

Cole Figus

Nothingness

Nothingness. Consciousness. My room is dark save for a streetlight's illuminations on my wall in lines through my windows' blinds. I've peacefully awakened in the middle of the night, an occurrence I do not mind when I think about having a few hours left to sleep before I must get out of bed and go to work. It is a split second of tranquility. But the tranquility ends just as quickly as it began.

I become aware that my heart is beating at an insane BPM, and I am not breathing. My central nervous system jumps into crisis mode, inwardly screaming that my body is running out of oxygen. Adrenaline jolts my mind awake and heightens my senses so that I can react to the emergency, and I bolt upright in bed, throw off the sheets, and step down from the mattress. What do I do? The breath has been sucked out of me, and the resulting panic only intensifies my fear. I have no past experience to tell me what to do, but I move to get out of my room. There is no destination, but my body instinctively makes me run as if I can escape this suffocation anywhere other than my bed. I throw open my bedroom door, reach the hallway in front of the stairs leading down to the first floor, and hold myself up on the wooden banisters above the steps. As I peer down the staircase, my breath comes back to my lungs in gasps and I struggle to relearn how to breathe. Two minutes pass before my breathing returns to normal, and my heart stops pounding against my sternum. Once I've stopped gasping I listen to the silence in the house. No one in my family is awake. This deathly experience is a secret. The next day at six p.m. I have an unusual chest pain that pulses with my heartbeat. The pain is sharp and forces me to hold my hand over my heart as if to prevent it ripping free from my arteries. It retreats after ten seconds, but I am worried it will return. Later that night I wake up again with a racing heart rate amidst gasps for breath.

These symptoms begin repeating every day, with ten-second bouts of pain in my chest during afternoons, and nights haunted by sudden breathless wakeups. My nights get longer, and the wakeups become more frequent

until they sometimes occur as many as three times before morning. Each consecutive time I wake up, it is harder to fall back asleep because of the fear that I might have a heart attack and never wake up again. The anxiety over dying during the night scares me out of sleep again and again as the last glimmers of my consciousness imagine dying and the end of my existence. What is death? Does anything come after life?

I was raised by irreligious parents as my mother was told to leave her Lutheran church upon marrying my Jewish dad, who since childhood had never thought much about his Jewish faith. My extremely rational view of life and the universe further makes me doubtful of the divine, and I am not banking on a life after this one. So now, nightly facing the very convincing prospect of death, I am beginning to decide on what I think will happen when I die.

I realize I have never contemplated the absolute end to my existence. I have only known life, and when I die my life will cease. With no afterlife, I will become nothing: my heart will stop, my brain will die, there will only be an unfathomable nothingness. I find that I cannot comprehend the absolute end to my life, and this idea of a great void scares me because it is beyond my cognitive abilities to imagine. The closest I can get is that death will be like a dreamless sleep where there is no memory of life between falling asleep and waking up. Absolute nothingness.

These thoughts of not existing keep me up late into the night, day after day, and plague my thoughts while awake. They are more discomfoting than a hell to me because at least Hell will be something. Nothingness becomes a fear squatting in the back of my mind every minute of the day.

Struggling with these thoughts through two weeks of late night wakeups, my mind turns to a physical afterlife. My psychological and mental life will end abruptly, but my material body will not end so quickly. Some cells will continue to function for as much as a week or two after my heart stops, and surely my bones will be around much longer than any memory society has of my life. When thinking about this I feel that I must use the third person—my corpse is not me, but is instead Cole's corpse. I am only my mind, which will have gone dark. Cole as a living entity will die, but the matter that once comprised my body cannot end. Those atoms, elements, and compounds will be recycled into new forms, perhaps even new life someday,

but the matter will never be gone. The Matter Formerly Known As Cole will transform between living and nonliving entities hundreds or thousands of times, until eventually the sun turns supernova and destroys the Earth. The Matter Formerly Known As Cole will then take on other forms in the universe as parts of planets, stars, and space dust.

Throughout this ordeal I do not tell anyone what is happening on a nightly basis. For better or for worse, as a philosophy to my life, I accept what is coming to me because I feel worrying about what might happen sours life, which is much too short anyway. Every night I go to bed thinking that I very well may die, and though death at seventeen would not be ideal, I am happy with the life I have led. As three weeks go by, thoughts of death plague my daily schedule. I reach a point where a prism of death shadows everything I experience, and by the end of the third week, I accept it. I suddenly find that I am comfortable with dying and understand that though I will not exist anymore, not all of me is over.

This gives me the idea of materialism—that I am nothing but matter. I am Cole, a Homo sapien, but when the collection of matter that makes up my body breaks down I am a functioning life form made up of organ systems, organs, tissues, and cells, all of which are living. But when I break these down further something interesting happens: I become components of cells, then compounds, and even further than that I am simply elements, atoms, electrons, quarks, and smaller pieces of mass still, all of which are nonliving. I am a highly organized living being made up of very nonliving matter. Humans are so highly organized that we have consciousness, and have in many ways moved beyond Nature because of what we can do with it. In terms of chemistry, I am nothing more than stardust. My existence is possible only because all elements heavier than the lightest three have been forged via exploding supernovae stars billions of years ago. Genetically, I am a random assortment of DNA that has been evolving from the first replicating single cell to the dynamic Homo sapien species of which I am a member.

So what if I do die? I am not religious so I do not feel there will be any eternal judgment of my life, or that there is a heaven I have to strive to be invited to, so in a way life is a meaningless, unnecessary fluke. I am on a random rock, in a random galaxy, in an infinite universe. I am small and entirely insignificant. But the beautiful thing is that I am alive, and these

notions do not squash the value of living. A meaningless life is even more beautiful to me because I do not have to be here at all. I am a fluke that happened to be born in America to middle class parents who want me to do well in life. I have money in my wallet, food in my stomach, and easy access to more the next time I get hungry. My life is better than 99% of all humans that have ever existed, and every second I get to live is a beautiful gift from a universe that is indifferent to my existence.

After four full weeks of this wilderness, I have an exceptionally bad wakeup that convinces me I am about to have a heart attack. I get out of bed, get my breathing under control, and calmly tell my parents that I might need to go to the hospital. We wait ten minutes to see if any symptoms come back, and they do not. Then twenty. Then thirty. I am fine again. I go back to bed and have a peaceful night's sleep for the first time in a month. The next day I make a doctor's appointment, and when my heart's rhythm is tested they say nothing is wrong. The doctor tells me that if the problem persists I should come back for a second appointment and more rigorous tests, and I uneasily go about my life. Though the problem remains unidentified, I never experience the day pain or the night wakeups again; it ends just as mysteriously as it began. However, I now have an entirely new view of life as the thought that I may have died from the problem makes me feel like I have a new lease on life. In accepting death I find that life is even more beautiful.