

TWO POINT FIVE BILLION

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In the entirety of our relationship, you will ask me a variation of that same question a total of one hundred and eight times. Did I dream last night? I'm not sure, and from the way you tap your pen against the clipboard, I know you think I'm being evasive. So I tell you that in all likelihood, I did dream last night, and that maybe the new drugs are having a positive effect. What did I dream about? A brief segue back to childhood, probably. Conflicting feelings push against each other, vying for attention. Contentment. Confusion. Resentment. Fear. Abandonment. The usual.

My mother is rolling dough in our old house, the one we lived in before it was gutted by the fire. Beside her, a kettle is boiling and the steam from it rises to an overhead light. The lit bulb gives the steam shape, a column sculpted by the shafts of sunlight coming through the window. Through this window, my mother can see me and I can see her. I am playing outside in the garden and my toys are scattered across the grass. Now there is a stranger standing amongst them. My mother screams and runs away, leaving me alone with him. The act of abandonment sickens me, drives a spike down through the pit of my stomach. I am rooted to the spot, the fear a solid and immobile thing lodged in my throat. I cannot speak or move.

I see my mother running in the distance. She is cradling something precious. A child? Am I the child? Or am I, in this particular moment, the stranger, standing amidst the toys and trinkets? I can feel the grass tickling against my bare feet, freshly-cut and springy to the touch. The smell takes me somewhere else, the sun bleaching everything around us.

You're writing this down. You think it is important. One day you tell me how you think that dreaming marks an interesting parallel with my situation, or at least, my situation as I've been tried to describe it. Dreams rarely follow a fixed narrative: time, consciousness and perception are all allowed melt into each other with little apparent regard for rhyme or reason. The laws of physics and established logic become fleeting, arbitrary notions. I cough but do not argue the

point. I am having a reasonably good day. Some quirk of toxicology is allowing me a degree of focus that is rare: mostly, the best the drugs can achieve is a sort of temporary numbness.

You tell me that you will allow me visitors for the first time since the new treatment. Back ninety-six days and I am screaming at you, because you have to strain to remember and I have to strain not to. I am there now, the restraints cold and pinching the sides of my arms. This was what they wanted, I tell you, this was what they wanted all along. You will try to comfort me when I surface from the darkness this first time. I have soiled myself and you tell me it was just a side-effect of the drugs. I was somewhere else, I reply. I am always somewhere else.

I am an old man, thin fist clenched around a plastic handrail. The view is from a semi-translucent tram, sleek and silent. As we travel, the buildings slide up and down in time, swelling and contracting like a sine wave. I am a boy on a bus, the metal handrail greasy with clenched palm prints. My father tells me that our stop is next and I can finally press the red button that will bring the whole bus grinding to a stop. When I get off, my knees are throbbing. I gave my seat up for a pregnant woman three stops earlier and stood for the remainder, swaying with every twist of the tramline. The woman looks concerned and I smile and tell her that I'm younger than I look. It is an obvious lie, but it makes her a little more comfortable. She leans against the window with her head resting against her hand, long fingers stretched delicately across her cheek. More than four decades earlier, I am watching Carol sit in exactly the same way, sandaled feet tapping impatiently against a cast iron balcony. Outside, an unseasonably heavy downpour is drowning the first day of our Sicilian honeymoon, sending people scurrying for cover amidst the narrow Palermo streets. She hasn't brought many warm clothes and I drape my light jumper around her shoulders.

Nine years later, my hands are shaking. I take a last drag and hand what's left of the cigarette back to Ernst. He tells me that it may be my life's work, but no-one would blame me if I walked away now. My teeth are chattering as Ernst drops the cigarette and crushes it underfoot. He rolls another one – quickly, because smoking is forbidden on the complex grounds. We are standing in one of those little open cloisters within the main building; you might call them courtyards, but that implies some sort of rustic charm that does not sit well with the ventilation pipes that crowd around us, jutting in and out of the wall like stainless steel sea-serpents. I should not be smoking and strictly speaking, neither should Ernst. But he's not the one getting strapped in. He's not the one whose urine is being analysed for abnormalities both before and after.

How will they categorise them? How did they analyse the rats and primates, before resorting to dissection? They will want to dissect me, I know. They long for it, until they risk another, after they think they know what went wrong the first time around. The horrible truth, as I see it, is that nothing went wrong, everything happened that was supposed to happen. But they do not want to hear that.

Do my hands shake because of the cold? Because I do not know what is going to happen? Because I do? It does not matter. Seven minutes and thirteen seconds before the technician calls for us, my hands shake anyway. My fear is starting to rub off on Ernst, and to take his mind – our minds – off it, I ask him to tell me a story. Anything he can think of: maybe one of the folk tales his father told him. It takes him a moment to recall one.

A man is waiting for a train and a stranger suddenly appears. The stranger offers the man anything he wants, so long as he goes with the stranger at the end of his life. The man is no fool, and recognises the devil in disguise. But though he is wise, he is also clever, and thinks to trick the devil. So after a great deal of thought, he asks if he could live forever. The devil laughs inside, because this is an old, old wish that he's heard a thousand times before. But the man has not finished. He wants to live forever, but not as an immortal, with all those he loves dying around him. He wants to wait until a moment of his life comes along that is absolutely perfect, and then keep it going forever. Not frozen as a painting, but a living breathing instant that will never get old, never become tiring. A mood of pure happiness that would never be extinguished. The devil curses the man's cleverness, but a deal is a deal. So he hands the man an old pocket-watch and tells him –

The technician calls to us. They are almost ready to go. Just a few minutes more.

Two days after allowing me visitors, you have a chat with Ernst, let him know what to expect, what subjects he might want to steer clear of. He steps into the room and I do not recognise him. Eleven years earlier, I do not know him. Carol introduces us in a bar in Stuttgart – she would not appreciate the irony of doing so. Ernst is married to a second cousin of hers. He is older than I expect, and thickly-bearded. He hunches his shoulders when he smokes, like an ex-convict waiting for some unfinished vendetta to creep up on him and slip a knife between his ribs. Carol – my wife, my fiancée, my girlfriend – likes him. She says he stands out from the greyness that envelops so many of the other scientists I work with. She thinks he could stop me from slipping into tedium. We meet again the following year, as colleagues. He smokes hand-rolled cigarettes, the papers black and the smell exotic.

I smile at him standing by the door of my room. He holds his coat bunched up under his arm and tries to look cheerful. I congratulate him on the shaved look, but it only confuses him. He tells me how sorry he is, but doesn't really know what he's apologising for. The entire project was being put through a major procedural review. Dozens more animal tests were being fast-tracked, particularly the higher primates. Exhaustive behavioural monitoring and constant psychological evaluation. They will all be dead in less than two months, I tell him. Ernst doesn't know how to respond and stares dumbly at the back of his huge hands. I think he pretends not to hear. The morning after the last chimpanzee finally dies, he visits me and tells me the bad news as if I hadn't already known. Half the subjects had killed themselves in the first week, dashing their heads against walls or choking themselves on their restraints. The remainder refused to eat and just wasted away, regardless of force-feeding. Someone terms it "Quantum Psychosis" and inspires your successor to write a lengthy paper on it. It is never officially published, of course.

Forgive me, I know you don't like me talking about him, any more than he likes it when I mention you. "Fatuous comparisons," he calls it. Yet comparisons are all I have to hold onto, surely. How else to define character as to proclaim that you are you and he is him? You are small and precise, careful with your words in a remarkably honest way. He is a large man, broad and far taller than me. He stoops over everyone he meets, peers down through glasses he wears like binoculars, the same ones he fiddles with to hide the focus of his attention. He smiles all the time, even when he's carrying the worst of news.

Ernst apologises again, this time for Carol. I knew she would not come, even before the experiment. Ten years before, I make dinner for our first anniversary, before we get drunk and emotional and alarmingly sincere with each other. She promises me that she will never become a waiting widow, like her mother. On our second date, we are in a restaurant near the quays, the tide high and lapping at the stone-grey banks. She is twenty-seven then but will always be beautiful. We talk about our families and she says her father worked in the North Sea. He was home for three weeks and away for six, refitting the oil pipelines that ran along the ocean floor. Her mother fretted and shared it with the whole family. She says it casually and I do not press her. A year later and she accidentally spills wine across us both. I am mopping it up with a paper towel when she starts to cry. She whispers that she can put up with almost anything, but she would never live in dread of a late-night phone call, not again.

She likes that my job is boring and enjoys teasing me about the fact. I laugh along. Years down the line, I am hiding things from her, little white lies of omission. I tell myself that it is because I

don't want to worry her, and maybe it is true. My work changes gradually, picking up momentum after meeting Ernst. We spark well off each other, sharing a quiet love of the improbable, a dream of things unseen, deeds undone. He has contacts that get us a minor funding. I have a university tenure that leads to government interest. We are signing our names in a bright room with too few windows and armed guards outside. We are given access to equipment and research material far in advance of anything we thought possible.

I throw up into the virgin snow forty-five seconds before the technician appears. Ernst repeats himself: I can still walk away. I wipe my mouth and smile weakly. Someone has to do it. I dust frost off my knees and we go inside.

It's cold in here too, a rigorously maintained chill, gases rendered inert, microchips and motherboards susceptible to a mere grain of dust. Those sections of the building are kept off-limits to all but a handful of trained staff, bound in protective gear that shields the computer's inner workings from any human contaminants. We joke over the size of the thing. Technology striving to minimize, and we call its bluff: push out and expand, luxuriate in as much space as we can soak up.

The accelerator tunnel runs in a perfect underground circle with a circumference of just over four kilometres. We've walked it many times, the way lit bright as neon daylight by strips of fluorescent light enclosed into the walls, the ceiling, the floor. We do not walk it today, because someone else has done it – sixteen someones, checking each and every metre. Four thousand and nine in all. They have already reported the all-clear before I sit down, my colleagues already slipping the additional gear onto my arms, legs, chest and head. Clocks of various sizes and descriptions. Recording equipment, for my heartbeat, my lung capacity, brainwaves, sweat and blood flow. A urine sample is collected, for comparative study later. My teeth are rattling, and my clenched jaw doesn't stop it, only makes the sound louder. The echo carries down the tunnel to my left and right. Ahead, they sit behind monitoring equipment like impresarios preparing for a grand recital. Wires gush out of their grand pianos like meat through a mincing sluice. Goggles cling to sweaty foreheads, hiding prematurely receding hairlines.

I am standing beside our bed with my arms outstretched. Something small and hard and cold is stuck in my throat and I can't get any words out, none that mean anything. Carol is pulling a suitcase across the floor and her face is streaked with tears I should be sharing. I feel a welling around my eyes, but I cannot cry. She doesn't know where she's going and wouldn't tell me if she did. Would anything be different if I had told her earlier? If I'd elaborated for more than a

fraction on what we were trying to pull off? Four months later, Ernst is holding my shoulder and telling me that no-one will think any different of me for pulling out, even now. I tell him that he is just pretending to be earnest, but the pun is lost through the stammer.

He steps back. They all step back. I hold my breath and cough into the throat-mike. Behind the rows of monitors, Ernst pulls on a set of earphones and talks into a microphone. Halfway through his sentence, his words crackle into my ears. I nod to the technician, who nods to his assistant. Everyone is asked of their part to play, and they all nod curtly, nervously. Everything is ready. Everything is set.

At exactly fifteen minutes past four, November twenty-eighth, everything goes.

You ask me if I can prevent this. Ernst holds my shoulder and I can tell him to un-strap me, to let me go. You have asked me this before and you will ask me again. You are asking but not listening. Everything is as it should be. You talk of things falling into place because you believe that the act of falling denotes some degree of control.

You are a punctual, exact person. There is a day when that will change. You have come to the hospital from another hospital, but you do not say this and I do not ask. I do not need to – I have been piecing it together since the day we met, gathering clues without thinking about it, the passport photos you keep in your purse, the worry lines that have been growing around your eyes. You come in late and snap at me. It is out of character and you say you don't mean it, but you do. It is the last time we will see each other, before your successor and then his successor and all the ones after that. You cry and do not understand why I didn't tell you, why I didn't warn you. I do not know what to say, or how to say it. You ask if I can tell the future, but the most honest answer is that I don't have one. All I have is the past, but I'm living it all the time, all at once. I might tell you what I will dream of next week, because this is clearer to me, because the words fall into my mouth to describe this, and I finish saying them at the second you interrupt me. Because that is how it plays out.

Once, you tell me of a dream you have had all your life, ever since you were a child. You are on a rope swing and someone is pushing you harder and harder. At first, you are exhilarated, but this quickly turns to fear. It is too much, too soon. You try to ask them to stop, but they do seem to hear you. You try to scream out, but the force of motion has seized your stomach, your lungs, your vocal cords. You know that soon the swing will reach the apex of its arc and you will be flung up into the air. For an instant, you hang frozen there, the earth fallen out below you like a

small blue orb. And then you plummet back. In your dream, which you say you always remember having, there is the premonition; no, the *certainty* of what will happen from the first push. But you don't cry out then, you never try to halt or pervert the inevitable. You are a child, eager to play, and every time you hope it will work out differently. Perhaps it is folly to believe this, but what else can you do?

I am six and my father makes me my birthday present, so proud of the skill and craft in his hands. It is a little paper drum that mocks a moving image. On the outside of the drum are a series of vertical slits. On the inside are a series of drawings, each slightly different – one for each corresponding slit. Look through a slit on one side of the drum and you can see almost make out the drawing on the inside facing you. You spin the drum, and a flickering picture of movement emerges. I see a man in a Victorian bathing costume using a skipping rope. Up and down he hops, for as long as you keep spinning. The hand tires, and the movement becomes erratic. You see glimpses – enough to guess the movement, the shape, the direction. But details are smudged.

Ernst is standing up and ready to leave when I ask him to finish the story about the man who sold his soul for a chance at eternal happiness. He does not want to at first. Because I must already know what he is going to say, he tells me. Because the story is a macabre one and he thinks I would dwell on it. Because of how uncomfortable I make him feel, staring and staring and smiling at him with my shaved head and drugged eyes.

But he tells me anyway, because that was what was going to happen.

The devil gives the man an old pocket-watch and tells him that at the time of his life that he felt was the happiest, he should wind it, just once, and that moment would continue forever. The devil disappears and the man continues on his way, happy that he had got the better end of the deal. Soon after, he meets a young woman and falls head over heels in love. Should he use the watch now? Best not. He hadn't finished his apprenticeship and was still living from hand to mouth; he would wait until they got married and had a decent place to live. The years roll on and things go well for the man. But every time he comes close to a moment when he might finally wind up the watch – his son's first steps, buying the big house with the garden, his daughter's wedding day, the birth of his first grandchild - he is struck by the suspicion that things could always get better.

Close to my tram stop there is a bookshop and inside it I am straining my eyes to read the small type in a leather-bound book of European folktales. The assistant throws in a small magnifying glass for the price of the book and I thank her, my voice hoarse and cracked. I read the book that night, and come across Ernst's story halfway through. Though the setting and date vary considerably, the essence of the story remains the same and I can hear his voice saying certain phrases aloud, twenty-three years after he died of a heart-attack. They tell me he was on a bicycle when it happened, waiting for the traffic lights to change. Thirty-six years ago, he coughs in the sterile hospital air and says that the man's life ended without him ever using the watch. The devil laughed as he took it back, to keep aside for the next fool who dared think he could hold onto an instant of perfect happiness.

I lie on starched hospital sheets and listen to the sound of the machine that breathes for me. A nurse comes around to check up on me but I cannot speak to her because of the clotted tubes in my throat. Instead, I put a lifetime's energy behind one leaden arm and grasp her hand. I know what's coming, even if she doesn't. She half-sits on the edge of the bed and smiles at me. So does my mother after my first day of school. She is waiting at the gate and listens attentively to the rush of words coming out of my small mouth. The things I'd learned, the people I'd met... I say less with every successive day, each successive year. But she still smiles.

Ernst has been told that any effective treatment would take decades to develop, and probably wouldn't happen within my lifetime. He's wrong, and he almost asks me why before thinking better of it. They're letting me out right now, a kind orderly who unlocks the doors with the wave of a gloved hand. I'm their longest-serving resident and they've made me a cake to celebrate. I can't count the candles they've put on it and I'm grateful when someone helps me to blow them out.

We're making love in Carol's old bedroom as quietly as we can. We came back into the country to celebrate her 30th birthday with her family when they finally got the call her mother had been dreading for the last four decades. Carol's father had been retired for three years and was crossing the road to get a litre of milk when he was hit by a passing truck. He died instantly, the ambulance crew concluded. Carol's mother didn't say much at the time; she just had this sad confused look that she seemed to wear for the rest of her life. After the funeral, Carol begs me to help her feel something other than the cold stone weighing on her belly. Afterwards, we lie curled into each other and I stroke the hair on the back of her neck. I tell her about my father and everything I can remember about him. He is drinking tea and eating toast at the kitchen table and he tells me a fact for the day before I go to school. The distance in miles to the moon. The

number of people killed by influenza after the first world war. The top speed of a great white shark. The man who first developed a means of accurately gauging longitude. That every mammal on earth beats its heart an average of two point five billion times in its lifetime, some fast, some slow. A mouse. An elephant. A postman. A blue whale. A fisherman. A chimpanzee. A scientist. You. Me.

At exactly fifteen minutes past four, November twenty-eighth, they all beat at once.

It's the one moment I cannot focus on with any great detail. The accelerator powers up and releases the stream, which makes a complete four kilometre circuit of the tunnel in point zero zero two seconds before hitting me at point zero zero twenty-one. There is footage of me disappearing for an instant. There is no fanfare, no boom, no flash of light. If you blink at the wrong moment you'll miss it. I recall nothing but a sudden sensation of something like bubbles rushing past me, through me, and a total absence of light and darkness. Then it's gone, the one moment I can barely remember amidst every other one I can.

Ernst thinks the drugs have completely subdued me, erased the man he knew. Why else would I be smiling so placidly? I cannot help myself. I will be in an institution for a third of my life, and perhaps it is the dull routine that saves me. So many hours and days and years spent watching the same sun creep across the same section of floor before angling up the wall and illuminating the same golden corner of the table. Is it so different for everyone else? It does not hold me, imprison me. It cannot. There is so much else to drown it out.

I am drinking a can of illicit cider in the side of a field with a teenage friend. We talk about life and how different it will be for us. I am stumbling over my first words to Carol, wondering if this could lead anywhere while we run out of a registry office with friends throwing rice and cheering us on. I am helping my mother decorate the tree when my father arrives home with a Labrador puppy and announces that he's got me an early Christmas present. I look across a crowded bar at a girl and wonder what her name is and we are already having our final fight. I am on an airplane for the first time ever, my stomach clenching like a fist, adding to the excitement. I am standing on a ferry travelling down the Huangpu river and Carol snuggles into my arm. I arrive back early from college to surprise my parents; my mother is leaning over a stove while she talks to my father, and it is like I never left. I am celebrating the success of a minor funding grant with friends and colleagues but I am also on my honeymoon, drinking cocktails and dancing under an Italian thunderstorm. I am wearing shorts and splashing about in a rock-pool, watching tiny fish dart from my bare feet. My mother calls to me and I look back, blinking in the sunshine. I am

dying and I am not alone. Even after the nurse has let go of my hand and the heart monitor starts shrieking a warning siren, I am not alone.

You hide the pity in your eyes better than Ernst does, but the tell-tale flicker is always there when you look at me, today, tomorrow, yesterday. I want you to understand how briefly, eternally beautiful this lifetime is, but I don't have the words. There will be no-one else like me. The project is on indefinite pause until they can find a way of preventing anyone else from becoming "unstuck". Ernst says they'll get it right in the end and I can't help laughing.

Nothing ends, I tell him, nothing ever really ends. A single heartbeat is never gone. It's with you forever, just waiting until you have the time to feel it again. I count to two point five billion and feel the bubbles streaming through me again, until I finally succumb.