

## Death: Yours and Mine

**HAVE I TOLD** you lately that you're going to die one day? I wouldn't want you to forget. Life wouldn't be worth living without that knowledge constantly plastered to your fucking forehead.

Washed away and forgotten, you will become a millimeter-thick ribbon of fossilized slate in a wall over a million miles high. All of humanity forms a straight line, cradle to grave, toward decomposition and dissolution. Entropy. Things break. Pale Death comes and wins.

Death will rape you. Death will tear up your ugly smirking stinking self. It will trap you and squash you and consume you with smothering machinelike efficiency.

The giant black tapeworm opens its lamprey maws and heads straight toward you. As dusk falls like volcanic ash on an open field, you see Death crawling toward you from a distance, and you can't run far enough.

If you run from it, you die.

If you fight it, you die.

If you ignore it, you die.

You die, you die, you die.

Your life is an unfolding snuff film. Death is imprinted on each cell like an invisible birthmark. The death seeds sprout inside you. Like a butterfly inside a chrysalis, your skeleton hibernates, awaiting the day it's set free.

Feel your pulse and realize it will stop ticking.

Inhale deeply and count one less breath until your last.

Wave your limbs around and know that they'll be stiff one day.

One day soon, your body will rid itself of its unwanted guest. That's the ultimate betrayal, when your own body turns against you.

The first gray hair. First wrinkle. First roll of flab. The skin sags. The gums recede. The teeth fall out. The eyes glaze over. The liver quits. The bones start cracking.

And then the mind goes. Ha, ha, that's the worst part, when your brain turns to jelly. What a triumph of the will it will be when the nurses slip the adult diapers on you and spoon-feed you strained carrots

and you can't remember your own name and you keep asking when the Easter Bunny's going to show up with all his nice eggs.

Bedpans and sponge baths and cold rectal thermometers. Organ transplants and oxygen tents and catheters jammed up into your kidneys. Biopsies, spinal taps, and barium enemas. Blood in the urine and spot on the lung. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. Fever and vomiting and drooling palsied agony and involuntary spasms and exploding aneurysms and chest-cracking heart attacks. White cells get swarmed and destroyed.

You drop like a dog being put to sleep. Like a hair falling to the floor. Like an old elephant crashing to the sawdust.

Your meaningless life flashes before your eyes, every dim ancestral impulse, your brain riffling through flash cards of tribal symbols and ancient icons, a speed-rewind of every ugly face you've ever seen.

The cord is pulled. The picture on the TV screen shrinks to a small dot and vanishes. Your pulse flatlines. Lonely pine-cleaner smells float down the hospital corridor, long shadows slash sideways across hospital walls, cracks in the walls expand, and a bloody dried cotton ball is stuffed in a steel wastebasket.

Dusty scratching sounds hiss and pop on an old record. An upright vacuum cleaner hums in an empty room. Sweet images of laughing shiny children are trapped and inverted onto cockroach-colored negatives. Pesticide spray falls softly on insect eggs. The cold wind gently pulls a leaf from a branch and drags it across a field, past a prairie farmhouse that sits alone at night, lights going off from each room one by one.

Dead flames consume dark forests.

Dead ocean pounds rocks into sand.

Dead winds erode canyon walls.

Dead planets circle dead sun like yawning marbles.

Your mannequin corpse, a rotting sac of oozing putrefied proteins, a bloated repellent cadaver with its stupid facial expression of permanent defeat, mocks the notion of human sanctity. You are a plaything, a piece of meat for the pervert mortician who labors over your carcass with auto-mechanic indifference, draining your stagnant blood and spiking your collapsed veins with formaldehyde, then sending you off to the junkyard, where you become manure for our precious fragile ecosystem.

You are planted back inside Mother Earth's cold clammy cunt, down inside an earth whose crust is laced with human bones, whose stratosphere is clogged with evaporated dreams. The teasing diaphanous

light laughs on your tombstone, that lifeless little megalith where your relatives pull weeds and lay dying flowers and pray to a dead God who wouldn't listen to them even if he were alive, all the pathetic prayers and anemic affirmations your loved ones recite, all the limp greeting-card slogans they parrot to hide their gleeful guilt for still being alive, each wish fizzling out before it rises ten feet high.

Oh, I forgot—you're going to "heaven," right? Or to "a better place," is that it? Where IS this better place? Could you point it out on a map, please? It's in another dimension, you say? Really? How the FUCK do you know?

You don't go to a better place, you go six feet under.

The metaphysicians have it backwards. They think your "soul," meaning your consciousness, is what lives on, when that's the only part that dies. Your body continues to exist, however worse for wear and tear. Your body is the only part of the equation that has an afterlife.

Maybe you don't comprehend what the word "die" means. I'm guessing you don't know what is meant by "lifeless." You're so sure there's a better world after this one, but I don't see you rushing to get there. If you're so certain that you're headed for Elysian Fields, what stops you from killing yourself? Why are you stalling, kid? Why are you postponing the big payoff? If you think you have a soul, why don't I just shoot you in the head so we can test your charming little theory?

The reason you cling to life is because every cell in your body knows the meaning of death.

How many millennia have we been waiting for a soul—just one—to return from the dead? Since no one has ever come back from the grave, I'm going to take a wild guess and presume that they don't.

The ego doesn't want to hear that it won't last forever. It sees death as a problem. But death sees ego as a problem, and that's why death has killed every ego that ever existed.

Depressing? Death is only depressing to those who find some hope in life. Death only has a sting if you think life means something. But if you don't, you aren't empty.

You're free.

Free from worry.

Free from obligation.

Free from disappointment.

Free to paint reality whatever colors you wish. The colors will all fade eventually, anyway. And once they've faded, you're free to see things clearly again.

When all your dreams are smashed, finally you can see things as

they are. Finally comes perception as pure and fast as light. An open endless vacuum stands between you and your own demise. A free-fall into eternity.

Nothing lasts longer than eternal humming blackness. Imagine the midnight sky without any moon or stars. It isn't too far off in your future. This planet can't last forever. We've been pretty lucky slaloming around asteroids. And when that ultra-speedy chunk of star candy finally wallops this orb into a shapeless mass of super-heated vapors, all traces of human existence will be wiped away like tears on a handkerchief. Gone. Everything you ever held dear—gone.

You become space dust, interplanetary waste, a dependent, enslaved, boring micron raped of personality, just microparticles of what used to be a soul now littered into the dark, endless firmament.

Time, the great devourer. Time's mortar and pestle will grind you down. The four seasons follow one another in a seamless loop, softly, brutally wiping you away. One grain in the hourglass. One tick of the wristwatch. One fleck of spent gunpowder smudged along eternity's gaping shotgun barrel. A jerk of the seismograph, that's all you get. A jagged blip on an endless sheet of blank paper.

No angels. No harps. No warm white light. No marshmallowy clouds. No white silk gowns. No gold-paved streets. No annoying choirs. No heavenly father to come and suck you up into his frosty-haired bosom.

No salvation. No forgiveness. No redemption, rebirth, or regeneration. No galloping into the sunset.

Just erasure.

Neutered existence. Antimatter's complete ascendance. Subject becomes object. The cosmic insult of eternal nothingness. Identity wipe-out. No ears. No eyes. No you. Death is the victory of everything that isn't you.

There is no fate worse than death. There is no fate other than death. There is no heaven. Everyone goes to hell.

You can't kill death. It is the unifying principle, the vital force, the only constant factor, the only thing that's truly alive. Death is undefeated. Death is God.

What a black comedy, this little divine flea circus, this little ant farm of the creator. What a prank God plays on us. God laughs at all ideas of morality. Life is a joke that God tells over and over again, laughing harder each time.

God is not your friend. God does not love you. God isn't here to help you. God is hostile to your interests. God will murder you. God wills you into existence just to tease you, and then he erases you from the black-

board. You are God's pornography, his objectified pleasure.

The only person I ever loved died a few months ago, passing away anonymously in a halfway house, heavily sedated, shriveled and gray like a senior citizen, no friends, family, or pets by her side.

We never made peace with one another.

"Life is torture," she said to a mutual acquaintance near the end, and it's hard to argue with her on that account.

About three years ago while she was undergoing chemotherapy, she told me she dreamed that she was standing on a precipice, looking over at another cliff where cemetery workers were throwing bodies into the chasm between the two cliffs. She couldn't see the bodies as they hit the ground, but she could hear the thumps as they landed.

She's alive only in my dreams. The other night I saw her face, the same dark sadness in her eyes, the same confused purposelessness. She had wished for death all her life, up until the point where it appeared that her wish was being granted, and then she groped for the eternal life which has such a desperate appeal for the dying.

"Better safe than sorry," she always used to tell me, and she wound up sorry anyway. She played life safely, and to what end? Death didn't care. Death came and swallowed her alive. It gulped her down like a bon-bon and kept moving. For a dozen years I could pry nothing more out of the girl than a vague wish for security, yet death came and trampled her.

And me, I haven't been feeling so well myself lately.

I can feel Death passing through me tonight while everyone else sleeps. Wraithlike, Death embraces me, whispering in my ear that my number is soon up. For years now, long before I started writing this book, I've been beset with a profound morbidity, wading through a hall of mirrors where every mirror reflects a skull face. I can't shake the death vibe. It's so hard to walk with one foot in the grave. I'm spooked, punch-drunk on death, a black angel banished to the shadowlands. I came so close to death during all this, it's as if I've been stained by it. As if I've inhaled death. My lungs are clogged with death spores like microscopic burrs, my blood speckled with little black death chips, each sperm a black-hooded executioner.

And oh, how dry the skin on my hands is getting.

I remember dad's flesh all strung tight and strapped across his bones from the cancer, dad humbled and scrawny and hunched-over like a rejected chicken embryo, eyes squinted with pain, coughing, sallow, writhing, wrecked, humiliated, leveled, mocked by the death which had spread through his body like black ink in a glass of water.

And I remember the look on his face as if he'd been cheated, an expression that said his life was a long joke and his corpse would be

the punchline:

This is how it ends? This is what I worked for? This is why I fought in the war and paid my taxes?

I ain't going out like daddy did, I can tell you that much. My life may have started with his ejaculatory whimper, but bet all your money that it will go out with a bang. Wide, wide, I open my eyes, straining to glimpse every hue in this Technicolor disaster awaiting me. I came in kicking and screaming, and I'll go out the same way. I'll be plenty relaxed when I'm dead. But until then, I'm going to keep bringing trouble.

I've yet to do everything I want to do, but I'll die trying. This isn't the time or place to reveal my plans. I have a few projects I'm working on, and that's all I can tell you right now.

Somebody will read these words after I'm dead. Maybe it's you. I resurrect myself inside your mind. Writing is the only way I know to stay alive a little while longer. Not forever, mind you—that's impossible, but just a smidgen longer than they had planned. It's like throwing the car keys in the trunk while it's closing. Or like picking the Grim Reaper's nose while he's carting me away.

At the first mention of your terminal diagnosis, I want you to think about me.

As you close your eyes and sink into the drain, I want you to think about me.

Indisputable proof of life's worthlessness is that it always ends. But that shouldn't stop you from whistling "Dixie" as they march you to the ovens.

Life grows short. Have you done everything you wanted to do, or have you played it safe?

Your entire life is only a dress rehearsal for those terrible last moments when you pass judgment on yourself. In the final seconds before the lights blow out, only you will know whether you've cheated yourself.

Death will approach you. It will ask you if you're ready, and before you can answer, it will take you.

There is no sacrilege you can commit which is worse than what Death will do to you.

And so, little flame, burn as bright and hot as you can, because the fireman is coming.

