

FOREWORD BY JOHN BURKE

What I Saw in
Heaven

THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY
OF THE DAY I DIED, MET JESUS,
AND
RETURNED TO LIFE A NEW PERSON

HEIDI BARR

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Heidi Barr, *What I Saw in Heaven*

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This book is dedicated to my mother.
Good, bad, indifferent—she was my mother,
and in her own way she loved me.
She's with the angels. I miss her.

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Foreword

It was March 2016, and I had just been interviewed on a major New York network news program about my book *Imagine Heaven: Near-Death Experiences, God's Promises, and the Exhilarating Future That Awaits You*. I had researched well over one thousand cases of near-death experiences (NDEs). On the show, I explained how the commonalities I found from cases around the world point to the expectation of heaven we see in the Bible. That night I got this email from a nurse in California:

I've never before heard of you or your book. I'm Jewish, a registered nurse. I was raised by an atheist and an agnostic, yet at the age of 16 I died and experienced a full-blown NDE. I'm a weird Jew. Don't attend the synagogue. Absolutely believe in God, and I know the person with me during my NDE was Jesus or Yeshua. Very strange. Thanks for your time.

Heidi

Wow! I immediately emailed Heidi back, wanting to hear more of her fascinating story. I was curious: How did she know he was Jesus, and why Jesus if she was raised Jewish with atheist parents? Heidi and I began emailing and talking about her experience, which is one of the most intriguing and evidential ones I've heard.

Heidi's experience of God and of the life to come is not at all what she would have expected, yet it aligns with the thousands of accounts I've studied, and it confirms God's identity as revealed to the Jewish prophets and through Jesus. Heidi came face-to-face with the love, compassion, forgiveness, and inexpressible joy of God. Her story reveals both expected and unexpected aspects of God's winsome character. Like the fact that a sixteen-year-old girl who loved racing across an open meadow bareback on a horse would say that Jesus took her on the wildest ride of her life—more fun than she's ever had.

But Heidi's amazing story is about much more than her heavenly journey. It's about life, family struggles, and redemption by God's amazing guidance and grace. Heidi has been through hell on earth, yet through the many trials and tribulations, she came out the other side a better person. Her story intersects with so many stories of people who have been abused, betrayed, or just beaten up by an evil world and wonder, *Where is God? Is he there? Does he even care?* If you've ever asked those questions or struggled with the evils of this world, Heidi's story will give you hope and a new perspective that will help you to overcome, just as she learned to do. This is a story of life's harsh realities overtaken by heaven's brilliant love and redemption.

Over the past eight years, Heidi has become a good friend to me and my wife, Kathy. I've had many conversations with her since that first email in 2016. I've interviewed her multiple times about her story, and I can tell you, she's the real deal. She's an honest, kind, unpretentious person who loves God and has dedicated her life to serving others as a hospice nurse. She's Jewish, yet she believes in Jesus as her Lord and Messiah because she met him face-to-face when she died. I find it amazing that as a sixteen-year-old with no understanding of God's nature, she describes meeting the triune God of the Bible.

After her hospitalization, Heidi kept her near-death experience to herself. This is common, as the experience is sacred and hard to describe. Imagine trying to describe a three-dimensional world of color to two-dimensional people living in a black-and-white world. That's what I'm convinced people having NDEs are forced to do. They say their experience was more real than this world because it was an experience of more dimensions, sights, sounds, and senses than we have on planet earth. As Heidi wrote to me in a later email,

I saw flowers and grass—the most vibrant colors—colors we can't even imagine. All were lit from within, glowing with life. And it struck me at the time that even on the most beautiful day here on earth, what we see is a mere reflection of what exists in heaven.

Heidi also had a lot to lose by talking about her near-death experience. Writing about meeting Jesus could mean losing many of her family members and longtime friends.

She has no reason, no motive, to publish this wild story other than that it's true, and she knows God wants her to tell others the truth about him! I'm so glad she has finally published her story because I know it will be a catalyst that God uses to change many lives. It has changed my life for the better, and I'm confident it will do the same for you.

John Burke, pastor and *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Imagine Heaven*
and *Imagine the God of Heaven*

The Accident

I remember many things about the day I died.

My sixteenth birthday had come and gone. I now had my driver's license. It was a weekday, but for some reason, we were out of school. Was it Easter? A teacher's workshop day? I honestly can't pinpoint the date. I know it was before Shavuot, the giving of the Torah—or, as it's known to Christians, Pentecost.

What I do remember is that it was a good day to ride my horse. No rain had been forecast. The weather was decent, the day reasonably warm, partly cloudy. Warmer days were on the way, but we had yet to feel the humidity of an Iowa summer. That would arrive soon, but not today. The wind blew large, fluffy white clouds across a deep blue April sky. All was calm, which was a little unusual in my life. For once, I expected the day to be drama free.

I anticipated nothing out of the ordinary, nothing but a fun, old-fashioned ride on my horse at Shady Lane Ranch. Since my sisters wanted to come as well, and my mother had no plans, she was quite willing to let me borrow the big green 1968 Oldsmobile Delta 88.

Usually on days like this, I would ride with my friend Meryl. Her father had bought her a horse after I'd gotten mine. He'd hoped caring for a horse would be a good outlet for Meryl. She hung out with the same crowd I did, and we'd both had some issues with drugs. She'd experimented a lot more than me, but we never used drugs when we were riding. (At least, I never did.) That day, Meryl was sick with a bad cold, so she declined my offer of a lift out to the ranch. No big deal. Riding by myself was just fine.

As I led my quarter horse, Heather, in from the paddock, I couldn't help but overhear a loud argument in the barn. A woman who owned a gray Arabian mare was arguing with her husband about whether he could ride the horse. I very much doubted he could. The Arabian was ill-behaved under the best of circumstances, and the woman had always had a difficult time controlling her. She'd managed so far, but I wasn't a fan of the mare, and I tended to avoid the pair when they were out on the narrow, thickly forested trails.

Much of the time, Meryl and I rode off the ranch, taking the backcountry roads to Big Lake Park, where we would spend hours swimming with our horses. Or we'd ride a few miles along the side of the county highway, back into Council Bluffs, to buy our horses ice cream cones at one of the local hangouts, Christy Creme Drive-In. We'd ride

our horses right up to the window to order. Heather loved vanilla soft-serve ice cream. She especially liked to crunch the cone after she'd licked all the ice cream out of it.

This day, since my sisters had come with me and were waiting, and I was riding alone, I was content to stay on the ranch proper. Charlie, the owner of Shady Lane Ranch, owned several hundred oak tree-covered acres set back into the hills of Pottawattamie County. The ranch itself is still open. I don't know who owns it now. Perhaps Charlie is still alive or his son has kept it going.

I ignored the argument and led Heather through the barn to the hitching post outside, where I brushed her and put on her hackamore. I kept her halter on and knotted the lead rope around her neck. Since I didn't have a saddle and I wasn't the best jumper, I used the fence as a mounting block to climb onto her back. I headed off into the hills, leaving my sisters behind.

Both of my sisters liked to hang out at the ranch. Shady Lane was a fun place. Usually everyone was relaxed and happy. But then, hanging out with horses tends to make one relaxed and happy. My youngest sister often played with the miniature horses, a paint mare and her white colt. Although my middle sister loved horses, she was allergic to them, so when I rode off, she remained in the Oldsmobile.

I headed up the main trail and disappeared into my own private world for an hour, communing with Heather, communing with nature, and enjoying the day. I saw no one else on my ride aside from the bright red cardinals—my favorite bird—darting from tree to tree, the squawking blue jays, the diligent robins on the hunt for worms, and

the black squirrels native to that part of Iowa. This was the best, the one thing I loved—to be alone with my horse.

I felt at peace.

I felt so peaceful that although I knew my sisters were probably getting bored, I didn't rush back. Heather and I made our way toward the trail down to the barn, but I turned off to the side so I could sit on her back a little longer. I was reluctant to leave her and return home. Heather calmed me. Being on her back, the rhythm of riding, gave me both a sense of peace and a feeling of exhilaration. Nothing compared to the joy I experienced on the back of a horse, especially when Heather and I were galloping full speed across an open meadow.

I was perhaps a few hundred yards from the side of the barn, sitting quietly on my horse, when I saw my sisters farther down the hill. My middle sister appeared to be reading in the car. My youngest sister stood near the miniature horses, petting the young colt. When I heard pounding hoofbeats coming from farther up the trail, I knew immediately who it was and what that meant. The man had won the argument. He'd taken out the ill-tempered Arabian mare, and now he was out of control—she was racing at breakneck speed toward the barn.

Every stable I've been associated with has many safety rules, including no running back to the barn. It makes for barn-sour horses and dangerous situations. Charlie had that hard-and-fast rule at Shady Lane, but in this case, it was meaningless.

I didn't have a whole lot of time to react, and I didn't know what to do. I had nowhere to go, no way to get my horse clear. Heather and I were at the end of a trail. We

stood essentially at a dead end. Moving would put me directly in the man's path.

The hoofbeats grew louder. The horse was getting closer. I could see them now, the Arabian and the man flapping on her back. He'd dropped the reins and had a death grip on the saddle horn.

I had the presence of mind to think, *I hope she doesn't step on her reins. She'll flip and dump the man, and they might both get badly injured.*

My next thought was about myself. *Okay, if I stay on Heather, the mare will see her standing still and she'll calm down.*

But she didn't. She kept coming.

Okay, she'll avoid me and make her way to the barn.

But she didn't. She came right at us.

Maybe I should dismount. But I was concerned I would be injured if both horses got tangled up.

Heather began to get nervous; she danced around. I attempted to keep her calm and under control, but we had very little room to maneuver, no place to get out of the way.

Still that horse kept coming. In hindsight, I should have dismounted and let Heather go, but my thoughts were a jumble. I was afraid the Arabian mare would trample me. It was a very real possibility. I reasoned I might be safer on Heather's back.

That Arabian galloped right at us. She barely missed us, almost clipping us as she raced past. I was aware enough to know she came within an inch or two of Heather's rump.

At that moment Heather reared up. I dropped the reins, leaned forward, and grabbed her chestnut mane, gripping

it with both hands. Heather came back down, then reared up again. This time either one or both of her back feet slid off the narrow, sloping trail. She flipped over backward, falling downhill and across my body, crushing me.

The instant Heather's back fell across my chest, I died.