

The Art of Dying

The small room fell silent as a calming energy swept over its inhabitants. Everyone was well aware of their impending ruin. Today they would die. It was a miraculous change in position; from life to certain death. And in that moment, no one could muster the courage to look at anyone else. That would make their fate all the more real and the facts of their apparent undoing were still processing in their minds. The Tuesday, for each, had begun just as normal as any other. They all awoke and played out the scenes of their day. As it began like any other, *surely*, they thought, *it would end the same*. Who could have known that this would be the last ending, from which no new sun would rise?

The moment the inhabitants had been made aware of the news, a silent bond formed between them. All the life energy in the room fused together at the realization of its imminent ruin. The synchronization of that energy brought forth a momentary silence; In sound and in their minds. It was all so clearly over, there was nothing more to think about. There was no panic, no anger, no fear, just silence...at first.

In the corner near the room's entrance, sat an auburn-haired, freckled-faced man-child. Wide-eyed and staring blankly, he was only a few days past his 18th birthday. In just two weeks' time he was to be seated in an 8AM Intro to Political Science class at his first choice university, UC Irvine. Just yesterday he had sent all of his belongings to the dorms for early move-in. He, himself, was scheduled for a late afternoon flight to join them just two days later. He thought back to what his mother had always told him about procrastination. If only he had heeded. He had the whole morning to be there. If he would have come three hours earlier or even 30 minutes, he'd still be on the same path he had spent the past four years planning. But there he sat just as awestruck as the other inhabitants, contemplating what would come of his ending. His grandmother had taught him about God and the savior they call Jesus Christ, but where were those stories now? He couldn't remember a single one, except that there was some place he would go after here. A place where he would be like himself, but better. He leaned his head back against the wall and hoped that his new world would be something like a university.

In the end, most of the inhabitants felt it was better to have gotten the news and to not have been taken to their end by surprise. They were graced with the time to really process their ruin, to meet with it and look in over for a spell, before finally stepping into its unknown. What brought them the most comfort was that they were not alone. Whatever would come of the future plans each had made, all the other inhabitants would share in that loss. Many of them sat on the cusp of new beginnings, excited by the wonders they would meet. They could feel those wonders fading in the distance along with any seeds they had sown.

Hot tears welled in a young mother's eyes as she looked down at the sleeping babe in her arms, but they did not fall. His soft blond curly locks were like hers, but his entire face was his father's. It had been a stressful 6 months since his father's passing, but she was finally beginning to feel like herself. She had even started writing again. It was a true miracle that her son was sleeping through all this. He would never wake and he would move on knowing nothing of the dark energies lurking in this world. That made her smile. At least they were together. And soon all three of them would be together and forever young. Her life had been no crystal stair, but she found peace when she learned she was pregnant. Her babe had come from the great unknown and brought with him a light into her dim world. That day she had become a believer. In what, she didn't quite know. But, in her mind, the goodness he brought was of something outside this bleak world. That was for certain. She began studying all things metaphysical. She learned about the chakras, the subtle bodies and the healing power of crystals. Each night she'd shower her babe in binaural beats and send him off to sleep surrounded by crystals in his crib. She wanted him to stay of wherever it was he had come, not to become of this world. And she had gotten her wish. Now, he would be going back untarnished. She held onto him tight praying that wherever he was going, he would take her along to this new land.

The inhabitants of ruin settled in to their new normal. They were forced to ponder what lie on the other side of their end. For some, their faith had promised them clouds of light and gardens underneath which rivers flow. For others, all they could muster was an infinite blackness. But for either fate there was certainly something to be said of its contents; so much unlike the world of concrete and steel these inhabitants had come to know. What secrets lay there in the cool blackness? Nothingness? How bold of a concept. Of course no love, no laughter, no warmth, but

also, no fear, no pain, no cold. Not even time. Just space, uncharted space, the space to - for once - not be.

Clingy steadfastly to a dark read misbaha, the local masjid's Imam stood stone faced, his mouth in the rhythm of his Dhikr. He had studied his whole adult life, the creed of his religion, and here in the moment when it all really counted, he was filled with fear. He felt like a hypocrite. He had only just gotten the Imam position. His apartment still donned the decorations from the party his wife had thrown for him. His wife...he would miss her most of all. His first Jummah had gone horribly. His voice shivered in nervousness throughout the entire lecture and it was his wife who had consoled him and assured him that it would be much better next time. But there would be no next time. There would be only the grave and the waiting. He thought on what would befall him in the grave. He had lived a modest life in the way of his Lord. Though far from perfection, surely his deeds would afford him pleasure in the grave and not torment. He knew it wasn't his will to choose and that, above all, his creator was just. He had resolved himself to prepare for whichever scenario he was given. Both would ultimately lead him to a new existence in Jannah. He whispered... "*inshallah*".

Those inhabitants who favored the rivers, greenery and lights had a much more optimistic outlook. Electing to spend the other side of their end with their creator. Whatever they would lose of this world surely didn't compare to what new world was waiting for them. Still, what they thought they knew they could never really know of the Divine's secrets. The gardens wouldn't be the gardens they know, the rivers wouldn't be the same rivers or have the same flow and the light wouldn't have its same earthbound glow.

Cuddled close together, a young Anglo couple sat holding hands. But not in any desperate manner. They did so, just as simply as they had last night on their way home from the movies. He had told her he loved her for the first time. Their story was a romantic tale: love at first sight. They fell even more in love the more they got to know one another. They shared the same love for right wing politics, TED talks, CrossFit, and heated debates. It truly was a match made in heaven, if they believed in such a place. The man had grown up Seventh Day Adventist and it never quite took. He left the religion and his family behind at the age of 18 and had been on his

own ever since. No Creed, no God just him and his wits, which had gotten him all the way to the clerk's office of a conservative federal judge. The woman was raised in an agnostic home and over the years her skepticism turned to disbelief. They both stared blankly, unsure of how to feel. Despair? What good was despair, when all along this moment was an eventuality? Anger? This was no one's fault, where would such anger be aimed? Disappointment crept in around the edges of their calm. It was so ironic that it should all be over just as things were starting to get good. Still, what they had for the past 3 months was enough for 10 lifetimes. It reflected the true purpose of life: to find satisfaction in it. They would meet the cold darkness of nonexistence together and each silently hoped that even in that new found nothingness, they would somehow be together still.

What lie on the other side of their end? The inhabitants would all step into the great unknown together, but each would emerge in their own new beginning. They went forth knowing that whatever lie on the other side of their ruin, would be unlike anything they had ever known. It would be terrifying and tremendous in tandem. It would be their somber end and some new beginning all at once.

A greying lady about 70, paced back and forth through the middle of the room. She had lived a life without fear and in its end she wore a grin of irony. The end was less eventful than she had thought it would be. She had made the fearless journey to the United States alone at the age of 16, had become fluent in the language by the age of 18, worked hard and owned her own business by the age of 30, and raised three boys to men, who now looked after their dear mother in her old age. She was the American dream in the flesh. Still, the whole situation pained her so. She very much wanted to die in her native land of Haiti, taken by the hand to glory by her ancestors with smiling faces. She wasn't quite sure if they would reach to this strange land. The thought of glory made her warm inside. She had done enough on this earth; it was time for her to be with her Lord. His will was done. But, how much of that will was hers? In actuality, she wasn't even supposed to be there. She was standing in for a friend. '*This is the last time I ever do anyone a "favor"*', she thought to herself in annoyance. When she realized the ultimate truth of this notion, she let out a small chuckle into the silence.

All eyes fell on her as her chuckle grew into a roar of laughter. The rest of the inhabitants were stunned, but couldn't resist the smiles growing on their own faces. Then laughter broke through like a fury. The Anglo couple, the Imam, the young mother, the college bound man-child, three stylish sisters dressed in pink, a middle aged pregnant woman, a hipster too cool to care, even the security guard, they were all beside themselves and in on the same joke; their demise. Their lives were over and the joke was the clothes they wore, the jewelry they adorned, the cars, the houses, the people they knew. It had all meant so much just a ten minutes ago and now it would all be so meaningless and obsolete wherever it was each would be going. In their time of ruin, they laughed, tears streaming, like little school children. In a community of strangers, they felt reborn, tasting nothing of loss, perhaps even more eager to see what news waited on the other side of th....

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