

There's a Place: A thought-provoking and uplifting story that gracefully draws attention to the importance of end-of-life directives

Sharkie Zartman

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Zartman skillfully explores assisted suicide and the border between physical and spiritual reality.

A near-death experience leads to a murder charge in *There's a Place*, a provocative glimpse of one woman's perception of the afterlife. This potentially controversial short story about the topic of mercy killing makes a strong case for a person's right to die.

Dana Brown is a heroine with a powerful voice, but she is also a murderer, as revealed in a riveting opening that places the charged felon in the office of a psychiatrist. Presented in a straightforward manner, this exploration of a perceptive woman's moral crisis delves into issues faced by those with a loved one on life support. Such situations, common among accident victims and the elderly, usually leave little hope for recovery.

Dana relates her experiences to her doctor prior to her murder trial. In an approach that simultaneously enlightens and enrages—yes, there is a heaven, and no, murder is not legal—this brief journey into the psyche of a woman who has almost died will open the eyes of staunch supporters of maintaining life support while conveying a warning to those who wish to terminate patients who linger.

Drifting in a dreamlike limbo between a physical and a spiritual realm, Dana encounters a young man and forms a friendship. Then she returns to her body: "It felt like I was deep in the ocean, trying to swim up to the surface. I was no longer connected to life support, so I had to fight for every breath. I started to hear fleeting sounds and voices, and I began to feel sensations in my arms and legs. I still couldn't move, but I started to feel like I was coming back."

After recovering, she "meets" her ethereal companion, old and dying, in a hospital bed with his wife at his side. She illegally removes him from the life-support machines, yet the point behind this startling scenario is more complex. To what extent is the human soul able to communicate with another soul when both are nearly deceased?

A command of language, combined with the skill to implement a difficult concept, sets this work apart, but there is too much reliance on dialogue. The protagonist is developed only within the confines of a plot-driven story, leaving much in doubt about the deeper aspects of Dana's character. A beautiful cover featuring a multicolored forest with a couple loosely linking hands gets a high mark for eye-catching design. The material on the back cover, however, includes only an author bio and promotional quotes, with no reference to the story line itself.

Sharkie Zartman, a professor and radio host on health-related topics, has done an admirable job in this romantic tragedy—her fiction debut. No one will be able to put down this author's work, for the conclusion must be pursued.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (January 23, 2014)

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