation," said Frank, turning his head to look out the window.

"Or maybe we die, like, our physical being, but the soul lives on. Do you think there's a heaven or hell for us?"

"It doesn't matter to me either way."

"You're not concerned about the possibility of eternal damnation? Perpetually lost in a sea of souls, condemned to torture and pain for all eternity? Or what about heaven? Everything you could have ever wanted, reunited with your family and no pain or loss ever again."

"When I die, I die. That's it."

"So you think, in this great world of ours, with all its intricacies and miracles, that when we die, NOTHING happens? We're just dead, and that's it?"

"That's it."

"No place beyond this life? No great beyond? No final frontier?"

"None. And the final frontier is about space, not life after death."

"Well jeez, Frank, what's the point of even living if there's nothing to look forward to?"

"I didn't ask to come into this world, nor will I miss it when I'm gone," said Frank, now turning to look at Dave, hoping he would catch on to his lack of interest in the conversation and drop it.

"I wonder who, or what, determines exactly if I've lived a good life, you know? Like, who decides if I go to heaven or hell? Is there a checklist of all the good and bad I've done? And are certain things worth more points? I wonder what my score is..."

"Believe me, it doesn't matter. And I don't think anyone is keeping track of your 'score'."

"That's sad, Frank. You've got to believe in something to make this short life here on earth mean something. What about your family and everyone who came before you? Are they also just dead, with no chance to ever reunite with them?"

"That about sums it up."

"No way. I refuse to accept the idea that there isn't at least *something* after we die. Maybe we'll come back as ghosts to haunt this world forever, or perhaps just until we fulfill something that we didn't have the chance to do when we were alive."

"Heck, maybe we'll come back as zombies..."

"Yes, Frank! That's a possibility too, now you're thinking! That'd be pretty crazy, right? Can you imagine being a zombie? I wonder if we'd be hungry for brains, eternally roaming the earth with no thoughts of our own, yet somehow alive."

"I was joking..."

"Some people say Jesus is a zombie. And look at him, revered and worshiped around the world. Maybe someday, people will build huge temples and shrines in our names, praying to us as gone but not forgotten deities. Books written in our memories and a special day commemorating our lives when people bow down and pray to us."

"That's unlikely," said Frank, letting his eyes now wander over to the unwashed dishes in the sink.

"But it's possible. You never know, and that's what makes life so fascinating, the idea that no one can confirm what happens when you die. I mean, it's not like someone died and then came back and told us all about it. It's mysterious, isn't it? Personally, I think what happens is..."

The buzzing in the kitchen had reached a dull roar, so much so that Mrs. Peterson had reached for her pink fly swatter and brought it crashing down onto the counter, only managing to squash one of the flies while the other took off. Frank flew to the top edge of the dusty refrigerator and watched as Dave fell to the floor, already dead before he hit the linoleum. Mrs. Peterson, with her pink curlers and floral bathrobe, took another puff of her cigarette and did a slow scan of the kitchen, hoping to find the remaining fly, but soon gave up and retired to the

living room and her faded green sofa. Frank looked down at Dave and hoped that his death had given him the answers he had been searching for, while also taking solace in the fact that if not, well, no one else had them either.