

A Million Ways to Say “The End”

The leaders of the world—mostly overweight and cracking under the weight of self-importance—looked embarrassed to tell us that the world was ending.

Huddled in a pocket of midnight, the TV program that stole the world from their beds was unsatisfyingly short. No politician or scientist would waste their time explaining things we couldn’t possibly understand. They were in possession of sufficient evidence to know it to be true, and they needed to go home. Endings make people selfish.

The night was not peaceful the way you might hope your last night on Earth to be. The world was in torment. The ground was rolling underneath, tensing and clenching till it pulled you underneath like the swelling waves of the Atlantic. Thundering in agony, the sky threw fat raindrops that shattered against the pavement. The thick oak trees lining the path through Central Park spasmed as wind tore the nerves from their bones. Even nature was cowering in the shadow of whatever carried our demise. Were they punishing Man for dreaming too big—dreaming at the expense of everything else?

People found their own way to protest. Buildings bled throngs of people onto the street, all who screamed to release the chaos of their mind into the chaos of the world. People prayed, their hands crawling up streetlamps and crosses, anxious for the promise of something beyond darkness. Everyone was crying. Though for what, I’m not sure. Maybe it was the baby they’d never have, the legacy they never built, the knowledge they’d never put to use, or the streaks of happiness buried into their face from a lifetime of laughing that they’d never see.

The misbelievers of us refused the promise of an end. They pushed themselves further and further into a stubborn sleep, but their minds could not shake the chaos outside. Eyes

unblinking at the popcorn ceiling that would cover them like a coffin. They bit their lip till it bled and counted sheep to avoid counting the hours they wasted at a thin, plastic desk in front of their thin, plastic screen.

My name? My name doesn't matter. It doesn't mean anything anymore. No money or power or fame could save me now—not that I had any. Now we are just people. Not employees or spouses or victims or optimists. Just people.

The glass on my window fractured delicately, splintering my stony reflection. The electricity crackled overhead, dipping in and out. Of course this building was the first to go. Even before all this, all you had to do was touch the brick, and it would crumble in your hand. A contractor was discussed, but never witnessed

My phone trembled as I attempted to call my dad. No connection. My best friend, for want of better luck. No connection. I threw it across the room, hard. It left a dent on my otherwise smooth walls before tipping to the ground.

I compromised by planting a kiss on the photographs that decorated my bland apartment.

“Goodbye Dad. Goodbye Lana,” I whispered. “Even you Max, goodbye.” I turn to the rolling grey clouds streaked with lightning. “And Mom, I will see you soon.”

It strikes me now, how much people build on Forever. The most pathetic thing we've done is suffer for a shiny tomorrow. One that will always come rusted with inadequacy. Or, in this case, never come at all. And now we see what we should've known all along. Nothing ever lasts. We're stuck with half a legacy that no one will be around to celebrate and bags under our eyes. That's why no one's showing up for their job as an editorial assistant; you're calling the

family you abandoned for the past eight months so you wouldn't be late to pick up your boss's Vanilla Protein Cream Cold Brew. Death—or the promise of it—reminds you what you care about.

Maybe the noise outside was just the dissipating noise from inside. People only have one thought now—their last one.

Mine was ringing through my body. Throbbing against my bones like the deep, solemn strike of a church bell.

I pull open the door to my closet and reach for my wedding dress. It's smaller than I remember, no longer feeling like a problem that swallowed me alive. My fingers are heavy against the delicate embroidered bodice and creamy chiffon skirt. I drape it gently over my couch, letting the layers pool over my scuffed hardwood floors. I won't bother with the memories. They're from Then and I only have so much left of Now.

And while the world around me crumbles and aches, I'm sliding the dress over my waist, patient, while it catches on the stubble of my unshaven legs. I'm tracing my fingers on the neckline, and I'm standing in front of the mirror like I did every night before my fiancé told me he never wanted to see me in it. Memories, always memories. I look older now, possibly wiser, but in a way I have to tell myself is a good thing.

The Statue of Liberty is now engulfed by the Atlantic Ocean, but something warm and exciting crawls up my spine and shivers ripple down my arms. I look at this apartment for the last time. I look at my family, frozen behind glass panes, for the last time. Then finally, with the steely and unbroken look I carried as a child, I look at myself for the last time. I see the lines of my body I cared too much about, I see the lips that moved bravely in defiance of injustice, and I glimpse at the soul I carry just beyond my eyes. The soul that bled into my life and made it wonderful.

Did I ever know myself? Was I cynical or a dreamer that never wanted to know the rejection that lay beyond the cliff's edge? These things I will never know.

I walk out of my apartment and stuff the train of my dress into my arms, if not to expose it to the tears that stream from the City of Dreams. No one cares enough to give me strange looks. If they did, I wouldn't mind. For the first time in my life, this moment is about me entirely.

I turn down a well-worn path of mine to my favorite coffee place. I thieved a stale croissant from the display table and turned around. I felt safer behind the plexiglass walls of the cafe. I could pretend that this chaos didn't include me. I could watch people regret and pine and agonize, and laugh like I was something other.

I was not anything other. I was in this moment as much as the next person. So, I removed myself from the dim cafe and sat cross legged on a bench.

The world was not in a state to be observed. For the first time in their lives, people were more concerned about themselves than people thought. People cried and hugged trees, danced in the rain, and fell to their knees, screaming things they'd never had the courage to say. They kissed and cried as if to squeeze every last emotion out of them. But still, I was captivated by the one girl who appeared to be laughing, the dancer. She swayed with the rhythm of the wind and moved her body like she had never moved before. At every crooked angle her body made, she still looked beautiful and wild. I want to be someone who laughed at everything the world gave them. I would prove that even the worst storm could not make me bitter. There would be no regret.

And now, if ever, I was at liberty to sacrifice my dignity.

My slippers slapped the wet pavement and I went to join her. She didn't stop, even for a moment, but still looked deep into my eyes and she said, "I love you."

And because I had enough love for the whole world I responded, "I love you too."
Nothing more was to be said.

And then, we danced.

I let the wind pick up my limbs and spin me around. My legs pointed out and kicked up, and I twirled with my heart to the sky. Wet hair snapped against my face and raindrops pooled in my mouth.

"Take me," I whispered. To whom? The shapeless force ending us.

I hummed every song my body could recollect and the power of my voice soon warmed my body. I was taken over by something else. The music. The feeling. The end. It was pulsing through my body and moving me in ways I hadn't experienced.

"Take me."

My fingers reached and curled against the ground. My legs sprung from the ground and brought me closer to the sky. I drew big, sweeping circles through the air. My back arched and my head rolled on my shoulders. All inside and out of a beautiful asynchronicity.

"Take me!"

My cheeks swelled with blood and I was gasping for air against the torrid wind.

Maybe if I hadn't wasted so much time being *realistic* I could've lived. The way I am now. The way I'll be done doing in a matter of minutes. I inhale the smell of earth that rain drew out from deep underground.

I love you big, beautiful world that pretended to break me only so it could have the joy of seeing me more than who I was before.

“TAKE ME!”

And the wind swept me up and carried me Beyond.