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## Here In The Afterlife

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HERE IN THE AFTERLIFE

It's honestly a wonder that anything at all happens here in the afterlife.

I say that not only as a Pleasantly Surprised Atheist, but also because of the truly staggering bureaucracy of all of human history's souls learning to coexist, with more arriving every day than the day before.

Here's my experience with how everything works here. On Monday, I saw your hand tremble as you sold the soccer tickets we'd bought together months ago to someone outside the stadium. When I saw that Jane and Mark were going to come over to watch the game at home with you, I got an idea. I rushed over to the Sports Miracles department and grabbed one of the forms. I crafted a perfect goal: Tie game, in stoppage time. A cross from the far left side of the field. Here comes the striker, leaping up, higher than the defender. The goalie's outstretched hand is going to get the ball first, but wait! There's some bend to the kick, and no, no way, the striker's able to head the ball down and past the goalie, and it goes in!

That was the plan, anyway. I filled out the form and craned my neck to take in the line, which wrapped around the Sports Miracles building. I sighed and shuffled to the back. The woman in front of me asked which team I was for. When I told her, she shook her head. "I grew up watching the other team," she said. "I guess our miracle requests cancel each other out."

Then, the man in front of her heard us and joined in. "I'm actually for the same team as you," he told me, "but I want the team to earn the victory all by themselves. I'm here to ask for no miracles to happen."

I sighed. No wonder these things happen so rarely. I walked back to the Observing Area with my head and shoulders down and arrived just in time to see you with our friends and the game on. Your eyes were moist and you barely moved or spoke the whole time. That was Monday.

On Tuesday, when the beautiful little freckles underneath your eyes tilted downward as you got ready for work, my heart sank. But after the previous day's debacle, I had no idea what I could do.

There's the Museary, where I could go to request that the author you like finally gets that next book out in their series, or that the movie version actually does a good job. But I hear that place is really snobby, and they only approve the most subtle of miracles, and almost never to the same artist twice.

There's, of course, the Politics Department, but that is crawling with those annoying purists, like that guy from the sports line, and

they're always saying things like "powerful movements only develop in the absence of miracles." Not helping.

Everywhere I turned, there was gridlock, delays, or committees. I had to find something I could do to make you happy. I finally spotted a building with a relatively small crowd around it, and went in without reading the sign.

Colorful maps swirled on the walls of the huge lobby. Countless globes slowly turned above my head, distracting me until I bumped into someone standing in the only long line in the building, which led into the Large Weather Events Office. I wasn't going to wait in that.

Up on a balcony above, I spotted a door with just a few people waiting outside. I climbed the stairs, got in line, and only a few minutes later, success! My request to the Tiny Weather Moments Office was in.

As I left the office, I pictured your smiling face when the early autumn breeze I requested would rustle the leaves in the front yard outside your house, carrying the smell of apples, and cooling your ears in the same way the air did every fall growing up.

But later that day, when the big moment finally came, and the breeze met your face, you were still... hardened. Your eyes froze, and your breath quivered. You shook even though it was warm out.

I went back to the Tiny Weather Moments Office on Wednesday, searching my mind to try and cook up something better this time. But as I clicked my pen above the clipboard over and over, what I'd seen the day before finally caught up with me. I have no idea if any of the requests I put in will actually make you happy. I hope they do. But if they don't, I get it.

So tomorrow, there's supposed to be a sunbeam reflecting off a perfect, crunchy oak leaf on the driveway as your bicycle tire rolls over it. And the day after that, if they don't mess this one up, there should be a blended purple and pink sunset outside the window and between the trees, when you need a distraction from doing your taxes. You're supposed to be able to hear the frogs and the nearby creek at that same time, but the person in the office was kind of inattentive when I'd told him that part, and I couldn't tell if he really got it or not.

But these moments don't belong to me. Whatever you do with any of them, is all yours.

MATT LUEDKE