

# ESCAPE FROM HEAVEN



**J. NEIL  
SCHULMAN**

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# Escape from Heaven

A novel by

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To My Father Who Art In Heaven  
And To My Family Who Art On Earth



## A Revelation

Everything is different than I thought.  
What I thought was my cage  
was the nest I'd built for myself.  
What I thought was my life  
was just my basic training.

We really don't know what's going on  
right next to us.  
The universe is so strange,  
so surprising,  
so dramatic.

Life can be exactly like  
the most exciting novel  
and for the writer,  
how could I not jump in  
to play one of the roles?

Shakespeare, after all,  
used to play his characters.

But it's different  
when your character suddenly is *You*,  
and you find out  
that you're not what you thought you were.

What had just been glimpses  
through a dark glass  
before  
became an open window  
for a few hours.

Do you know how long a few hours is  
and what you can see  
if you look around?  
I wanted a glimpse  
my curiosity was boundless  
and be careful what you pray for  
because the guy who answers  
“Thy will be done”  
has a real rough sense of humor.

The thing is, he climbed inside with me  
and let me share the joke.

Unbefuckingleivable.

The game's afoot!  
Heinlein was right.  
Yoda was right.

The universe is not what it seems  
and,  
the amazing thing is

Neither are You.

February 18, 1997



**Part 1**  
**A Call from God**



# Chapter One

There's an old saying that everybody wants to go to Heaven but nobody wants to die.

That's how it was for me, anyway.

I drove a Mercedes because I was told it was the safest car in a crash. And it was a smart choice. I died of something else.

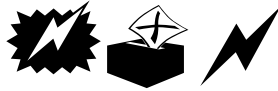
I owned a handgun so I wouldn't die at the hands of a burglar. I was right about that, too. The burglar who broke into my bedroom ran like hell when he saw the .45 Government Model I was pointing at him ... and I died of something else.

I quit smoking, did my best to keep my weight down and eat a low cholesterol diet, and practiced safe sex, because I didn't want to die of cancer, heart disease, emphysema or AIDS, and it paid off: I died of something else.

You see, that's the part they forget to mention. No matter what nasty ways of dying you avoid, there's always another one waiting for you. If one thing doesn't get you, another thing will. Everybody could have saved a lot of thought that went into bumper stickers and public service messages. All they would have had to say is, "Don't do that. Die of something else."

It would have saved me a lot of trouble, too. I was a coward most of my life because I was afraid of dying.

My story begins the day I died and went to Heaven.



It was a slow news day. Here in Los Angeles, no riots, no brushfires, no mudslides, no earthquakes, no celebrities being accused of child molesting, hit and run, wife-beating, trafficking in drugs, or murder. On the national and international scene, no terrorist attacks, no school yard shootings, no one holed up in a church surrounded by the Feds, no movie idol or politico getting caught with a prostitute, no husband looking for his johnson in the traffic island, no custody battles with a communist dictator acting in loco parentis.

The sort of day that strikes fear into the hearts of talk radio hosts like me.

Okay, I'm exaggerating. A little. Some of the best shows have been on slow days. I once heard Tom Leykis when he was on KFI, do a spellbinding three-hour monologue — no calls, only commercial breaks — just telling how he got into this business. Phil Hendrie is the radio equivalent of fantasy mud wrestling. But if you don't have that sort of talent for improv — and I don't — then you succeed or fail by the quality of calls you get.

Talk radio topics get divided between the social issues and the personal issues — the macro and the micro, as my old friend Dennis Prager calls it. As a general rule, people are more willing to talk about the personal issues with women hosts who put the word "doctor" before their first name. There have been exceptions — David Viscott, for example — but that usually requires diplomas I didn't have. Other talk

show hosts had no problem getting the phones filled with wives calling about their husband's cheating or gay men talking about their lovers dying of AIDS, but that wasn't the sort of listenership I tended to attract. My listeners wanted politics, current events, controversy. I wasn't pushing the outside of the outrageousness envelope, like Imus or Howard Stern. I was a pundit, a loudmouth. In other words, a Rush Limbaugh/Larry King wannabee, like almost everyone else in talk radio.

I could always get the phones lit up by talking about abortion, or gun control, or political correctness, or illegal immigration. But you don't want to hit on those too often. You just keep hearing the same arguments over and over, usually from the same callers. (And yes, I know it's you, even if you give my call screener a phony name and pretend you're on the other side so we put you on for the third time that month.)

There are certain subjects that will light up the board with callers you just don't want to go near. People who say they've been abducted by UFO's. Callers reincarnated from Marilyn Monroe — and not just women, either. People who say they've figured out the doughnut assassination, or claim they know where Bill Gates is. Mysterious deaths of pets owned by powerful politicians. Waco, 911 Tuesday revisionists, the International Space Station explosion, militias, endless conspiracy theories. Any of these calls you take, no matter how good your call screener, is walking through a minefield. And most of them are just unoriginal — bad radio. You really have to have the bizarre talents of an Art Bell to succeed in that sort of market.

I guess I was desperate. I was coming back from my first commercial break after the news, evening drive time and my second of four hours, Monday through Friday — and if you called me right now, you were not going to get a busy signal. A bad situation.

My engineer, Terry, had a cruel sense of humor. For the musical bump leading back into the show, I was hearing on my phones Frank Sinatra singing, “It’s quarter to three, there’s no one in the place ...except you and me...” I gave Terry the finger and he grinned from the other side of a plate-glass window.

I hit the cough button to clear my throat and came in a half beat too late: “You’re listening to 680 K-TALK, and I’m Duj ‘Rhymes-with-Judge’ Pepperman. The time is exactly 5:19. That little musical interlude is my engineer’s not-so-subtle way of telling me I’m dying. So for the rest of the hour let’s talk about death. The big D. Specifically, do you believe in life after death? Our number again is 1-888-55-K-TALK.”

My producer, Jules, rolled her eyes heavenward. She was the one who was going to have to talk to all the assorted loose nuts who were about to call in. But it didn’t take long for the video screen in front of me to start filling up with descriptions of new callers — and some of them were bound to be airworthy.

Okay, it was a cheap trick. You don’t keep evening drive time in a top-rated market unless you do sheer entertainment once in a while.

My video screen said that line two had a 38-year-old woman who was having an affair with a ghost. I hit the private intercom to Jules, behind the glass. When the intercom button is pressed, my broadcast

mike is cut off, allowing private conversations with my engineer or producer. “Line two,” I said to Jules. “Calling from the Twilight Zone?”

Jules shook her head and gave me a hand signal that I interpreted as meaning “sex”; Jules didn’t speak to me because she was screening another call.

I released the intercom and punched up line two. “Marie in Torrance,” I said, “you’re on K-TALK with Duj Pepperman.”

“Duj? I can’t believe I got through! I’ve been trying to call for weeks!”

I hit my intercom again and blew Terry a razzberry.

Releasing the intercom button again, I went back to my caller.

Marie’s “ghost” sounded suspiciously to me like Patrick Swayze in the movie of that title, but I didn’t say it. As long as she didn’t get hotter than PG-13 in her description of her romantic relations with him, I could let her go on about him a bit. Nobody was going to be punching up KRLA.

Listening with one ear, I went back to reading through my fan mail (okay, hate mail, too) and wondered why anyone in my job ever wanted to move over to TV. Sure, the money was better, but with the camera on you all the time you had to work for it. And wear a suit. And get recognized in restaurants, too. I had a monthly audience averaging a few million, yet nobody ever asked me for an autograph while I was standing at a urinal. What celebrity can ask for more than that?

I thanked Marie for her call, went to a traffic report, told Terry to cart the new Purple Web commercial,

then read it live while he recorded it for posterity, and returned to the live phones. My call monitor said line seven had “God” calling from “Paradise,” and the subject was “Personal proof that life-after-death exists.” I guessed that “God” was Jules’ abbreviating Godfrey, and while Paradise, California is a few hundred miles north of our usual daytime broadcast area, we get calls from all over from satellite radio and our web cast. “Godfrey from Paradise,” I said, “this is Duj Pepperman and you’re on 680 K-TALK.”

“Duj,” said a rich baritone voice. A good radio voice. *My* voice. “This is God, calling from Heaven. I can’t believe I got through. I’m one of your biggest fans!”

I immediately hit the “delete” button, but it didn’t work and the call continued, “Listen, Duj, would you mind dying tonight and meeting tomorrow morning at my palace in Heaven? We need to talk privately.”

I punched the intercom to Terry. “Kill line seven!” I hoped he could wipe the call before the four-second delay finished and the call went on the air.

There are words in life you never want to hear. A doctor pointing at an X-ray of your brain and saying “inoperable tumor.” Calling your business manager’s office and having a voice answer, “Frauds Detail, Detective Smith.” Any call from your child’s school that contains the word “accident.”

The words that I heard next fell into that category. It was my engineer saying, “Kill what? There was no one on seven.”

The primal part of me gasped. I looked at the display again. Now there was nothing on the monitor for line seven. The professional in me, trained never to



allow long silences on the air, took over immediately, and before releasing the intercom I said, “Not funny, Terry!”

Terry looked innocent and shrugged.

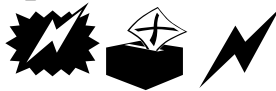
Jules looked at me blankly, and shrugged, too. It was obvious that neither of them had any idea what I was talking about.

I didn’t have time to worry about it now; the studio ON AIR light was still glowing.

I shrugged back. No reason to let my colleagues think I was losing it. “Modern technology strikes again,” I said lamely, and punched up line eight. “Bob in Long Beach, you’re on 680 K-TALK with Duj Pepperman.”

It was only after the show was over that it crossed my mind that I might have been the first talk show host in human history to get a live call-in from God.

And I had hung up on Him.



There’s something about having a few hundred thousand people listening to you that makes you feel invulnerable. Or maybe it’s that the studio feels like a fortress — the fences and guard posts you have to pass to get in, the labyrinth-like corridors, the enforced quietude of the studio when the ON AIR light is lit.

Glitches happen all the time in radio. If it was a little strange to be hearing a voice my engineer couldn’t and having a call disappear from the board, each had happened before. The only strange thing about it was both happening at the same time.

When I had a minute to think about it after I was off

the air, I decided it might be a high-tech prank of some sort — a computer virus maybe. I decided if it happened again, I'd let the station's management look into it.

The human mind is wonderful at not seeing the things it doesn't want to see. By the time I left the studio, I'd convinced myself everything was perfectly mundane. Usually you had to be that way, if you're going to get through the day. Just for example, you turned on the morning news and spent two seconds seriously wondering whether even a fraction of the terrible things you heard about could happen to you, you'd never have left the house. Not in L.A., anyway.

All things considered — as they say on the competition's show — it's amazing any of us got out of bed in the morning. Or could manage to fall asleep at night.

It's just a ten-minute drive from the K-TALK studios on Motor to my town home in Culver City. I drove into the complex through the main gate, past the empty guard shack. We used to spend a couple of thousand dollars per unit each year to keep a rotation of guards in that shack. It didn't stop a series of burglaries — and one rape — so there was a discussion at the Home Owners Association meeting. First, the board voted to demand the security firm to fire one guard, for sleeping on the job. Then a lot of ideas were batted around. One of the HOA's directors, an LAPD cop, came up with an idea that everybody laughed at until they realized he was serious. Then a few other people said, "What the hell, it couldn't hurt." The board passed a resolution, adopting it.

The next day, posted on the guard shack, was a paper target showing the outline of a man, courtesy of our cop-in-residence. The target is riddled with bullet holes — big ones. Nobody's been broken into since and we voted to get rid of the guards entirely.

When I got in I checked my phone messages and private email. The only message was a call from my ex-wife, the rock star, reminding me that the semester's USC tuition was due. Our daughter, Felony, wants to be the next Quentin Tarantino. Before you laugh at my daughter's given name, I have it on reliable authority that, nearing the end of Felony's freshman year, my 18-year-old daughter is still a virgin. I dialed my business manager's voice mail and played my ex's message into the cordless.

You might think that, being on radio, I never had to spend a night alone. You'd be wrong. The truth is, I just didn't get all that many opportunities to meet women. I didn't have a lot of guests on my show, so I was pretty well sitting alone in a glass-enclosed room four hours a day. Then I went home to an empty town home. I don't like parties or bars, I'm terrible with pick-up lines, and I think I'd have had better luck dating the first dozen single women in the phone book than the women I'd met through classified ads, the Internet, and dating services. I'd have had better luck meeting women if I'd been "recovering," but you had to be addicted to something, first. Take my word, it's not as easy for a radio talk-show host to get dates as it looked on *Frasier*.

I knew my freezer was full but I wasn't in the mood to defrost. I jumped back in my car and onto the Rich-

ard M. Nixon Freeway to Marina del Rey—all two miles of it. Fifteen minutes later I was chowing down on a tongue and Swiss cheese on rye at Jerry's Famous Deli.

That's where it happened. That's where I remembered that I was God.

## Chapter Two

Did you ever find a million dollars that you forgot you had?

That's about as close as I can come in describing how I felt at that moment.

It's not that anything around me changed physically at the moment of revelation. I was still sitting at a table in Jerry's Famous Deli. My sandwich was still in front of me. So was my glass of Dr. Brown's celery tonic and a dish of pickles.

What was different is that I wasn't Duj Pepperman anymore.

I looked around the restaurant, at the other people. I saw them for a moment on the surface; then it was as if my vision went around a corner and I was seeing them from another angle, not just on the outside, but from the inside out, and with perspective both on their past and future.

I looked at a waiter and I knew that his fondest wish at the moment was to get the part he was up for on *General Hospital*.

A young woman sitting at the next table had just been told by her doctor that she was pregnant ... but not by her husband, who was sitting at the table next to her, and had no idea. She wanted to keep the baby. So would he ... but only if he thought it was his.

I looked over to a trim middle-aged man with a shaved head, sitting a few tables away, an ex-army colonel who had served with distinction in the Gulf

War. He had been forcibly retired due to a sexual harassment scandal involving men under his command, but that he, personally, had nothing to do with. Now he was middle management of a small computer software company and was about to be laid off, although he didn't know it yet. His greatest wish was just one more mission where he could make a difference.

Across from me, at another table, was a short curly-haired man who had been a successful writer of science-fiction paperbacks—mostly media tie-ins. The book contracts had dried up and he was now working as a technical writer. He had completed an original, science-fiction novel with an epic theme that he hoped would be his break into hardcover publication and serious reviews, but so far no one would touch it and it was breaking his heart.

The TV over the bar had CNN on. A prominent U.S. senator was being interviewed about a bill she had introduced for a comprehensive national health plan. She should have been focusing instead on her own health; she was addicted to both amphetamines and barbiturates that she used to mask the pain of her husband's serial adultery. She had shut down sexually, converted her libido into power lust, and covered it all with a smile that was permanently glued onto her face.

I looked in the bar mirror, at myself.

I saw that my life until that moment had been preparation for this one, that "Duj Pepperman" was a fictitious identity, that his life until that moment had been a series of training exercises waiting for my arrival. I felt that I'd just arrived after a long journey but regis-

tered surprise at how overweight this body was.

I laughed silently. Until that moment, Duj Pepperman had been an atheist.

There were two staggeringly beautiful women with elfin ears, both of them blond, almost albino, sitting a few tables away from me, looking at me intently. I recognized them as angels named Estella and Sophia. They recognized me as well. I nodded to them; they nodded back.

I paid my check and walked out to the parking lot. They were waiting for me in front of Sebrings hair stylists, where I had parked.

“I can’t commit suicide,” I told them. “I’m bound by the rules.”

Estella nodded. “Don’t worry, we understand our orders.” She pulled a Glock 9-millimeter pistol from her jacket pocket and pointed it at me.

Sophia said, “Give me your keys.”

I gave the keys to Sophia, who unlocked the doors with the remote. Estella opened the rear passenger door, motioning me in with the gun. I got into the back seat of my car, Estella following, with the gun still pointed at me. She reached across and pulled down the shoulder strap, buckling me in.

Sophia got behind the wheel of my car, started the ignition, and drove off, while Estella pulled a roll of duct tape out of her handbag. “Give me your hands,” Estella said.

Holding the gun on me with one hand, she bound my hands to the seat belt, ripping the tape off with her teeth, then bound my feet. I tested the strength of the tape. She’d done a good job.

Sophia turned on the radio and tuned it to KLSX FM. The Beach Boys were singing “Good Vibrations.”

Both angels started singing along, “I’m pickin’ up good vibrations, she’s giving me excitations ...”

Still singing, Sophia drove onto Admiralty Way. I started singing along with the angels, “Good, good, *good*, good vibrations!”

Sophia turned left on Via Marina, then onto a pier leading out to the harbor. Sophia accelerated the car while opening all four windows. The car leapt the pier and splashed. The Mercedes floated a few seconds then began sinking. Water began rushing in through the open windows.

“Na na na na na ... na na na!” sang Sophia, Estella, the Beach Boys, and me.

All of a sudden, the angels vanished and their voices cut off. Just as suddenly, I was no longer God.

The radio shorted out and went silent. I stopped singing, mid-vibration.

I was Duj Pepperman again, bound with duct tape into the back seat of a Mercedes that was sinking into cold salt water, water that was quickly rising up my chest.

“God, where did you go?” I shouted, panicked. “Why did you leave me?”

There was no answer.

I took a deep breath as the water rose toward my chin. Used all my strength to try to break the duct tape, but it was no use.

“Oh, shit!” I said, took one more breath, my last, then sunk beneath the water and drowned.



# About J. Neil Schulman

J. Neil Schulman is the author of two Prometheus award-winning novels, *Alongside Night* and *The Rainbow Cadenza*, short fiction, nonfiction, and screenwritings, including the CBS *Twilight Zone* episode “Profile in Silver.”

His first nonfiction book was *Stopping Power: Why 70 Million Americans Own Guns*, of which Charlton Heston said, “Mr. Schulman’s book is the most cogent explanation of the gun issue I have yet read.”

Schulman’s next book, *Self Control Not Gun Control*, was his *magnum opus* on personal, political and spiritual power.

He has been published in the *Los Angeles Times* and other national newspapers, as well as *National Review*, *New Libertarian*, *Reason*, *Liberty*, and other magazines. His books have been praised by Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, Anthony Burgess, Robert A. Heinlein, Colin Wilson, Walter Williams, and many other prominent individuals.

Schulman is a popular speaker on a variety of topics, and a frequent radio-talk-show guest. In 1992 he hosted and produced his own weekly radio program, broadcast on KPRO AM, Riverside, California. He was on ABC’s *World News Tonight* as an expert on defensive use of firearms during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and in 1999 was interviewed twice on the Fox News Network for the fifth anniversary of the Brown-Goldman murders, regarding his alternative theories about the crime.

J. Neil Schulman is a pioneer in electronic publishing, having founded in 1987 the first of two companies to distribute books by bestselling authors for download. He is currently developing the Julius Schulman Center for the Living Arts in Pahrump, Nevada, as a teaching and performing arts center. His personal web site is at <http://jneil.tv/> and his edress is [jneil@pulpless.com](mailto:jneil@pulpless.com).

**“This is Duj Pepperman and you’re on 680 K-TALK.”  
“Duj, this is God, calling from Heaven. I can’t believe I got  
through. I’m one of your biggest fans!”**

With this first-ever call-in from God, an L.A. radio talk-show host is sent on a mission from God that takes him to Heaven — then back to earth — on a rollercoaster adventure that includes meetings with the most famous celebrities in Heaven and on earth. Along the way he learns the origins of our universe, the meaning of life, and how the War between God and Satan will turn out. A comic journey that is bound to be compared to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah*.

**“J. Neil Schulman’s *Escape from Heaven* is so heretical it threatens a new orthodoxy and so comic that it is one of the most serious novels you will ever read.”** — Brad Linaweaver, author of *Sliders*, *The Novel* and the *Doom* series.

**“It is the God damnedest thing I’ve ever read. If C. S. Lewis, Robert A. Heinlein, and Ayn Rand had teamed up to write a novel, something like *Escape From Heaven* would have inevitably resulted. I say ‘something like’ because this blistering satire of contemporary culture, religion, and politics could only have been written by J. Neil Schulman.”** — John DeChancie, author of *Witchblade*, *Castle Perilous*, and *MagicNet*.

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