

## 106 Billion

Lately, my lungs have taken to generating a drowned crackling noise, like Rice Krispies snapping in a fire and grumbling at their fate. The sound is grotesquely beautiful: inhuman and sweetly rhythmic. Lying in bed, listening to the labor of my own lungs would almost take my mind off the fact that I'm dying if it didn't simultaneously bring to my attention the fact that I'm dying.

My doctors never told me how little time I had left; I learned that from the stoic silence of the whitewashed hospital walls. They've seen death take the living too many times, and they carry the stories in cold tile. The premise is always largely the same. The disease varies, and the victim it chooses ranges by a number of ascertainable factors and values, but in the end death inevitably creeps in among a flurry of beeping and wailing until everything is stilled.

As the patients rotate, the families follow. At the end of each day the doctors have the luxury of returning home and living a life outside of the hospital. The walls aren't so lucky. They endure the task of watching every action, every breath, and every death. They hoard the memories and bury them away to keep the air clean.

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I wake up and my mother is holding my hand and whispering something into our palms. I can't make out her words, but her voice hums into my palm. I think it's a prayer. She often talks of angels and tells me they'll be with me to aid in my passing. She says she knows that once I get to heaven God will appoint me as one of his angels, and I'll be able to come back to earth and help other kids with their struggle, too.

I wonder if her God would still be so eager to receive me in heaven knowing how many times I've cursed his name and the body he gave me. I wonder why her God has the time to create angels to assist in dying, but not to cure the suffering themselves.

I don't ask my mother any of these questions because I know they would break her heart. She means well and her stories help her sleep at night, so I leave her vision of the world unscathed. I smile and say thank you while I think that too often it's the dying that have to comfort the living.

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The next time I wake it's very early and the walls are my only company. Across the room they part to give me a view of sunlight and foliage through the blinds. I can't decide whether showing me a world I'll never step into again is courteous or cruel. I might never leave this room again, but I have my stainless steel tables and rough cotton sheets. If I get nostalgic for nature, there's a flower vase on the nightstand by my bed.

A few days ago when my father brought in the three crisp, white lilies and placed them in the vase next to me, I wondered if they would outlive me. Now, going on day three, they seem to be as strong and beautiful as the day they were picked. I, on the other hand, vomited on myself when I sat up too quickly yesterday.

I ask the walls how much time they think I have left.

The walls don't answer.

Not much, I infer, because in a hospital, silence is never good.

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It's dark now and my chest is very, very heavy. Fluid takes up most of the real estate in my lungs, and oxygen has been kicked to the curb. My breaths grow shallower and weaker as my lungs fold in on themselves to fill the void.

I lean over the rail of my bed and try to empty the contents of my body onto the floor. Maybe if I can cough out my heart and my stomach and my lungs there will be enough room for air to sweep through my torso. Maybe if I just let myself slip inside out through my lips, nothing will be able to hurt anymore.

I'm spewing me around the room when a nurse comes in, and now I'm spewing me onto her. There is me on equipment, and on the bed, and on the floor. Trails of me mark my journey down the hallway and mark my territory in my new room on the second floor of the ICU.

The walls hold onto flecks of my blood and cradle them until a nurse has time to wipe them clean.

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In the ICU my mother is with me, always. My father comes when he can, working from his laptop in my room or in the lobby, but my mother stays stationed in a chair at my bedside, sometimes holding my hand, sometimes stroking my hair, sometimes cradling her own face when she can't choke back her tears. Her eyes are always red.

I wonder if I could count all the tears that have been shed for me. I wonder how many of them I deserve, and how many were born from guilt, fear, and deception. What have I done that's so extraordinary that the world should be any worse off with me gone? I could come up with reasons, but they'd probably be biased.

106 billion people have lived and died on this earth. We don't even remember a fraction of them; the world just let them slip into negligence. People who have lived more notably and suffered more nobly than I, drowning in my own body on a comfortable bed in a clean hospital. I've done nothing but live for myself. These 106 billion dead people have done just as much for you as I haven't, but a tear shed for each one of them would take dozens of lifespans that you don't have, so don't waste your time on me.

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They say that when you're dying your life flashes before your eyes, but when you've been dying for as long as I have, your mind seems to improvise.

I remember my 5th grade graduation where I broke the heel on my first pair of big-girl shoes playing kickball. I remember a kiss with a boy on top of the monkey bars. I remember a secret handshake. I remember learning to cover my face with makeup, and then relearning how to be comfortable in my own skin. I remember learning how to drive. I remember crashing a car. I remember winning a science fair.

I keep remembering. I start to remember things from a life that isn't mine.

I remember a boyfriend I never had. The way he smelled and his voice in my ear. We went to school in Massachusetts. I studied history. I published papers. We grew up. We bought a house. We had a baby. A beautiful baby.

She's two weeks old. I stare at her and wonder how her tiny body keeps her alive at all.

She's four now. I don't have time to work.

She's nine now. She's beautiful and smart.

She's fifteen now. She's sick. I'm rushing her to the hospital. What do you mean her lungs? We pay the bills. I have to work.

She's sixteen now. I sleep in a chair in a hospital room waiting for her to drift into consciousness.

I'm wearing her blood, now. She's coughing up her lungs in the ICU.

I'm looking at my baby from this life I didn't live. My beautiful, fragile baby that I brought into a world that has only hurt her and torn her body apart. I'm looking at the mess I brought upon beautiful perfection. I can't stop crying. I cry every day. My eyes are always red.

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At some point the memories stop coming. My head is pounding. I can't separate my senses; the world looks loud and sounds bright.

It takes all of my concentration to force my mind back between the walls in the ICU. The room is spinning faster than I remember, but I can feel my mother is still here, holding my hand, trying to ground me with her stare. I look hard at her, and try to force my body into action. Words are clawing at my skull, and I need to say them. I need to tell her thank you. I need her to stop crying. I need her to understand what's happening.

I know in my mind that I'm dying, but my body is floating in a far-away bliss and it doesn't seem so bleak from the inside. I could stretch this moment into forever. I could stay here, holding my mother's hand as time drips away long after the rest of the world has moved on.

I need my mother to understand that this isn't about me anymore. My death is about anyone but me because while I'm indulging myself in this new world of light and sound and breath, I'm leaving her in the old world I've come to hate. I need to tell her I'm sorry. I don't want my legacy in the world to be a scar on my mother's heart. I don't want my death to take away her life, too. I could handle anything else.

I want so badly for my mouth to form all these words and for my hand to reach out and touch hers one more time, but at this point my body is too useless to move. All I can do is watch her watch me until my mind slips away again.