

## Residue & the Reluctant Model

It took a lot for me to learn to stop staring at the door. I had always looked to it to offer guidance. Comings and goings, beginnings, endings. A doorway is a tangible metaphor and therefore much wiser than the countless platitudes that one hears when the diagnosis rhymes with *terminal*. Sorry for rhyming *terminal* with *terminal*. I hope you can forgive me. Like I said, I considered doorways a source of advice. If that's too much of a stretch for your suspension of disbelief, or makes you think that I'm some sort of unreliable narrator, don't let the metaphor hit you on the way out.

I had plenty of time to stare at doorways. Waiting for nurses, doctors, family members, friends. And when they did arrive, my thoughts and feelings rarely came into the matter. Apparently my approaching death didn't belong to me. A shocking number of things in a person's life don't belong to them. Allow me to elaborate.

A person's birth does not belong to the individual. The person who is born is only the byproduct of the work done by the womb and the DNA belonging to others, spiraling in a fit of self-indulgence. The aftermath- the resulting individual- is a monument to the audacity of two people, held up by the delivering doctor like a trophy, hoisted in the air for those in the room to gaze upon, then stored in a viewing nursery for anyone to ogle. The person then spends their first experiences of life as the excuse for parents to smile smugly in photos and show off to family and friends with varying resulting levels of interest.

One of the few things that I would have thought belonged to the individual is their death. No one gets to tag along, to act as a voyeur, the gaudy tourist intruding where they don't belong. Because it is so exclusive, so unwavering in its exclusivity, naturally people have become

obsessed with forcing themselves into death's VIP section in order to share what they have discovered, like a plague. Charlatans claim they can see beyond the veil, but they're stuck on one side of the door just like everybody else. They're shysters crowing fabricated tableaux. The less successful shysters are dismissed as frauds. The more successful get book deals that squawk pleasant platitudes about the Great Beyond and tour the talk-show circuit. The truly great shysters establish religions.

But the truth is no one knows for certain. Death belongs to the person who experiences it and no one else. And mine was taken away from me.

My first mistake was telling my friends and family that I was dying. I had no husband, no wife, no children, but I still had that biological imperative to leave something behind that said, "I was here." It's a selfish impulse and I was not immune to it. I felt that someone needed to know that I was dying. At the time it felt important to be the center of attention, at least one final time. As soon as I let my friends and family know, I began to regret it.

They would have figured it out on their own as my body began to waste away in front of them. If I had let them come to their own conclusions, at least I wouldn't have had to waste my dwindling time explaining to them what was happening, though I'm sure they would have wormed their way into the experience eventually when they wouldn't be able to overpower their desire to insert their own fear of mortality by fussing over mine.

As death continued to intertwine itself throughout my body, nuzzling ever closer, wrapping itself around every cell, that intimacy was trampled over by others. I was confined to a hospital room, the captive audience to a parade of doctors, med school students, and the cartoonish over-acting of the bereaved, too impatient to wait for my exit, all too eager to perform their sorrow, chomping at the bit to display their mourning.

I felt sickened by the performance. Doctors trying to show off their knowledge, justifying their impossible price. Well-wishers trying to prove to the world how good of a person they are by refusing to let me be. Me and my death were sickened by their gaze as it writhed all over me. The trail left by their wet eyes passing over my body felt like the slime left by snails. I felt this emotional residue on my skin more acutely than the death coiling around and around the insides of my body.

And I let them do it. I played along with them, just another actor on the stage. Crying with some, acting brave for others. I lost myself in the performance, separating myself from the only thing that belonged to me and me alone. Eventually, thankfully, I realized what I was doing; my death was being taken away from me. As soon as I realized this, I began to feel sick. I could feel my death being embarrassed for me.

So I decided that if I had to share my death, divide it amongst everyone else, then I would not take part in it at all. If my death could not belong to me and me alone, then I would reject it entirely. I decided that I would not die, ever.

Of course the doctors and my loved ones protested when I checked myself out of the hospital; oscillating between sympathetic, moral, and furious arguments in order to get me to stay. They tried appealing to every ethos-pathos-logos sentiment they could think of, but I could tell that they were only upset because I would no longer allow them to leech off of my death.

After successfully freeing myself from their emotional burdens, I set about trying to find something that would truly belong to me and me alone. If death was no longer mine, and therefore no longer an option, then I would have to find something else that was unique to me. I decided to make my body and mind completely my own and not the result of the genetics and influences of others.

This did not mean that I was no longer dying, however. In fact, I felt the process in earnest, as if the death within my body were throwing a tantrum since I had rejected it, lashing out like a jilted ex-lover. But I was resolute. This particular death had been spoiled and so it would have to go.

My body was beginning to fail so time was of the essence, but this also served as a great motivation. I was willing to do anything, pursue even the darkest of paths in order to reach my goal. My stomach was the source of the spoiled death, so I set about fixing that first.

By this time my death had spread throughout my body, but it had begun in my stomach, turning it into a womb to nurture it and so starting there seemed the most logical place to begin. This was also prudent because I also needed my stomach to nurture me, and if I was going to create something truly unique, I would need the energy my stomach provided through its alchemy.

I will freely admit that I do not possess the skilled hands and precise knowledge that surgeons possess, but when I removed my stomach from my body, I couldn't help but give myself credit. The process was painful and the workmanship rough, but the point remained that I hadn't done too terrible of a job in hollowing out my belly. There was practically a bounce in my step as I walked to the art supply store, though this could have been because I was significantly lighter due to the removed weight of the organ.

Having arrived at the art store, however, my mood soon soured. Choosing a nice set of wire sculpting knives I walked up to the cashier, a teenager who seemed plucked from a photoshoot highlighting the latest in corporate-approved indie fashion. They looked upon me with the derision that comes from the superiority complex attributed to niche (though still a financially viable avenue) counter-culture. They looked down on me and my sensible haircut, my

functional denim pants, and gaping abdominal wound and rolled their eyes. I collected my tools and my receipt and left, frustrated that I let the teenager ruin my mood, practically sulking like a teen myself back at home while I scraped the death from inside my stomach like inky bubblegum, though I did perk up looking at the now scraped clean and pristine organ. I soaked the stomach in grease to prevent the sickness from sticking to it again and sewed it back in place.

My breathing had become quite labored and I found it hard to catch my breath after sewing my stomach back into my body, so I used the bone saw I had stolen on my way out of the hospital to cut through my sternum to inspect my lungs. The source of my breathing problem was clear now that I could see the sickness that had coated my lungs like a web of sticky tar, branching out and across like scaffolding in a bees nest. I held my breath and removed those next. It was a more delicate process than the stomach due to the ribcage. Here my inexperience became much clearer as I snapped a few ribs in the process of removing my lungs. I tried to not scold myself at my amateur status, repeating to myself the old adage that if you want to make an omelette, you have to crack a few eggs.

Sadly, upon closer examination, my lungs appeared to be a lost cause. The branches of tar-like death had woven themselves into and through the tissue like the roots of an invasive species of brush. My lungs would simply have to be replaced. I began to panic because I didn't know what I could do to replace my lungs and because it was quite difficult to hold my breath this long. Then an idea struck me; I could get a new set of lungs at the morgue just down the street.

Even though the morgue wasn't far, I was still sweating as I limped my way down the street. The few people I passed looked at me holding my empty ribcage in place and sneered. Worse were the people who glanced at me and pointedly tried to avoid making eye contact. As

disgusted as I was when people's gaze groped me like a clumsy, chubby fingered oaf, it stung just as bad when they looked away, having judged me within the microseconds they spent looking at me. I was thankful to be out of the public eye when I entered the morgue and made my way back to where the bodies were stored in their refrigerated depositories.

The mortician in the back immediately began berating me for my intrusion and my appearance, saying intentionally hurtful things like, "You're bleeding everywhere," and "How are you even alive?" I would have explained my situation, but because I was holding my breath (which was getting quite difficult at this point), I could not. Expediency limited my options so while I held my ribcage together with one hand, I grabbed a shiny and heavy looking tool from the tray next to the mortician and hit him in the head with it until he stopped trying to get in my way and collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

No longer being hassled by the mortician, I set about looking through the coolers for a new set of lungs. I settled on the lungs from a twelve year old John Doe. Though they were a bit smaller than my previous set of lungs, the child had drowned in a lake which would save me some time from having to hose them clean and I was running out of breath already.

I hurried home with my pale package and set about sewing my slightly used, but brand new to me, set of lungs under my rib cage. I was worried my stitching would be a bit slapdash, but ended up looking fairly decent and I sighed with relief at both not having to hold my breath any longer and because I was getting better at sewing. I also noticed that I was feeling better the more that the sickness was removed from my body. Even though my job wasn't done ridding my body of the spoiled death, I allowed myself to imagine a world where I wouldn't have to feel people looking at me with wet, selfish, greedy eyes anymore. I would be free. I wouldn't have to feel their projected shame, disappointment, or anger.

The thought got me thinking further. I was standing with the tube of super adhesive in my hand, about to glue my rib cage back together, when I decided to remove my heart. A few deft cuts (I was pleased with myself at my increasing skill) and it was done. I dropped the diseased organ next to my discarded lungs and smiled.

My moment of reverie was spoiled, however, when I began to feel a pain in my belly. I looked down and into my exposed guts and saw, tucked between my diaphragm and my newly cleaned stomach, an organ that was blooming and pulsating to a sickening degree. My liver looked and felt like it was going to burst. I frowned at this because my liver was one of the few organs that had remained free of the sickness that coated my insides.

It clicked that I had assumed that the lungs of the child that were now in my body were clean because of the lake water they had drowned in. It hadn't occurred to me that the body might have already been embalmed in formaldehyde or some other poison. That combined with the grease I had used to coat my stomach must have been wreaking havoc on my liver.

Luckily, the solution to my now ruined liver presented itself when there came a sudden pounding on my door. It was my downstairs neighbor, a hateful, washed out stockbroker, complaining about all the blood that was seeping through his ceiling and onto his rug, which cost over \$5,000 (he'd have me know). I let him in, calmly explained what I was doing and that I was happy to pay for any damages as I led him further into my apartment, killed him, and put his body in my bathtub. I figured that as long as I was going to use his liver, I could also use his blood. I was running a bit low and could use the top off.

I spent the next few days meticulously carving out every last bit of sickness that had invaded my body with the wire sculpting knives, which performed quite well to the task. I then spent a few hours looking up videos of sewing tutorials, trying several different techniques, from

the basic catch stitch, the blanket stitch, the whip stitch, the ladder stitch, and the invisible stitch. I practiced until I could do each quite adeptly and even used some fun colored thread.

I admired my work in the mirror, quite satisfied. I wasn't the freshest chicken in the roost, but much better than a dead chicken. But then I thought about going outside. I definitely wasn't going to show off my success to my friends and family. They had already proven that they were more concerned with basking in my death, so I would leave them to it. And I wouldn't parade for the doctors, showing that I had succeeded where they had failed, that would just be prideful.

Even being free of those restraints, I would still have to exist out in the world with other people. I'd need to go to the grocery store for food. I'd need to find a job. Now that I was going to live, I'd soon run out of my savings. Especially when the family of my neighbor came around looking for someone to pay for the \$5,000 dollar rug.

All of these interactions would involve feeling their filthy gaze slather all over my customized body. Their judgement, projections, lust, and envy would leave a film all over me and I couldn't risk that affecting my nice stitchwork. Something would have to be done.

I tried coating myself in lacquer, to keep the residue of people's attention from touching me, but the smell gave me a roaring headache. Similarly, laminating myself produced the annoying effect of hearing myself squeak with every movement. The thought occurred to me that if I couldn't keep people's gaze off of me, perhaps I could redirect it back at them. I lathered myself in glue and rolled around in broken glass, so if someone looked at me, their own tactless visage would be thrown right back at them, refracted a hundred million times. But I was spending too much time polishing the bits of mirror and all of the reflecting light brought even more attention to me, and even covered in reflecting glass, it still felt as if people were robbing me of my agency, turning into an object meant for their amusement and consumption.



I came to the conclusion that I would never be able to live amongst people if I truly wanted the experience of my life to truly be my own. Everything I had done to this point had been because of other people. I had let other people own my decisions. This would simply Not Do. If I wanted to be free of the taint of other people, I'd have to go somewhere untainted by people.

For several weeks, I traveled only at night to avoid as many people as possible. Stealing cars and driving until they ran out of gas, then stealing another, searching for some place free of people, but always failing. There was always someone to gawk at me, to take part of my life and incorporate it into their own pointless narrative. I was just some interesting story for them to tell and be the center of attention that they craved, at least for a few moments before they would have to dredge up some other excuse.

At last I stumbled upon an abandoned forest preserve, a forgotten refuge off of a forgotten road, in the middle of nowhere. Finally, a place where I could be free from other people. I could live a life that belonged only to me.

And so I did. Everyday was mine and mine alone. It didn't matter what I did or didn't do, what I said or didn't say, if I looked one way or another, no one was able to tell me it was good or bad or could be better, failing to live up to some fictional metric. I lived this way for a long time. I have no idea how long and I liked it that way. It could have been thousands of years for all it mattered to me.

Until one day God came to visit me. They came to me without a face, which I appreciated. If they had come to me with a face, the judging feeling would have been worse than it already was, judgment being their Whole Thing. They told me that I was the last human being on the planet. I said that that was good. I could tell they wanted me to ask them if I wanted to go

to heaven, hell, or wherever, but that would probably mean I would have to be subjected to people or demons or whatever, so I said nothing. After a few moments they left and I never saw them, or anyone, ever again. My body, my experiences, my life, all of it finally was mine. It was wonderful.