

HEAVEN

By Ellen Luborsky, PhD

“I’m going to Heaven,” Tanya announced. “Do you want to come?”

I did.

A slight four year old with dark curls, she peered at me from in between the wooden slats of the climbing gym.

Tanya’s teacher had just been telling me how worried she was about her.

“All she wants to do is talk about death. She’s obsessed! At Circle Time, I try not to call on her, because she’ll start.”

“What does she say?”

“She starts talking about people who died. Like her brother, and she never even had a brother!”

The teacher had already brought it up with Tanya’s parents, but they had no idea where this was coming from. No one they knew had died, except for the cat, and that was so long ago that she forgot about it already. And they did not allow her to watch any kind of violence on television.

“Hurry up, cause it’s going to close soon!”

Our route to Heaven began at the climbing gym and took us across the playground: past the basketball hoop, around the sandbox, and in between the bikes.

While we walked, Tanya told me about Heaven. Heaven had her brothers, eight brothers, grape popsicles, her cat, her dogs, Candyland, and gray mice.

Lunchtime interrupted our journey.

The next time I came to the playground, we went to work. We took pretty much the same route as we'd taken to Heaven, but this time we collected leaves to use in our work. Tanya led the way to a large rock that served as our office, and we piled it with leaves.

As she "did work" by writing on leaves with her finger, I took a mental journey back to my office, to consider the meanings of our destinations. Work is where her parents go when they leave in the morning, and Heaven is where her cat went. Maybe we were investigating where they all go when they vanish.

Our next excursion was a business trip, along the same path as we'd taken to Heaven and work, but this time she produced an (invisible) map. I was glad to have such a well-prepared companion.

"Tinkerbelle's in my pocket," Tanya told me after we had walked for a while. She took out an imaginary Tinkerbelle, and we admired the bright light in the palm of her hand. Tinkerbelle stayed in her closet at night, she explained, but when Mommy went on a business trip, Tinkerbelle came all the way into the bedroom.

An invisible night-light, I thought, as we looked at Tink together. Or, an illuminated *transitional object*, Donald Winnicott's term for the blanket or stuffed animal that toddlers like to hold. Somewhere between teddy bear and memory, Tanya had found a way to feel her mother's presence while she was gone.

"It must feel good to have Tinkerbelle with you when Mommy is away," I ventured.

Tanya tilted her head, and looked up at me. "Let's pretend you're my

mommy and I'm a little girl."

I smiled acceptance, and she took my hand.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Home."

Tanya led me to the sandbox, where she began to dig our house, a sand pit covered by some thin sticks. A boy from her class stopped by, and helped her dig.

On the way back to the school, she turned toward me.

"I have a cat who died," she said softly.

"A cat who died," I echoed. "That's sad."

Tanya stayed silent for a moment. "I can't see her anymore."

I paused while we shared a gaze. "What did she look like?"

"She looked like you."

I could feel the sun warming a colorless sky. How did I get to be feline?

My own childhood companion was a black cat. I used to watch him disappear into my closet, and come out all dusty, with yellower eyes and ears scuffed back. He'd been to Catland, I imagined, and traded places with another cat.

Tanya was taking me back.

It was a pretty good deal for both of us. I got to travel into childhood, and she got my company for what had been a solitary quest. Where do animals (and people) go when they vanish?

In the magic of being four, you can bounce back from being dead and come alive again. So how could she understand the difference between dead

and gone? Her mother went on business trips, while Tanya kept her place through the light of imagination. But no matter how much time she spent imagining up the dead, her cat never returned.

After we shared the journey to Heaven, work, and home, Tanya faced the truth.

"I have a cat who died." Her soft voice still echoed.

So that's how I became feline. Her cat kept her company too.