

Death is the kind of truth that is accepted but rarely acknowledged. Sure, we know it's inevitable, but that knowledge makes us uncomfortable. As a species who craves nothing more than warmth and comfort, we push death to the very back recesses of our minds. It gets covered up by more pleasant things, like, oh, I don't know, childbirth. Now *that's* something truly beautiful.

But not me.

Death doesn't scare me and it never has. I think death has a bit of a bad rep, you know? He's not some black robe wearing, scythe carrying demon out to steal your soul. No, to me, death is a lot more like the person who devotes their life to saving stray cats and dogs. And listen, I *know* that sounds dumb.

"What are you even *talking* about, Nathan?" you might ask. "Death doesn't give a damn about kittens!"

That's where you're wrong. There's a direct connection here: death sees those who are struggling and brings them into his arms for the same comfort we all know and love. He's not such a bad guy after all.

I do have to say, though, that actually dying is a lot different from what I expected. I didn't expect much of *anything*, really, just a whole lot of nothingness. I thought it'd be a permanent lights out, a "show's over folks, nothing more to see here!" kind of deal. This, though? This is strange.

A long hallway stretches out before me with no end in sight. As far as I can tell, this hallway leads nowhere, and there are no doors opening up to new rooms. It's just me and pale, sickly yellow colored walls.

Blinking once, twice, three times, I try to rid myself of the image before me. When it's clear that this isn't a pill induced hallucination, I take a cautious step forward, towards a whole lot of nothing. My footsteps echo off the walls, and they sound almost deafening compared to the stiff silence surrounding me.

The only sound I can hear as I continue walking is my own feet hitting the tile floor. A new noise joins the fray after a few moments – another pair of footsteps. I halt my own steps immediately. No one is in front of me, just more of the endless corridor. Turning my head around slowly, I see more of the same hallway that was in front of me, except with a twist. A woman makes her way toward me.

There's something I really never thought I'd see again. I was *hoping* I'd never see another person again. It's not that I hate them; it's just that I was hoping for death to be a much more solitary experience. Or, well, to not be an experience at all.

“Oh *hell no*,” the woman says once she’s approached. She’s clad in casual attire – a simple tank top and jeans. Her hair falls in tight curls against the dark skin of her exposed shoulders. “You’re way too young to be here. Man, if I had the power, I’d make your ass march all the way back to where you came from.”

A lot of things run through my mind then. Questions like “*where is here?*” and “*what do you mean too young?*” Instead, I reply with an extremely intelligent, “Excuse me?”

She raises her eyebrow. “Excuse you?” she says, shaking her head. “You heard me, kid. You’ve gotta be, like, what, fifteen? That’s too young to be offing yourself.”

“I’m seventeen,” I say, maybe a touch too defiant. “And you don’t know the first thing about me.”

“You look pretty typical to me.” Her eyes look up and down, surveying my appearance. “You look like one of those John Green worshipping, library going kids who takes some weird sort of pride in their self-loathing.”

“I don’t-“ I start to say, tugging at the collar of my sweater vest nervously. It’s the same one I wear for school; I didn’t even change out of my uniform before I decided that enough was enough. “I play football!”

I’m on a real winning streak with these comebacks. I can’t help it though – my thoughts are jumbled under her disapproving stare.

“Oh yeah?” she asks, “And what was so terrible in your life that you had to end it? Fumble too many passes?”

That’s not it at all. This woman in front of me doesn’t have any idea what my life is like. She doesn’t know, or understand, what it’s like to be driven to the point of swallowing a handful of pills. All of this jabbing she’s doing, all of this blindly attacking me is offensive. “I don’t have time for this.”

She snorts. “I think you’ll find you have all the time in the world, in here.” Raising her hands up in mock surrender, she continues, “But fine. You walk your own way, Mr. Varsity Athlete.” With that she turns around and I’m left alone.

I exhale a deep breath, trying to calm myself down from that encounter. I turn around, to begin walking in the opposite direction of her, but take an immediate step back. “Whoa.”

A young girl stands in front of me, probably around the same age as I am. Her blonde hair is pulled into a loose ponytail, and her bangs frame her face. “Hi there,” she says, pulling at the bottom of her dress. “I see you met Maia.”

I glance behind myself, at the woman's – Maia's – retreating back. "Yeah," I say, turning back to the girl. "She's not much of a conversationalist, huh?"

"Forgive her," the blonde says. "She's not coping with... all of this very well."

"What...what is all of this?" I ask, gesturing at the plain walls around me.

"I don't really know," she says. "But all of us – there are more of us – we... You know what you did? We all did the same thing to get here."

I stare at her, at the young girl in front of me. "Suicide," I say, supplying the word for her. "I killed myself. Why does no one ever want to talk about it?"

"Not everyone wants to acknowledge the truth." She smiles slightly. "Come on, walk with me."

I follow after her, my hands stuck deep inside the pockets of my khakis. "Where exactly are we going?"

Her shoes, white and shiny, click against the ground as she walks. "Nowhere, silly. There isn't anywhere to go. These halls never end. "

"So there's no way out?" I ask, starting to feel nervous. The walls are confining, stifling even, and I can't imagine spending an eternity like this. It's like solitary confinement – nothing to see, nothing to do.

"Not physically," she replies. "All I know is that sometimes new people come, and sometimes people who have been here for a while leave. Here one minute, gone the next."

We walk in silence. The silence teeters on the fine line of relaxing and deafening. I feel alone in it, despite the girl walking at my side. I'm not sure if I'm okay with that.

As we walk, I chance a glance at my watch. Time doesn't seem to pass here. The hands of my watch are eternally stuck at 3:15, the moment when I finally worked up my courage. Mom had been picking up extra shifts at the diner lately, so she wasn't home when I got out of school. I was alone, with only my racing thoughts for company.

I can't say which one in particular made me rummage through the bathroom cabinet. I wasn't upset about any one thing. I think it was a combination of factors that made me decide I had had enough. Or maybe it was simpler than that. Maybe I was just sad for too long.

That moment was a weird one – I felt brave and terrified all at once. It did feel, though, that in some warped sort of way, I was actually doing something right for once. I stare in front of me, at the hall with no end. I was so sure that I wanted this. I'm not anymore.

"I wish I didn't do it." The younger girl says quietly, breaking our silence.

Swallowing, I ask, "Why did you do it?"

"They were always mean to me," she mumbles, looking straight ahead. "I thought I'd be teaching them a lesson." Sparing a glance up at me, she asks, "And you?"

I think about the days I spent lying in bed, feeling guilty and worthless. I think about poor test grades and not being able to find a part time job. I think about a world that's perpetually colored grey. "Because nothing had a point," I respond, swallowing down a ball of spit. "Especially not me."

"Do you regret it?" she asks, her kind and curious eyes staring up at me.

I look away, unable to handle the intensity of her gaze. "No." My voice wavers.

She nods. "I see."

We're coming up on another figure now, this one clearly the silhouette of a man. His back is slightly curved, and a beard covers his chin. Glasses are perched on his nose.

"Hello," he greets as we finally make our approach. Seeming to recognize the girl with me, he nods at her. He doesn't look happy to see her, just solemn. His face is all downturned lips and hard lines.

"You're both so young," he starts to say. "Some might say you're too young to be here, but I'm going to let you in on a big secret. All of us are too young to be here."

Frowning, he continues, "There's no magic age where it's acceptable to go and off yourself." His voice is melancholy personified. "No matter how old you are, you're always going to be leaving someone behind. I left my wife and son."

His eyes droop, dark circles etched into the skin below them. They're from more than being tired. An alcohol problem, maybe.

"Someone out there really, really wishes you'd wake up," the older gentleman says.

I turn my gaze away from him, instead looking up at the ceiling. I don't want to think about my mother being left behind. I don't want to imagine her going through hard times because of me. This was supposed to make things better for her – a single mother can't support two people on minimum wage.

"Someone out there would do anything to get you back."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I bite my lip. I can't cry. I *won't* cry.

"It's okay to cry, you know," the blonde girl pipes up.

I break then. “I wish I didn’t do it,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “Are you all happy now? I wish I didn’t do it and I want out!” My fist connects with the wall behind me.

The younger girl just nods. Her arms reach out towards me, in a gesture of comfort, but something weird happens. My body starts to feel lighter, almost ethereal. “I miss her,” I say, but even my voice sounds muted. When the girl tries to hug me, her arms go through me.

She smiles.

* * *

In a suburban hospital, a teenage boy lays in a hospital bed, unconscious. His chest rises and falls steadily, the only movement he’s made for the past two days. A mother sits in a chair pulled as close to the hospital bed as possible, her hand grasping her son’s. Dark circles underline her eyes and her shoulders sag, the toxic cocktail of exhaustion and worry finally taking its toll on her.

“I wish you’d wake up,” she mumbles. “I really, really wish you’d wake up.”

The heart monitor beeps steadily. A bead of liquid makes its way through an IV drip. A crow perched on a tree branch outside flies away. The boy still does not move.

Running a hand through her hair, the mother exhales deeply. The clock reads ten minutes to nine. Ten minutes until the end of visiting hours. Ten minutes until she has to make the drive home, alone. She starts to pull her hand away from her son’s, but the slightest movement stops her.

His finger twitches.

She watches his eyes flutter open. He blinks once, twice, three times, trying to rid himself of the confusion. When his head is relatively clear, he chances a cautious look over at his mother. “Mom?” he croaks out, voice hoarse from days of not using it.

“Oh, sweetie!” she cries out, her grasp on his hand tightening.

“Mom,” he repeats, staring back at her. His eyes are glassy, brown hair messy on top of his head. “I’m sorry.” His voice cracks. “I’m so sorry,” he says, over and over again, like a mantra. He blinks, trying to keep tears back.

“It’s okay to cry,” she mumbles, voice gentle. “I’m here.”

She gets up from her seat, leaning over the bed to pull him into a gentle hug. The boy watches as her arms reach toward him, in a gesture of comfort that feels all too familiar. This time, when her arms wrap around him, they meet solid, warm skin. She pulls him in close. His chest rises and falls, the telltale sign that he’s here, alive.