

# MENO

The front door was missing from the restaurant where we met. The walls were a patchwork of absent plaster, lost to the memory of celestial bloat. Our table had only three legs and we were forced to share silverware as most of theirs was gone.

She hugged me when I approached the table and we both sat down as she said,  
'How have you been?'  
'Oh fine, just fine, you?'  
'I really don't know.'

At times, when speaking, syllables and sometimes entire sentences fell mute- the heft of their vibrations distorting in extreme nothingness. It was as if we were selectively lip synching to silence.

'Looks like we're going to have to share a knife', she said, 'some of the silverware is missing.'  
'I don't mind. Less likely anyone will get hurt this way'  
'What?'  
'Nothing.'  
'Oh, be carefull, the table rocks.'

When I awoke this morning the sky was as white as a fresh sheet of paper, like some gossamer of cloud stretched so thin it became invisible. The words of Edwin Honig came to mind, 'You beggar, you're rich! You've got a blank page'. Colors of what once might have been called vibrant were dulling. Not only was the noon sky opaque but at night the moon and that great blanket of stars against the black twinkled down into something a bit south of nothing. As

mass decreased the electromagnetic field waned, and auroras popped up sporadically in brilliant contrast to the increasing monochromatic. It was lovely, at least for someone lucky enough to remain with retinas intact. You could peer into the strange domain of nihil, so that the vast ubiquity of sky would seem only as an half closed eye looking upon the face of God.

'Yeah, I noticed the table is lacking', and I tested it with my hands.

'So, you look good', she reported as if the fact were a surprise.

'You know me, a steady diet of nothing.'

'I know you', she smiled, 'How do you do it?' - a joke-

'A girl's gotta have her secrets', I said stroking my beard.

'You really want to bring up secrets?', she slides a bit in her chair as she puts an elbow on the table and it wobbles. 'You still seeing that girl? The young one? What's her name?'

'Anne? - No. She took off. I do have a pretty serious thing going with a bottle of gin though.'

As we lose mass so too we lose the force of gravity, the weakest of physical forces in the universe, though it always kept me coming back with every step. But today while walking to the restaurant for lunch, I bounded whole city blocks without setting foot on the sidewalk. At one point I stepped from Vermont ave across R street to 14th just like that. I watched as my almost non-existent shadow traversed a concrete below in which I used to weave intricate patterns of a drunken tourism while stumbling home to her at night. The lack of gravity gives the sense that we're dust floating about without intent, ready to be swept up, or stolen.

'So what's this about?', she asked after the waiter took our orders and waddled away on his one remaining foot.

'How do you mean?', my chair seemed unreliable.

'Well last week they break the news about everything disappearing and then you ask me to lunch? I haven't heard from you in, what, at least two years?'

'Wait, you called me.'

'Bullshit', she said, as one of the front windows in the restaurant dissolved.

Last month the middle toe on my left foot disintegrated. Poof. Gone. Vamoosed and took the train to oblivion. Curious.

The official party line is 'transmuted-submolecular-material-dissolution', which roughly translates to, 'cash in your 401k'. The whole of existence is on its way out, dirt nap, long walk off a short pier. The milky way is dancing the macarena to the beat of decline soon to be absolute, baron, zero. On the bright side, you don't have to worry about those unpaid parking tickets.

The phenomenon was first discovered about a year and a half ago by a student at the University of Maryland. His thesis involved this equation, or series of equations, or some such nonsense that analyzed the amount of mass accumulated on Earth annually through the flotsam and jetsam of celestial debris. Apparently, each day, more than twenty million meteors enter our atmosphere and deposit their remainders. These seeming fleas on the galaxy travel millions of miles in a vacuum alone and cold, and after such deep endless profound ennui enter our atmosphere like a bat out of hell only burn up in seconds. Good for them. Each day these fleas litter a hundred tons of space dust in the ionosphere amplifying the thyroid condition of terra. Interstellar particles land on your laptop, coalesce in clouds, collect in your belly button. Or I guess I should say they used to. For eons we've been getting heavier, fatter, a goddamned oscillating behemoth. By measuring our rotation and generating relative checkpoints, and running these numbers through various formulas and whatnot, one day, almost two years ago,

this PhD student discovered a growing depletion. Uh oh. His figures were double checked, then triple checked and a fourth party confirmed. We were shrinking. The Earth was taking a page from Jenny Craig. No shit!

'Bullshit yourself', I said, 'I can show you in my phone. You called me yesterday', and I reached into my pocket as the waiter set half empty plates of food in front of us. I searched only to come up short.

'Great, my phone's gone. Goddamn universe!' I shouted brandishing my fist at the ceiling with all the inertia of an errant hair on a summer day in the desert. She made a face and picked up her fork.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'No, really, what was that face about?'

'No really nothing', as she tucked into half a chicken breast.

'Say it.'

'Fine', she said with her mouth full of disappearing proteins, 'It's just like you to blame something else. Nothing is ever your fault.'

'Jesus.'

'No, it's true, same as always, you think nothing is ever your fault. It's always something else, someone else.'

I motioned for the knife by her plate so I could cut the strange slab of beef in front of me. She picked it up and held it close to her chest so I raised my hands in surrender.

'Look, I don't wanna fight, can we just not fight? For once?'

'Fine.'

'Fine' -knowing she was absolutely right. Nothing is my fault.

I motioned for the knife again and she passed it over. As I cut into my meal, I said under my breath, 'But it was you who called me.'

I felt her eyes piercing my skull like laser beams.

Post mostly hung over as usual these travelers in the beautiful and truthful academia ran the news up the flagpole where it made its way through security channels and locked boxes and subcommittee after subcommittee after subcommittee and then it was full information vacuum as an APB went out. A search for unusual suspects, a role call of the ignominious. Speculation among top brass ran rampant. The information was strictly on a 'need to know' basis and few, if any, needed to know. A cabal of world renowned egg heads got together in Helsinki to investigate. Supercomputers collated data.

The conclusion: The universe is on its way out. Well, shit.

Through careful observation and odd calculation, it was discovered that the phenomenon was not restricted to Earth, but spread throughout all the known and unknown universe. It seemed that God might be a child who had been playing with his vast lego set of molecules for the past few billion years and now the adults were making him clean up. Oh, God.

'.....zero', she concluded.

'What?', I said as the persona of sound returned.

'I was saying how funny the idea of zero was. This whole thing made me think of something I read once about the numeric value of nothing.'

I knew when she said 'read' she really meant something she saw on television. As long as I'd known her, she never read a thing other than the occasional Us or Vogue. As she spoke, I

noticed how long her hair had gotten. She had been growing it out. I wanted to tell her it looked good. The weighty wavy black with light brown highlights. I was overcome by the urge to reach across the table and run my fingers through it one last time before it was gone forever. She looked into my eyes and I looked back. Goddamnit I looked right back into those brown eyes, deep and intense. Those eyes could launch a thousand ships.

'Are you listening?', she asked.

I looked away and said, 'Oh yeah, nothing, you said something about nothing.'

'So apparently there was no numeric value for nothing until about six thousand years ago. Some garment trader in India or something invented the symbol for zero. It took us, some, countless millennia to invent nothing. How crazy is that?'

'That is interesting', I said, not sure how accurate this history was, but I really didn't care. I just wanted to kiss her.

She had remarried within a year. She left me and I thought it had something to do with economics, or the fact that I hastened to end each day, while she lamented its passing. I thought I had forgiven her, not that there was anything to forgive. She made her decision. She left me for another man. I still just wanted to kiss her in this moment.

'What?', she said looking at me with a smile. That smile made my gut sink.

'Nothing', I reply, 'I mean, zero.' I put my fork down to lean back in my chair which began to wobble. 'Just not that hungry, I guess', and then the chair vanished and I fell to the floor with a loud blunt bang. She laughed and the sound of it made my condition worse. I wanted her. I remained on my back for a few seconds before I began laughing as well to cover my failing emotional espionage. The waiter approached and apologized and pulled a chair with three legs

and half a back over from an empty table. 'It's not your fault', I said to him, and she was still laughing. I felt embarrassment for the first time in years. Then a portion of the far wall dissipated.

Before the galaxy began pushing rope, biologists estimated that one point seven million species on the planet were known, but that there were between ten million and one hundred million species on Earth. I'd say there's a substantial gap in knowledge. That number is speeding with the parking brake on toward the growing depletion. Those species 'lost' will simply become, well, lost- just in a different sense. The subject remains, while the perspective changes. Curious.

'Really, what are we doing here?', she asked after I situated myself.

'Good question', I replied, 'makes me think of something Meno asked Socrates in Plato's Republic'. She fained a yawn and pretended to stretch her arms. She actually said, 'yawn', so I would know that I was boring her. The remainders of a roasted chicken breast evaporated from her plate. 'Really- why did you bring me here? I want to hear you say it, I want you to actually say the words', and she cupped her lovely brown face in her dainty brown hands with her tender brown little elbows perched on the three legged table as it rocked to and fro.

'I don't know what you're talking about', I said knowing exactly what she was talking about.

'When are you going to grow a pair?', she asked.

'What?'

'You heard me.'

'That's not what you're supposed to say.'

'And just what am I supposed to say?'

'You're screwing it all up', I said, 'I had this whole thing mapped out perfect. It took me three drafts, but I got the dialogue right, finally, and this is where we talk about the differences between loss and lost.'

'So I'm here to support a thesis?', she kicked the table as the waiter removed our plates.

'Ah fuck'.

She mocked me with her beautiful eyes.

'Look, I had this done', I said gesturing emphatically with my hands which I never do, 'We would discuss the Phaedrus, you know, the section where Meno asks his question, how does one go about finding the nature of that thing which is unknown to him, and we would spin vague but somewhat clever observations based on the delicate little fucking fiction I had going until now, but you have to undermine everything I do, it's like a compulsion with you. It's a fucking compulsion with you.' Her face contracted the angry wrinkles that I had become all too familiar with when we were married. I know that look better than I know myself.

After the news broke, the world went mad. For a bit. The madness settled to confusion before taking firm grasp on resignation. The egg heads tackled the problem every way they knew how, but without a solid understanding of why this was happening, they were at a loss as to where one might start. Theories varied. Perhaps something beyond a supermassive-massive black hole existed, or perhaps the big bang had dovetailed and the universe was splitting apart at the seams. Maybe there was a twelfth dimension. The fact was, no one had a clue as to why, how, or what to do. There may be fates worse than nothingness.



I had a friend. I tried to call him a few weeks ago. There was no answer. I went over to his apartment and found the door unlocked and a kettle boiling on the stove. Perhaps he took off for a better view of the cosmic euthanasia. Or maybe he walked into the woods with a bottle of wine and a shotgun. Either way, I guess we're no longer friends. Good for him.

'You really think this whole end of the world bit is going to work? It's trite and it's been done to death. Not to mention you've got no resolution. I mean, Jesus, I bet you don't even understand the basis for conflict', she said.

'Well, I thought I did', and I tore a paper napkin to shreds as the ceiling bubbled into translucence.

'Seriously, the concept is weak and you have glaring holes in the exposition. Now you're letting your characters take the dialogue hostage? Vonnegut did it, and he at least did it well, not like this garbage. You're an awful writer, I mean, no offence, but you are truly awful.'

'Yeah I know. You're right. I am', and my back grew slanky.

'Why did you have to drag me into this? What did you hope to achieve?'

'Initially it was only to explore the idea of loss and lost and the unknowable and, I don't know, I guess it doesn't matter', I mumbled.

She sighed and I piled the pieces of napkin on the table in front of me as they vanished into nothing. We stared at each other and I started to feel small, insignificant. I felt like I did when we were married.

'Well, what now?', I asked her.

'It's your story', she said, 'do what you want, but I'm leaving.'

She's right. It is my story. I feel an impish wave.

She turned in her chair and put her arm on the table for support to stand. Then she paused. She looked down for a moment before looking back at me with such a vitriolic sneer and she said, 'You son-of-a-bitch.' I ducked my head under the table knowing what I'd see. Her legs had vanished. Poof. Gone. Vamoosed and took the train to oblivion.

Curious.

'I hope your wallet wasn't in your pants', I said, 'I was kinda hoping you would get the check.'

What we don't share about the end, the realization of the finite quality, is that we'll miss every goddamned second of life. We'll miss the good times as well as the bad. It's strange, but when the news came through official channels, we slowly began to realize this. We held tight to our cigarettes and paychecks. We strangled our problems like Lenny with a tit-mouse. Every action arising from love and anger as if they were indistinguishable. The subject remained the same, but the perspective changed.

Curious.

Then the foundation of the restaurant began to rumble as the floor gave way to a viscous apathy for existence and I knew we would have to find egress lest we become two more victims of the growing nothing. I got up from the table and told her to throw her arms around my neck. It was more choke hold at that point than rescue, but I got her torso and arms countered against my weight and made for the sidewalk.

Once outside, the building languished behind us for an instant before forgiving matter and leaving like the last warm embrace of haggard lovers. I coughed as her biceps attempted to strangle my trachea.

'This is so like you', she said. 'The constant need to play the hero when in fact you're the source of the tragedy.' I coughed again before centering her weight on my back and I thought how it seemed I had been carrying her around for years.

'Where to?', I managed to gasp when I had gathered myself.

'I want to see the water one last time', as her hold on me began to loosen.

'Me too', I said.

So I took a step and traversed whole neighborhoods as gravity further forgave mass. From the apex of our little flying nun routine, we could see the blank space that used to be the Kennedy Center, no great loss there. What an ugly building. We could see the Washington monument looking more like an unfinished game of Jenga. An improvement, I thought. The Capitol was gone, as well as the hill. I looked back to see that most of the city was nothing as her hold around my neck relaxed and we returned to the ground for another step. She got lighter.

We found ourselves at the edge of the Potomac, down off of M street in what used to be Georgetown. There was a park bench left and not much else. We sat next to each other in silence for some time.

I felt bad about the whole 'me dissolving her legs' thing and I started to apologize when I realized that she was no longer there. She was gone. Forever. She made her choice. I made mine.

My right leg began pulsing like sound waves or a heartbeat, then vanished. Poof. Gone. So I got up from the bench and hopped to the edge of what was once the mighty Potomac river and I thought of Celine's 'Journey to the End of the Night', and I thought that might not be such a bad way to go out. So, I unzipped my fly and steadied myself on the one remaining leg I had now

and I pissed into the void that was the river. I watched the piss disappear as day faded to white  
and made slight contact with a celestial nothing.

ZERO

