

Are There Enough Chairs in Heaven?

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All I see is darkness.

Actually, that's not quite an accurate description. What I should really say is that all I see is a fuzz reminiscent of light, over a black background. Kind of like the picture you see when you close your eyes after staring at a laptop screen for hours on end. Locked in your own personal abyss of a room at 3am – likely binge watching a socialite drama. You know, that pixelated vision you get, where you know you can't see anything because you've shut your eyes, yet you get that feeling that something is lurking there. Maybe it's just the light from the screen imprinting itself onto your retina, or perhaps, there really is something there. Something on the edge of your conscious which you shove deep down because you know it exists, but you refuse to see it.

Or maybe I'm just paranoid, or even delusional.

Who knows, but either way, I digress. I've been here for what I can only assume is quite some time now and well I simply don't know where here is. It's really starting to concern me because, I can't seem to move my body. I can't even feel it. I definitely have a body, I have memories of a life that certainly would not have been possible without having access to a body. My own flesh vehicle to transport my mind and add physicality to my ever-so-carefully chosen words.

For example, I distinctly remember the trickle of the first rain drops on an autumn day, a forlorn hope of water doomed to their own personal groundhog day of free falling through a magnificently grey sky. Only to rest in my hair and evaporate back into their fluffy castles up above.

I remember the sound of screeching car tyres and a screaming baby.

I remember how my father used to tuck me in at night when I was a child. His voice resonated, a thunderous boom, but without the malice and ferocity of a thunderstorm. His words would pierce your ears like a dolphin pierces the ocean water as it performs acrobatics for no one in particular, the pictures they created were just as beautiful.

When I was in high school I got into a fight with my best friend over, I can't actually remember what it was about, but I do remember the feeling when he punched me. Absolutely nothing. Well, at first, later it stung like a lover scorned, but for the first few minutes I didn't feel a thing. Kind of like now, in my comatose state of nowhere in particular.

I haven't felt a thing for a while actually. David Gilmour might have described me as *un-comfortably numb*.

The dazed feeling, or lack of feeling, I'm currently experiencing is one I remember well, in one form or another. However I can't help but remember random physical sensations from my life. Like the ache in my chest after sprinting around the track at school, it felt like my heart was a foreign object, trapped in a prison of skin and bone. Pounding on the bars of its cell trying to break through the beams but failing miserably. I felt something similar when I found out my wife had died, except that was more like the second chapter in the bestselling story of *The Great Escape of the Prisoner Heart*.

In that chapter our valiant hero had almost lost his strength and fallen to his knees. The prisoner in the adjacent cell, Mr Stomach, told him to quit before it was too late. He said that a prison break was impossible and that the best way to get out of jail was a hunger strike. Mr Stomach fought vigorously, until the guards came. They dragged him away kicking and screaming. I'd heard that they force fed him for weeks until he eventually became brainwashed into the routine of eating, despite a lack of hunger. After that the Prisoner Heart stopped trying to break out of his cell for a while, but he still longed for freedom, one day.

What's that noise? It sounds like a faint metronome of some kind, verging on the edge of my conscience.

Sorry, where was I? Ah yes, the memories of my senses. Just after I'd finished college I tasted the most extraordinary cake. I was sat in a quaint coffee shop on the outskirts of town, I decided to go there to try and clear my head a little – I had writers block and it stood to reason that a day out of the city might help with that.

Anyway, there I was, laptop open, struggling to write, when a shadow crept across the room, eventually blocking out my light. I looked up from the screen, glasses askew, and there she was. Tall, but not taller than me, brunette and wrapped in a draping, checked scarf. She held her hands a little awkwardly when she asked if she could sit with me - due to how busy the shop had become. I'd barely even noticed it filling up, I was so lost in my *lack of work*.

Which brings me to the cake. The strange girl had a slice of red velvet cake she'd bought with her coffee. We hadn't been talking all that long when she offered me some. Usually I'd decline – I find any situation where a stranger offers me something a bit unsettling – but something inside me didn't want to ever say no to her. That's when she carefully scooped some of the cake up with her spoon, making sure to catch just the right amount of cream to complete the golden ration, and fed it to me.

Before you get ahead of yourself, it wasn't seductive at all. This isn't that kind of memory. It was just the most perfect, insignificant moment, that I needed that day. The cake is actually a little irrelevant. Oh it was baked beautifully, but I enjoyed it so much because of the company. It's like my eyes were feasting for the first time, and that made the food even sweeter.

The metronomic ticking seems to be speeding up and getting quieter. Whatever could it be?

I saw that girl again, many times in fact. Before long we were courting, until one night I asked her to come away with me. I'd become rather infatuated, I hadn't written in months and I didn't even feel the usual burning desire to start again – I usually get that when I take a break.

Anyway, about half way through our romantic getaway I took her down to a private beach after dark. I remember the feeling of lukewarm, golden sand between my toes – worming its way into every nook and cranny like a parasitic worm trying to find its way into a large intestine – did I mention my contempt and disgust for sand?

After a long walk and some thoughtful conversation I finally did it. It felt like my stomach had recently discovered adrenaline and had decided that tonight it would partake in its first bungee jump, followed by a skydive, followed a large, unsettling meal and finished off with a second, more dangerous, bungee jump. I bent my left knee to the ground and asked her to marry me – she made me the happiest man in the world, or at least in our world.

But then I went and did something terrible. I consummated the marriage. It wasn't our first time together, we'd *consummated* many times before, but this time, the time directly after our wedding, it was different.

I got her pregnant.

At first we were very happy, our families were over the moon, our friends – or should I say, her friends, as I tended to spend most of my time alienating people – were so supportive. It was perfect. Until it wasn't.

You see it turned out that the love of my life had a condition that rendered her incredibly weak and meant that her immune system really didn't allow her much immunity to anything at all. Over the course of the nine months till Labour Day we were in and out of hospital. I begged her to give the baby up, in this situation she could have aborted it and no one would have batted an eye lash – I didn't want to lose our child but how could I stand helplessly and watch the woman I loved die a slow death? But she refused. She told me that she couldn't end another life to save her own and made me promise to love the child for both of us, in the event that she didn't make it - and she didn't.

I had lost the only person I cared about more than myself. She passed right in front of my eyes. One minute she was squeezing my hand while she pushed out our daughter, and the next I was squeezing hers begging her not to leave me.

I remember being dragged out of the room by two burly nurses, I also remember punching one of them in the face for taking me away from her. As the hours passed I calmed a little and resolved myself to love and care for my daughter, for our daughter, until death and in the afterlife. However I knew, I still know, that I was incapable of loving her the way her mother would have. I just wasn't built that way.

The hands on the clock face ticked away, *much like the fading metronome in my head*, then finally a doctor came out of the room at the end of the hallway. She marched with a sullen purpose and I already knew what they were going to tell me.

There had been complications with the birth, it'd have been ironically Shakespearean if it wasn't happening to me. If it wasn't upending my life, wrenching my soul out through my screaming mouth.

I asked to see them, I needed some time to say goodbye.

The doctor kindly let me into their room and shut the door, allowing me my final privacies with the two women I loved so much.

That was the beginning of the final chapter of *The Great Escape of the Prisoner Heart*. In this climactic ending our protagonist had bided his time long enough and the Prisoner Heart decided to dig his way out of jail.

I climbed the stairs of the hospital until I reached the roof. You can see where this is going can't you? I guess even in the most unpredictable of griefs, I was more predictable than ever.

I reached the top. I stood on the edge, hugging my recently deceased baby girl and I jumped.

After that I woke up here, in the dark, alone, unable to move or feel – not just my body, but anything.

Do you feel sorry for me?

Do you condemn me?

Will you shed a tear for me?

I doubt it. But understand this, life wasn't a gift for me. I struggled every single day and if there is even the slightest chance of an afterlife where my daughter can grow up with a Father as well as a Mother, then it's a chance I was, am and are, willing to take.

I just hope that there's enough chairs in heaven for a man like me.