**Latent Life**

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I.

Arthur squinted into the tall, rectangular window of the eighth-floor office in which he worked, then out at the horizon, the flood of fluorescent winter daylight on his eyes felt painful, unbearable. His gaze shifted downwards, myopically, towards the bottom of the window. A water beetle lay dead but upright between the double-paned glass for what had probably been years, its shiny, mahogany exoskeleton preserved like an artifact in its makeshift mausoleum. He wondered how it had gotten into that tightly sealed air pocket. He imagined the possibilities: perhaps it had struggled to get in, hoping for a better life—better food, a mate, safety from the unknown; or maybe it had flown in with random gusto, a victim of its arthropodal hardwiring. Either way, it must have been oblivious to the knowledge that it would live out the rest of its days in a vacuum, to live and die between two panes.

*Were life and death two panes?*

*What lies between them?*

He looked up and saw his reflection in the glass. The hollows under his eyes sunk deep, like open graves, and his skin had a yellow tint to it, perhaps a distortion created by light refracted through layers of pane. Or a life spent in a hardwired trance of seeking and never finding. He remembered a phrase he had once seen in a scientific journal: *latent life*. It was an enigmatic state of being that was neither life nor death, but some liminal space between the two. Simple life forms could enter and remain in this suspended animation for years. Bears did it to a lesser degree in the bleakness of winter. Even humans—the whirling dervishes, or *fakirs—*had been known to entomb themselves for long periods of time, dead to the world, only to self-resurrect from this curious limbo as if nothing had happened. As if latent life had been a dream.

“You’re in the winter of your life, Arthur! When will you wake up!” His ex-wife’s last words crashed his *memento mori*, his death daze. Wake up to what? She had been as mired in the illusion of their happiness as he had. As if the spinning plates, the balancing act, the clown show of everyday life could ever be anything but exhausting. The wedding, the birth, the promotion, the new house, the second birth, the second promotion, the home renovation, the . . . As quickly as all of these things were appearing, he had felt he was disappearing. He would jolt awake in the early hours of the morning, panicked, streams of past and future flooding his mind, as if he had to grab onto one of these fragments containing himself or he would vanish.

She wasn’t to blame. It began long before their union. He had built so many castles in the sand, only for the tide to come crashing in, knocking them down, washing them away, in complete indifference. Gone, as if they never were. As if *he*, in that particular iteration, had never been. Looking back hurt. But looking out was worse. He closed his eyes.

II.

It happened on the drive home, although nothing really happened. Arthur looked in and saw that he was *not*. There was still a breather and a mover, yes. There was still a body. But there, at the intersection of Bourgeois Road and Commonwealth Avenue, the tight, knotted, heavy, layered entity which he called “I” vanished.

From that moment, “I” was a lie.

There was no one. There was a palpable absence when he alighted from his car, as if when he looked back, there would be an Arthur-shaped skin cast left behind in the driver seat containing every piece of information about him: every memory, every failure, every success; every concept and teaching that had ever been pressed into him without his consent, like a tiny creature crushed between the voluminous pages of a book. But there was no physical shedding. His form was fully intact.

The absence soon manifested in strange and disorienting ways. There were no longer floating snippets of past conversations and images looping through his head on autopilot. His favorite pastimes of listening to music, watching films, or visiting art museums were no more relieving than releasing his bowels. In fact, they were almost burdening: emotions that had been solidified into a symphony of notes, a storyline, or a canvas felt *heavy*;as if plucked out of the quick, ever-changing pulse of Life and unnaturally preserved in a shackling medium. These fossilized emotions, suspended in the sticky amber resin of Time and Space, felt alien to Arthur, their beauty eclipsed by their gravity, their *weight*. He now understood why the creator needed to release them: to carry them lifelong would lead to madness.

Life had a vibrant immediacy: birdsong enchanted him for hours and could bring him to tears; yet so could the buzz of the refrigerator, the dripping of a faucet, the insane and cacophonous singing of the construction worker down the street. Nothing was more sacred than anything else.

But the most felt absence was the unease. The subliminal anxiety that had no shape or form, but that had shaped and formed his entire life. It was the dis-ease of being, of *human* being. Unlike the plant, whose heliotropic lean towards the sun was itself complete, the person always felt lacking, *wanting*. The feeling of lack created the want; *was* the want. Arthur had wanted to swallow the world or be swallowed by it. Either would destroy the artificial and separative membrane that made him feel that life was outside of him, that he was an outsider to life. It was the impetus for every castle he had built: to seek for a wholeness which he already was. It was now seen that all his imaginings, machinations, and attempts to *do* life had been as real as fabled fumblings in a dream.

Life was laid bare. Every moment was like being pushed through the birth canal and opening his eyes for the first time. But he hadn’t been birthed. He had died. No, it was worse! The ghost called “I”—his painful place marker in the world—was seen to have never existed. He had been a dream.

III.

Walking on the beach mid-summer, he gazed into the sun, then out at the horizon. Eyes wide open, the light didn’t hurt anymore.

There were no more sandcastles to be built.

All that was left was sea and sand, which is all there ever was anyway.