

I JUST DIED

a short story by EVAN JAMES

IT'S summer, and I'm hearing my landlady's pets more than I'd like to. She lives upstairs and told me when I moved in that her animals were quiet. Clearly I was a fool to believe her.

At this very moment the landlady and her boyfriend — who listens to ESPN at top volume (another sound I never signed up for) — are ignoring their dog. It's been barking for an hour. What causes these barking fits? Imagine if, when I saw something threatening from my window, I just stood there shouting at the Thing I Saw and Feared for an entire hour. That's what it must be like to be this dog upstairs. How can someone share their home with such a fearful creature?

When I first moved here, I thought I'd finally be free of all the noise made by people in expensive, crowded cities. I came to discover that I have no patience for the noise small-town people make either. Because of the racket, I'm finding it difficult to plan an hour's worth of improvisational games for the kids at tomorrow's volunteer arts fair. At this very moment I'm lying on my bed in my underwear to beat the heat (global warming will soon kill us all), and each sound from upstairs — whether it's the dog barking, the landlady speaking in a Dog-Loving Voice, or the squawk of her gray parrot — feels to me like someone turning the wheel on a medieval torture device.

I stare at the ceiling and decide that, if I'm going to continue living here among people whose every moment is devoted to noisy pets, sports programs, and doggy baby talk, I need to buy some earplugs. I also decide that this is probably not a problem experienced by any of the men on *Gay* magazine's 100 Most Eligible Bachelors list, which I read this morning and which includes a number of people I used to know.

I'VE biked halfway to the drugstore for the earplugs when something — something *living* — flies into my open

mouth and down my throat. I have half swallowed a flying insect. I cough, gulp, wheeze — nothing I do seems to move the insect up or down. Why did I have my mouth open? I coast down a gradual decline and stop to get a drink from the



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water fountain at the public library, which finally helps wash the now-dead thing down into my stomach. I lick some droplets of moisture from my lips and try to act like just another Normal Person, but having nearly choked on a living thing is bringing on familiar feelings of dread.

I've cultivated many mechanisms for coping with this dread, which lately strikes me at least once every few hours. Today is day two of "Week Ten: Recovering a Sense of Meaningful Connection" in *The Golden Road*, an acclaimed book-length system of self-discovery for people who feel their creativity and spirit have been stifled both by other people and by their own learned behavior. And so I keep an eye out for meaningful coincidences, with another eye toward questioning the very idea that coincidences have meaning, hoping all this eye-keeping will make me feel Less Crazy.

Maybe I've been brought to this glamourless public library for a Cosmically Significant Reason. Maybe my dread is merely the overture before a more expansive feeling of rightness that awaits me if I venture farther into this harshly lit temple of knowledge. Some Other Part of Me believes that this is just a step in a process that will bring me closer to a saner life, a *Gay-magazine's-100-Most-Eligible-Bachelors* kind of life.

With this new, productive, eligible life looming on the horizon, I force myself to do something spontaneous: I walk farther into the library, trying to act like just another Normal Person Walking into the Library, not knowing what I might find there or even exactly what I'm looking for.

All this is what I mean when I use the word *coping*.

I'M told by people who talk a lot about Buddhism — non-Buddhists, usually — that confusion is one of the highest achievable states before the even higher and better-sounding state of enlightenment, which the non-Buddhist Buddhism experts always make sound like a warm bath of Feeling Good and Accepting Everything.

At this very moment I feel as if I am hovering in some purgatory between confusion and enlightenment. I wander the stacks of the library and wonder where dread lands on the scale of achievable states. With this fatiguing calculus of pseudo-Buddhist judgment going on inside my head, I find myself pulling a book with a bright-red spine from the shelf. The title, printed in blunt, blocky white letters on the cover, is *Your Former Self Is Dying* — a name so uncalled-for that my brain reels when I see it, and I laugh out loud. The subtitle is *Understanding Your Saturn Return*, which I know to be an astrological event — Saturn returning to the position it was in when you were born — that occurs at the threshold age of twenty-nine, the age I am at this very moment. I skim the introduction: "The first Saturn Return marks the end of youth and the beginning of the productive adult years. Unfortunately, only frustration

and pain are sufficient goads to get a human being moving."

I think of a T-shirt slogan I saw on a young man at the gym earlier this week: PAIN IS WEAKNESS LEAVING THE BODY.

Not sure what I believe about how the movement of the planets affects my day-to-day decision making, I start to leave the library, feeling I've found only more worries to cope with. Even so, I seriously consider checking out the book in case I later decide to try believing that I'm the kind of human being the author refers to in her introduction.

I CAN'T believe it: while I was in the library, someone cut through the lock on my bicycle and stole it. I stand staring at the abandoned lock on the ground: Astonished. Furious. And also guilty, because maybe I've manifested this outcome through negative thinking by some unenlightened Other Part of Me.

It was a white Schwinn Super Le Tour.

Feeling panicky, I start walking and doing breathing exercises while I consider my options: there aren't any. My bike is gone, and the world and I are barreling toward annihilation at this very moment. Sweat is forming all over my hairy body. The planet earth gets warmer every year. I pass a play structure outside the library and remember that I'm expected to expand the minds of children first thing tomorrow morning. Weaving among slow-moving, nonpanicked citizens, I wonder how I ever allowed myself to make the horrible mistake of stopping at this public space on a Sunday afternoon. Everybody — i.e., the Public — is out. And this kind of thing — i.e., Bicycle Thievery — is what happens in public. I might as well have left my bike in crime-ridden Rio de Janeiro. Without it I feel marooned. I hear a passerby say, "I only use my computer for soulless activities anymore," and I remember the earplugs.

This must be part of my Saturn Return, I think. I recall a friend in her midthirties back in Los Angeles telling me about this astrological beginning of the productive adult years. "You should get a reading, so you'll know what to expect," she said. "The entire time mine was happening, I felt like a ghost. I was like, 'What is this? What's happening to me?'" It was before I knew the first thing about astrology. It was only years later that all the pieces fell into place."

All the pieces are falling into place for me at this very moment, though I'm not sure it's a Good Place. That woman and I had a mutual acquaintance my age named G. who, I found out two weeks ago, committed suicide. She told me over the phone. I hadn't heard from her in a long time, so when I answered, I launched right into my usual glib banter: "Can you believe I'm living out here in the boonies?" She let me talk, then said, "I have some weird news."

I remember saying, "Oh, my God," and, "That's terrible." I didn't ask how he'd killed himself — I was too stunned to take

in anything beyond the One Fact. I knew G. tuned pianos for a living, and I'd once gone with him to a rock concert and watched him put in a pair of earplugs to protect his valuable hearing. "My ears are worth a lot of money!" he'd screamed at me.

After the call I took a walk along the river, feeling strange, and came to the conclusion that tragedies like this serve to remind us of What's Really Important in life.

This refreshed perspective lasted only a couple of days before life was again the ongoing and futile battle with day-to-day problems: the annoying sounds of my landlady's flea-bitten menagerie; the education of the young; finding ways to feel Less Crazy; reading about *Gay* magazine's 100 Most Eligible Bachelors.

The Golden Road advises me to acknowledge wounds and traumas but to move forward. My horoscope for this month tells me to "move forward," too, and also that money is coming my way, and that the sun — the *sun!* — is "besieged." The important thing in life is *not* to think about What's Really Important in life, because it only reminds me that my life — as I'm living it anyway — is so unimportant.

AT this very moment the sun is getting hotter overhead. Stuck downtown during the most dangerous time of day in the middle of a global-warming-fueled heat wave, I resign myself to stopping at an air-conditioned coffee shop. Caffeine is discouraged on my cruelty-free diet — daily caffeine consumption being a kind of deadening cruelty to the soul — but I'm desperate.

The young blond woman at the register is gossiping with a male barista. "I just *died*," she says, and then she turns to me. "Hi, how can I help you?"

I, too, sometimes use the verb *to die* in glib, spontaneous ways — I've even done so since hearing about G. — and I think that, though people are dying every day and the death of our species is basically imminent, it's still sometimes hysterically funny. But not today. I have to contain myself as I order an iced tea.

"We're out of iced," she says. "I can make you a hot tea, or we can do an iced coffee. Do you want an iced coffee?"

How can they be out of iced tea? I shouldn't be surprised: at this very moment the world is running out of everything humans need to survive, and there are more of us than ever. Even though I've been off coffee for months, I decide that, since we're all barreling toward annihilation anyway, I will Drink an Iced Coffee. It will be a "treat," a practice encouraged by *The Golden Road*, especially during this "Week of Recovering a Sense of Meaningful Connection." Of course, this kind of dangerous exception-making often leads me to believe that my life is completely out of control, sabotaged at every turn by some shameful Other Part of Me. Will I ever, for example, buy the earplugs I feel I so desperately need? I pour some soy milk into my iced coffee, feeling as though I'm plummeting into a void of Ineligibility.

Though I want to get out of this coffee shop as quickly as possible, a bearded young man in patchwork shorts and a T-shirt approaches me — an attractive artist I know from around

town. I first met him at a screening of experimental films, where he showed a frenetic video he'd made about attention-deficit disorder called *What's That?* At this very moment he's holding a lethal-looking blended drink — cold coffee mixed with hormone-injected cow's milk and refined sugar served in a toxic plastic vessel. Between sips he takes bites of a cookie that has bright, artificially colored candies baked into it.

When I ask the artist how he is, he says that he's finally graduated with a degree in Art and is leaving for Rome in two days. From Rome he'll travel to Naples, where he intends to create an Art Project about the garbage crisis there. I tell him I read about the crisis in the newspaper earlier this week, sandwiched between reports of other crises around the warming globe. I try to say this in a flirtatious way.

"I feel an urgent sense of mission drawing me to Italy," says the artist. "There's something important waiting for me there. I just know it."

"Garbage," I say. "Garbage is waiting for you there."

We both laugh, and he gives me a lingering look. We laugh again, more forced and awkward this time, and drop our gazes. "So," I say, and I feel some Other Part of Me operating in a predatory and sexual way. He asks if I want to come by his studio and see some sculptures he's been working on.

"Only if you agree to drive me to the drugstore afterward." Again I try to make these ordinary words sound flirtatious. The few sips of iced coffee I've had are stirring me into a speedy, reckless state.

The artist stuffs what remains of the horrible cookie into his mouth and walks toward the door, beckoning me to follow.

"SOMEBODY stole my bike today," I say as he drives.

"That's terrible," he replies. "I guess you're stuck with me."

The artist is confident and good-looking — the kind of person you might see on *Gay* magazine's 100 Most Eligible Bachelors list. "I exercise five times a week," he says when I ask him how he's been spending what will surely be one of the human race's final summers. He's also been Making Art and Volunteering at a Soup Kitchen. *Here*, I think, *is a Nice, Normal Person*.

The artist glances back and forth between the road and the area where my bare thighs meet the hem of my white shorts. I wonder if this is something he does often — pick up people at the local coffee shop, lure them to his studio with the promise of sculpture, and then take off their clothes. I'm trying to think logically, but some Other Part of Me is doing just the opposite.

(end of excerpt)