

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Mitch Albom

Author of
Tuesdays with Morrie



the five people
you meet in heaven

藏書章

The Five People
You Meet in Heaven



Mitch Albom

 HYPERION

NEW YORK

YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU

Copyright 1913 (Renewed) Broadway Music Corp, Edwin H. Morris Co., Redwood Music Ltd. All rights on behalf of Broadway Music Corp administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square, Nashville, TN 37203. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Copyright © 2003 Mitch Albom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address: Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023-6298.

International Mass Market ISBN 1-4013-9803-0

Hyperion books are available for special promotions and premiums. For details contact Michael Rentas, Manager, Inventory and Premium Sales, Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, 11th floor, New York, New York 10023-6298, or call 212-456-0133.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

ALSO BY MITCH ALBOM

Tuesdays with Morrie

Fab Five

Bo

Live Albom

Live Albom II

Live Albom III

Live Albom IV

This book is dedicated to Edward Beitchman, my beloved uncle, who gave me my first concept of heaven. Every year, around the Thanksgiving table, he spoke of a night in the hospital when he awoke to see the souls of his departed loved ones sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for him. I never forgot that story. And I never forgot him.

Everyone has an idea of heaven, as do most religions, and they should all be respected. The version represented here is only a guess, a wish, in some ways, that my uncle, and others like him—people who felt unimportant here on earth—realize, finally, how much they mattered and how they were loved.

**The Five People
You Meet in Heaven**

The End



*T*HIS IS A STORY ABOUT A MAN named Eddie and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun. It might seem strange to start a story with an ending. But all endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time.

THE LAST HOUR of Eddie's life was spent, like most of the others, at Ruby Pier, an amusement park by a great gray ocean. The park had the usual attractions, a boardwalk, a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, bumper cars, a taffy stand, and an arcade where you could shoot streams of water into a clown's mouth. It also had a big new ride called Freddy's Free Fall, and this would be where Eddie would be killed, in an accident that would make newspapers around the state.

☺AT THE TIME of his death, Eddie was a squat, white-haired old man, with a short neck, a barrel chest, thick forearms, and a faded army tattoo on his right shoulder. His legs were thin and veined now, and his left knee, wounded in the war, was ruined by arthritis. He used a cane to get around. His face was broad and craggy from the sun, with salty whiskers and a lower jaw that protruded slightly, making him look prouder than he felt. He kept a cigarette behind his left ear and a ring of keys hooked to his belt. He wore rubber-soled shoes. He wore an old linen cap. His pale brown uniform suggested a workingman, and a workingman he was.

☺EDDIE'S JOB WAS "maintaining" the rides, which really meant keeping them safe. Every afternoon, he walked the park, checking on each attraction, from the Tilt-A-Whirl to the Pipeline Plunge. He looked for broken boards, loose bolts, worn-out steel. Sometimes he would stop, his eyes glazing over, and people walking past thought something was wrong. But he was listening, that's all. After all these years he could *hear* trouble, he said, in the spits and stutters and thrumming of the equipment.

☺WITH 50 MINUTES left on earth, Eddie took his last walk along Ruby Pier. He passed an elderly couple.

"Folks," he mumbled, touching his cap.

They nodded politely. Customers knew Eddie. At least the regular ones did. They saw him summer after summer,

one of those faces you associate with a place. His work shirt had a patch on the chest that read EDDIE above the word MAINTENANCE, and sometimes they would say, "Hiya, Eddie Maintenance," although he never thought that was funny.

Today, it so happened, was Eddie's birthday, his 83rd. A doctor, last week, had told him he had shingles. Shingles? Eddie didn't even know what they were. Once, he had been strong enough to lift a carousel horse in each arm. That was a long time ago.

~"EDDIE!" . . . "TAKE ME, Eddie!" . . . "Take me!"

Forty minutes until his death. Eddie made his way to the front of the roller coaster line. He rode every attraction at least once a week, to be certain the brakes and steering were solid. Today was coaster day—the "Ghoster Coaster" they called this one—and the kids who knew Eddie yelled to get in the cart with him.

Children liked Eddie. Not teenagers. Teenagers gave him headaches. Over the years, Eddie figured he'd seen every sort of do-nothing, snarl-at-you teenager there was. But children were different. Children looked at Eddie—who, with his protruding lower jaw, always seemed to be grinning, like a dolphin—and they trusted him. They drew in like cold hands to a fire. They hugged his leg. They played with his keys. Eddie mostly grunted, never saying much. He figured it was because he didn't say much that they liked him.

Now Eddie tapped two little boys with backward baseball caps. They raced to the cart and tumbled in. Eddie handed his cane to the ride attendant and slowly lowered himself between the two.

"Here we go. . . . *Here we go!* . . ." one boy squealed, as the other pulled Eddie's arm around his shoulder. Eddie lowered the lap bar and *clack-clack-clack*, up they went.

☞ A STORY WENT around about Eddie. When he was a boy, growing up by this very same pier, he got in an alley fight. Five kids from Pitkin Avenue had cornered his brother, Joe, and were about to give him a beating. Eddie was a block away, on a stoop, eating a sandwich. He heard his brother scream. He ran to the alley, grabbed a garbage can lid, and sent two boys to the hospital.

After that, Joe didn't talk to him for months. He was ashamed. Joe was the oldest, the firstborn, but it was Eddie who did the fighting.

☞ "CAN WE GO again, Eddie? *Please?*"

Thirty-four minutes to live. Eddie lifted the lap bar, gave each boy a sucking candy, retrieved his cane, then limped to the maintenance shop to cool down from the summer heat. Had he known his death was imminent, he might have gone somewhere else. Instead, he did what we all do. He went about his dull routine as if all the days in the world were still to come.

One of the shop workers, a lanky, bony-cheeked young man named Dominguez, was by the solvent sink, wiping grease off a wheel.

"Yo, Eddie," he said.

"Dom," Eddie said.

The shop smelled like sawdust. It was dark and cramped with a low ceiling and pegboard walls that held drills and saws and hammers. Skeleton parts of fun park rides were everywhere: compressors, engines, belts, lightbulbs, the top of a pirate's head. Stacked against one wall were coffee cans of nails and screws, and stacked against another wall were endless tubs of grease.

Greasing a track, Eddie would say, required no more brains than washing a dish; the only difference was you got dirtier as you did it, not cleaner. And that was the sort of work that Eddie did: spread grease, adjusted brakes, tightened bolts, checked electrical panels. Many times he had longed to leave this place, find different work, build another kind of life. But the war came. His plans never worked out. In time, he found himself graying and wearing looser pants and in a state of weary acceptance, that this was who he was and who he would always be, a man with sand in his shoes in a world of mechanical laughter and grilled frankfurters. Like his father before him, like the patch on his shirt, Eddie was maintenance—the head of maintenance—or as the kids sometimes called him, "the ride man at Ruby Pier."

THIRTY MINUTES LEFT.

"Hey, happy birthday, I hear," Dominguez said.

Eddie grunted.

"No party or nothing?"

Eddie looked at him as if he were crazy. For a moment he thought how strange it was to be growing old in a place that smelled of cotton candy.

"Well, remember, Eddie, I'm off next week, starting Monday. Going to Mexico."

Eddie nodded, and Dominguez did a little dance.

"Me and Theresa. Gonna see the whole family. Par-r-r-ty."

He stopped dancing when he noticed Eddie staring.

"You ever been?" Dominguez said.

"Been?"

"To Mexico?"

Eddie exhaled through his nose. "Kid, I never been anywhere I wasn't shipped to with a rifle."

He watched Dominguez return to the sink. He thought for a moment. Then he took a small wad of bills from his pocket and removed the only twenties he had, two of them. He held them out.

"Get your wife something nice," Eddie said.

Dominguez regarded the money, broke into a huge smile, and said, "C'mon, man. You sure?"

Eddie pushed the money into Dominguez's palm. Then he walked out back to the storage area. A small "fishing

hole" had been cut into the boardwalk planks years ago, and Eddie lifted the plastic cap. He tugged on a nylon line that dropped 80 feet to the sea. A piece of bologna was still attached.

"We catch anything?" Dominguez yelled. "Tell me we caught something!"

Eddie wondered how the guy could be so optimistic. There was never anything on that line.

"One day," Dominguez yelled, "we're gonna get a halibut!"

"Yep," Eddie mumbled, although he knew you could never pull a fish that big through a hole that small.

⊙TWENTY-SIX MINUTES to live. Eddie crossed the boardwalk to the south end. Business was slow. The girl behind the taffy counter was leaning on her elbows, popping her gum.

Once, Ruby Pier was *the* place to go in the summer. It had elephants and fireworks and marathon dance contests. But people didn't go to ocean piers much anymore; they went to theme parks where you paid \$75 a ticket and had your photo taken with a giant furry character.

Eddie limped past the bumper cars and fixed his eyes on a group of teenagers leaning over the railing. *Great*, he told himself. *Just what I need.*

"Off," Eddie said, tapping the railing with his cane. "C'mon. It's not safe."

The teens glared at him. The car poles sizzled with electricity, *zzzap zzzap* sounds.

"It's not safe," Eddie repeated.

The teens looked at each other. One kid, who wore a streak of orange in his hair, sneered at Eddie, then stepped onto the middle rail.

"Come on, dudes, hit me!" he yelled, waving at the young drivers. "Hit m—"

Eddie whacked the railing so hard with his cane he almost snapped it in two. "MOVE IT!"

The teens ran away.

◊ANOTHER STORY WENT around about Eddie. As a soldier, he had engaged in combat numerous times. He'd been brave. Even won a medal. But toward the end of his service, he got into a fight with one of his own men. That's how Eddie was wounded. No one knew what happened to the other guy.

No one asked.

◊WITH 19 MINUTES left on earth, Eddie sat for the last time, in an old aluminum beach chair. His short, muscled arms folded like a seal's flippers across his chest. His legs were red from the sun, and his left knee still showed scars. In truth, much of Eddie's body suggested a survived encounter. His fingers were bent at awkward angles, thanks to numerous fractures from assorted machinery. His nose had been broken several times in what he called

"saloon fights." His broadly jawed face might have been good-looking once, the way a prizefighter might have looked before he took too many punches.

Now Eddie just looked tired. This was his regular spot on the Ruby Pier boardwalk, behind the Jackrabbit ride, which in the 1980s was the Thunderbolt, which in the 1970s was the Steel Eel, which in the 1960s was the Lollipop Swings, which in the 1950s was Laff In The Dark, and which before that was the Stardust Band Shell.

Which was where Eddie met Marguerite.

☞EVERY LIFE HAS one true-love snapshot. For Eddie, it came on a warm September night after a thunderstorm, when the boardwalk was spongy with water. She wore a yellow cotton dress, with a pink barrette in her hair. Eddie didn't say much. He was so nervous he felt as if his tongue were glued to his teeth. They danced to the music of a big band, Long Legs Delaney and his Everglades Orchestra. He bought her a lemon fizz. She said she had to go before her parents got angry. But as she walked away, she turned and waved.

That was the snapshot. For the rest of his life, whenever he thought of Marguerite, Eddie would see that moment, her waving over her shoulder, her dark hair falling over one eye, and he would feel the same arterial burst of love.

That night he came home and woke his older brother. He told him he'd met the girl he was going to marry.

"Go to sleep, Eddie," his brother groaned.

Whrrrrsssh. A wave broke on the beach. Eddie coughed up something he did not want to see. He spat it away.

Whrrrrsssssh. He used to think a lot about Marguerite. Not so much now. She was like a wound beneath an old bandage, and he had grown more used to the bandage.

Whrrrrsssssh.

What was shingles?

Whrrrrsssssh.

Sixteen minutes to live.

NO STORY SITS by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, like stones beneath a river.

The end of Eddie's story was touched by another seemingly innocent story, months earlier—a cloudy night when a young man arrived at Ruby Pier with three of his friends.

The young man, whose name was Nicky, had just begun driving and was still not comfortable carrying a key chain. So he removed the single car key and put it in his jacket pocket, then tied the jacket around his waist.

For the next few hours, he and his friends rode all the fastest rides: the Flying Falcon, the Splashdown, Freddy's Free Fall, the Ghoster Coaster.

"Hands in the air!" one of them yelled.

They threw their hands in the air.

Later, when it was dark, they returned to the car lot,