

The *meaning* of life. The *meaning* of death.

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1.

Sometimes we *really can* predict the future, my doctor says to me, and it's really really sad whenever we can do that. Stop being philosophical, I snap at him, it's really really annoying. Especially in a bar. Where people are trying to drink things.

Sitting next to me, to my immediate left, are two young lovers. They're talking about modern dance in loud reverential tones. The new modern dance. The new contemporary module of the new modern dance. While they're holding hands. While they're sort of holding hands.

Okay, here's the truth. They're kind of jiggling their fingers together and it looks really choreographed, or at least fake. What they're doing with their fingers. They're being erotic with one another, I think. Or *to* one another. I'm guessing this is what's going on. But maybe they're just good friends. Who are into finger things.

You wouldn't know at first that it was modern dance they're talking about because they're using words like *Parkinson's Disease*, *tremors*, *Peripheral Neuropathy*, *Central Nervous System Disorders*, *Lou Gehrig's Disease*. And they mention *spasms* too. A lot. To describe how modern-

dance dancers move these days. How they *should* move these days. And that they should scream at the same time. Really really loud. Because sound is dance too. Screaming is, anyway.

They're saying things to each other like: It's so inspiring that people with diseases like that still try to move. And with such inspiring artistic nobility. That you want to represent. And then they're talking about *dancing robot parts*. The next module in the new modern dance. And all of this really enthusiastically. Young people are always so inspiring, aren't they? This is them saying that, not me saying that. This is them talking about themselves.

I can predict the future too, I tell my doctor. You're not the only who knows when bad things are coming.

What bad thing is my doctor predicting this time? Let's call him Fred. My doctor. What bad thing is Fred predicting for me?

You can guess this correctly. I *know* you can.

2.

So this is the sad part of the story that I'm telling you. Before we retired to the bar, me and Fred, we were in his office. And what he was telling me are all the kinds of things you never want to hear from your doctor. Like I'm sorry. Like there's nothing we can do. Like there's nothing anyone can do. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow. After you're dead, I mean. But then again, maybe never. That's often the case. That we can never do something about something.

So that you should just try to enjoy your last remaining moments. That's what he says next. Fred. However many of these last remaining moments there are. Make something significant of these last remaining moments. Or just downright fun. *Downright*. That's his word. *Damned joyful*. That's what he says at another point in our conversation. Later in our conversation. And then he leans back in his easy chair, and smiles warmly like we're in this together. Me and him. Dying *together*, as it were. Except he gets to live.

Like almost all doctors these days he knows how to talk to patients in these situations. Because he's taken philosophy courses. Not just the required course in litigation analysis. *The Meaning of Life*. *The Meaning of Death*. That sort of thing.

And he's got suggestions too. This here Fred. *Lots* of them. For what I should be doing during all my last remaining moments. You're probably thinking: This here Fred is trying to sell me something. And you'd be right.

3.

Two guys come into the bar. (This isn't a joke.) Two guys with robot parts, I mean. Their lower bodies are kind of shiny-black sleek boxes with big red wheelies. A lot of buttons and joysticks on the consoles. They do the hello-with-the-eyebrows thing with Fred, who eyebrows them back in a totally friendly way. Then they zip-wheel elegantly into the restaurant, to a table near the back. They *know* Fred, of course. Why am I not surprised?

Fred meanwhile has been name-dropping all the famous people he's treated that have had cancer. Successfully treated, I mean. *Cured* for good, I mean. By just removing their body parts, see? and replacing them with something better. Metal and plastic don't get cancer, he explains to me, have you noticed that? Because there's no such thing as silicon-based cancer. Cancer is totally carbon based. Which is totally cool. Because even *viruses* aren't totally carbon based. Lots of viruses are electronic. Maybe most of them. But cancer isn't electronic. Not even a little bit. Not yet, anyway.

I've never thought about this—who ever would who was still in his right mind?—but of course he's telling the truth. People don't swap out their furniture or change their windows because they've gotten cancer. Kids don't dump their toys because they've gotten cancer. Inorganic is just better, Fred tells me. And then he shows off by rotating his right hand 180 degrees on its wrist. Rapidly, I mean. Very impressive, I say. Because even the modern-dance jiggling-finger people are watching it spin around. Nice, I add. Give that man another beer, someone calls from across the bar.

Fred's a surgeon, by the way. A good one. A very good one.

These new detachable hands do a whole bunch of neat programmable tricks, Fred tells me next. It'll dance on its fingers if I remove it like this, and push this series of buttons on the thumb. It can do rock, or waltz back and forth with my other hand, or even something called the twist. While it makes its own music. And hip-hop. Hands are *amazing* at hip-hop, hip-hop was *made* for the hand. Want to see? Maybe you want to buy one? For your last moments?

Fred invests in a lot of start-ups. In robot prosthetics. Did I mention that?

His hand looks just like a real hand by the way. Except, of course, when it's dancing all by itself on a bartop like it's doing right now. Then it looks like nothing on Earth that you'd ever want to see.

So here's *my* problem, apparently. New detachable hands won't fix *me*. New wheelie feet won't fix me either. So I'm doomed. As it were. Because you can't really replace brains. Especially if someone has them.

I hope you can tell that I'm really depressed. Really really depressed. Really really really depressed. Especially because I'm sitting here in a bar with Fred. And with Fred's hands.

Well, in a way brain cancer—even your spread-out-all-over-the-place kind of brain cancer—is quite curable, that's what Fred tells me when we were still in his office. Because we *could* just replace your brains too. You know, *all* of them. That's what Fred adds. With something pretty much as good. And most people wouldn't notice, they really wouldn't. But then we'd apparently just have replaced *you*. That's what everyone says, anyway, and I guess they're right if they're everyone who says that.

It's a real problem, he muses now, almost as if I wasn't in the room, almost as if I'd already died or anyway, as if I'd mysteriously vanished. People do that sometimes. In conversations, I mean.

As if they're practicing. For your future.

And then Fred adds meditatively: You can tell that it's probably unsolvable, because *philosophers* are writing about it. Of all people.

Just about then things got a little weird. Or weirder, anyway. Because the doctor suddenly spoke differently, even his voice became a little deeper now, a little more resonant or profound or something, he'd straightened up in his seat, and he was looking at me *intently*, into my eyes. I really had the impression there that he was going to talk *to me*. It was almost as if he had been seized against his will with something like insight or wisdom or whatever. (Things none of us *want* anymore—because it just *hurts* too much to be like *that*). Don't you think, he said slowly, really slowly, really really slowly, that how we die shows who we are? Who we *really* are?

I looked at him. And not just because he was the only thing in the room that was moving in an interesting way. But because I was thinking: what if we're hit by *buses* or what if we fall off *cliffs* by accident or what if commercial *drones* collapsing out of the sky land on us? So I said to Fred: Sheer accidents show who we are? Mechanical failures from the sky that crush us to death show who are we are? Whyever would they do such a thing? And how?

Fred says back to me: When you have an opportunity to plan your death, I mean. When you have a choice.

4.

And then there are always those con artists who come around, trying to rip you off when you're dying. Even then, I mean. They just *never* stop. Because at least one percent of the general population is sociopathic. And these people need jobs *too*. Never ever forget that. It explains nearly *everything*.

I don't mean Fred, of course. Fred is about as honest as an earnest idealistic young man in his position ever gets. Yes, there *have* been those moments when I was in the office with him, and he was shouting into his cellphone to his broker: Sell it! Those artificial *feet* aren't going *anywhere*. But that just shows that what it means to be a doctor has *mutated*—that's all. Like all jobs do. Like all job descriptions do.

Reincarnation salesmen, on the other hand, let's admit it, they're the sleeziest, they surely are. *Oh wow*, one of them says to me, all breathless and everything, *everyone wants to be reborn™*. Come back to *this*? I respond, I think I'd rather not. I think I'll pass. *Reincarnation isn't what you think it is*, he says back, *reincarnation's changed too*. And then he says next, *depending on how much you want to spend, we can YouGene™ insects*. (Oh wow, I said. But primarily to be polite.) *Think of crickets that scratch their legs and make your own special sounds—like your name or the way you sneeze. Or animals—new animals I mean—cute cats with your ears sticking out of the sides of their heads. Or your nose. Or some other part of your anatomy that you're really into*. This is certainly something to think about, I tell him. I tell him this because I'm thinking about all the parts of my anatomy that I'm still really into.

5.

Okay, so what's *Fred* trying to sell me? It's innocent enough. Really. Entertainment. What's called *Last Minute Entertainment*. I don't think he's trademarked that label, and it's clever. I keep telling him to hurry up before someone else does it.

6.

What about hunting? Fred asks me. Hunting? I ask back. Real hunting, Fred tells me. Where you actually kill something. Without animal activists finding out, I mean. Your last kill. How much? I ask immediately. Because it's always about money. Well, Fred says (instead of answering my question), think of a small ocean in Texas. Recently built. Ted Turner, I think. Probably. Since that guy just never dies. You kill a whole whale, Ahab-style. *Whale*-sized whale, I mean. Before drowning, I mean. Who drowning? I ask. The whale? Me? Someone else?

You drowning, he says. Because that's the idea, *last minute* entertainment, he says, like I'm being a little thick. Big angry white whale coming down on you from above. That's your last moment, see? Big white whale blacking out everything and then you die.

Um, I say. Sounds great, I add. (But I'm thinking, the *whale* dies in this scenario? I'm not quite seeing a dead *whale* from how Fred's described things.) I drum my fingers on the bar top for a second, and then all of a sudden Fred's hands do a couple of handstands, and take bows. (He's kind of a competitive guy, this Fred here. That's what I realize.)

Okay, Fred responds after a moment, and I realize he thinks I'm reluctant because of the money. He says: I admit that it's kind of expensive, it's as expensive, I guess, as flying to Mars without radiation protection. To your fresh new graveyard on another planet. That gets named after you. At least for a while, I mean. It's really really expensive. The deductible and the copayment, I mean. But *you* can afford it. I don't take in the implication of what he's just said. For a minute or two, I mean.

7.

We're moving onto other suggestions. Because I'm obviously not very excited about last-minute whaling. Fred has lots of brochures, of course. On paper. For old people like me. Who are most of his customers, I guess. They're about last-minute adventures, last-ditch attempts, last meals, end-of-the-world scenarios, kidnapped-by-terrorist options. I'm surprised that the other people at the bar are all so interested in this stuff—even the young modern-dance jiggle-finger people. *You guys aren't dying*, I say. Not yet, one tells me, as if he's making a joke. And it never hurts to plan ahead, he adds, and now I realize he thinks he's being witty. But what's more important is that I've just realized that Fred's implied that the bulk of this stuff is covered by insurance. Health insurance. For real, I mean. And I realize it makes sense. Because how you die can be expensive, really expensive. And I think: They want to keep you out of the hospitals. And even out of the nursing homes, the good nursing homes, anyway. Who can blame them? The insurance companies, I mean. The guys who are looking after *all of us* these days.

8.

So I'm looking at the Making-Mormon-Planets-A-Reality™ brochure when this guy butts in. He's talking to us about helping others. The other people who need to die? Fred is asking him. The guy is annoyed by Fred. Or maybe just generally sulky, the way most altruists are nowadays. No, he says, helping other people live better. And longer. Because longer is better. Giving your last moments *away*. To someone else. So they have some more moments to live through. Taking care of sick people, for example. That no one else will go near because they're contagious. Changing their bedpans. For example. Fred winces in feigned pain. He's a doctor, after all.

Fred and I decide to ignore this guy. You can totally do that at bars now. Without getting into fights I mean. It wasn't always that way. I remember, I totally remember. Bars were different in other ways too. No dismembered hands ever danced at bars. For example. That's kind of new.

9.

Tortured by terrorists? I'm asking Fred now, by *real* terrorists? I ask further: And people pay for this? Insurance companies *pay* for this? If the people are close enough to dying already, Fred tells me. And then he mentions studies that actually show that you live a little longer if you're being tortured. So it's not just paying off for the insurance companies. That result was totally surprising, Fred adds. Isn't empirical science amazing? someone else interjects. It's something to do with the immune system getting revved up, Fred explains. And now he's explaining it to everyone else at the bar who's near us. Like eating spicy food, he says. Only different, of course.

That immune system. So full of surprises. That we live longer if we're being tortured. This is the kind of fact that makes it look like we were designed for something by someone. Designed for

something bigger than us, I mean. It just doesn't look like an accident. Not even a little bit. So I'm thinking it would be good if philosophers knew about this. Because it sounds like a proof of God's existence. That he's out there. Making things better for us. In every way he can think of.

These brochures are so cool, one of the young finger-jigglers says, but do you only sell this stuff to dying people? Yeah, Fred says mournfully. Because it's really really expensive, and insurance doesn't kick in unless you're dying.

10.

I was so depressed, I really was. *Because I had nothing to live for.* (Did you notice that? Could you tell?)

But now ... you saw this coming, right? I'm sure you did. Because the point of this story *isn't* to surprise you. It really isn't. There aren't any surprises here. Not a single one. Even if it doesn't look that way.

I'm in my own movie. It's all being filmed, what's happening here. What's happening to me. It's for my relatives to watch. Those people my stock broker has done so much for. And it's for my descendants, too, whoever they are. Whatever they are. And maybe for all the other sentient beings we eventually mutate into. If this film becomes famous on Youtube, I mean. Which it totally could. This really isn't impossible. None of this is really impossible. Which is kind of thrilling. If you're in the right frame of mind.

I'm in a small room, and I'm panicked, I'm frightened almost to death. *Almost*. That's crucial. That it's *almost*.

It's an old-style room, hard to find these days, usually they show up only in old movies. Plaster walls, real paint on them, crown molding. No LED anywhere. Real windows. I mean: a real window. One real window, small and almost too high for me to pull myself into. Even with an adrenaline rush. Almost. Almost is so important in this genre. Like those movies from the seventies, the *nineteen* seventies. I just love the authenticity, although I'm way too frightened to focus on it *right now*. Because my heart is pounding, it really really is. Has your heart ever *pounded*? I mean with you just standing there watching something about to happen *to you*? Don't *miss* it. I mean it. Even if it's the last thing you ever do. Because it's definitely the way to go.

The *door*, the *door*. Always, it's the doors that matter. The way in. The way out. Think symbol. Think metaphor. Think allegory. Think myth. It's a wooden job, this door, with a lovely antique cylindrical brass doorknob. Keyhole underneath it. With a key, a big key. A *skeleton* key. Really. That I turn to lock the door, and that I then throw across the room. (Because I am so panicked. Because I am so panicked.)

I've also propped a chair up under the doorknob, by the way. To wedge the door shut from the inside. And I've pulled a rickety table up against the chair. To hold the chair in place.

Have you noticed that this kind of thing never works in the movies? And that it doesn't work in real life either?

What we've been waiting for. The viewers, I mean. You over there, for example, who's watching this. And me too. A giant lizard that has door-splintered its giant head into the room. Big toothful reptilian jaw, lots of slushy drool sloshing around those bright-white island teeth. Pointy. Most of them, anyway. And that big green ugly head waving back and forth, hissing and spitting at me.

Saying: *Hereee'zzz Jack.*

Hereee'zzz Jack. That's so cool, that's so original, that's so *fresh*. And then I notice for the second time, the small window, the one that's way too small for me to pry myself through, but perfect for getting stuck in when giant lizards are chasing you. I run for it, thrilled to death, while behind me I hear the door being torn apart into *splinters*. Totally torn apart into splinters, I bet.

Totally.

This is going to be quick. I can tell.