

We Still Have to Go Swing Dancing Before the World Ends

Cole Merbach

We were sitting at a small, round table in the corner of a café right off of Elm Street. We had never been in here before, but we always found the round table to sit at. The more sides to the table, the more inviting it was, I had said once.

“A circle has infinite sides,” she had said in response. Forever the math major.

So, we were sitting at the round table. It was, after all, the most inviting. Before my laptop was even out of my bag, she had hopped up, staring past me like the most important thing in the world has suddenly materialized just behind me. I quizzically raised one eyebrow.

“What should I go for: a single shot or a double?” she asked. Clearly the most important thing in the world was, at the moment, behind me as my back faced the barista.

“You didn’t sleep very well last night,” I said.

“You’re right. Double it is.” She walked around me and out of my peripheral to a line I couldn’t see. I finished pulling out my laptop and was in the middle of deleting unread emails when a long, flowery skirt brushed against my arm and sat down in front of me.

“Did you know,” she said after a long, two-handed sip, “that their menu is made up of small chalkboards with magnets on the back of them, so that they stick to the metal about the counter?” She was smiling a goofy smile as she looked past me again. “I think that’s cute.”

I glanced over my shoulder to check out the multi-medium menu, turning back around with a sly grin on my face. “I suppose, but wouldn’t it just have been easier to put a chalkboard up on the wall?” I asked.

She took a smaller sip this time, one-handed, and pondered my question. “Yeah, but then you lose the whole vibe of the place,” she said after a moment. “Everyone has a chalkboard in their hole-in-the-wall café, something they think makes them unique. But who has a magnet chalkboard?” Her eyebrows shot up as she ended her query, punctuating the profundity of her thought. She had this cute

way of widening her eyes when she did this, and I loved to look at how blue they looked when they were like that. I wish I had taken a picture of them, at some point.

I wish I had taken a picture of them at some point before I had said what I said next. “I guess you make a good point, but at least a chalkboard won’t fall down when Earth’s polarity shifts, right?” She was a physics major before she realized how much time she was spending in a lab, and then just said to hell with it. But she still retained some knowledge in the field.

“Well,” she said, “I think that if the Earth’s polarity shifted, we’d all have bigger problems than worrying about magnet chalkboards falling off the wall.”

“Like what?” I asked, biting at the inviting vagueness of her statement.

“Well, we’d have no atmosphere left and all just die.”

I was the one who didn’t sleep very well that night. The rest of our day continued on like normal, her switching the conversation to once again, maybe, possibly, considering getting a dog together, among other things, but my mind was fixated on the randomness of our impending doom. We were discussing polarity shifts a few weeks ago, and she said that we were long overdue for one. But I laid awake all night asking myself, *just how overdue? Would one knock on our door tomorrow, bust right through it and kill us all with the suddenness and force of a home invasion?*

That was why I didn’t sleep. The next morning, I made myself a triple and was sipping on it as she rolled out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen. “Morning” she said with a groggy voice, barely enunciating as she made a beeline for the refrigerator. She pulled out a carton of orange juice and went searching for a glass in the dishwasher when I said, “Do you ever think about dying?”

She plopped a glass with an audible clink onto the counter as she turned her tired eyes towards me. “What do you mean?” she asked, a puzzled expression creeping across her face.

“I don’t know,” I said when I did. “Just, well, do you ever think about dying? What comes next, you know?”

“I don’t think any of us know the answer to that, really.”

“Well then what do we do?”

She looked puzzled again. “What do you mean, what do we do? There isn’t anything we can do.” With that my heart sunk, and I drained the rest of my mug as she took my prolonged silence as a queue to switch gears and mention how one of her friends had gone swing dancing that weekend.

That morning’s conversation had switched just as quickly as the one in the café, but I still hadn’t been sleeping any better. She would sleep next to me, peacefully breathing in, then out, while I stared up at the ceiling trying to make sense of the world. *Was this what it was like to grow up? Had I finally done it, had I finally gotten face to face with the insurmountable wall of dread an adult? That is being so aware of the fleeting time that we have in this world what should put everything in perspective?*

If it were a class, I’d be failing it. I was no chump, but I was also no philosophy major. I didn’t think I had to be in order to come to grips with how to live my life under the dark shadow of my own mortality, but I’ve been wrong before. So, as she slept and I stared into nothingness, I started to read, read whatever I could find on death and the views towards it. A quick google search one late night, or maybe early morning, brought me to Socrates. Socrates offered little aid on the matter. His stance was that life was merely a preparation for death, for the true philosopher, and that all death consisted of was the soul leaving the body.

I chewed on that for a while. Was life just a preparation for what came next, whatever that may be? I certainly didn’t know what that would be, and neither did Gwen. I kept thinking about that into the morning once again, when I would crawl into bed as she was just getting up. I didn’t have to work until later that afternoon.

I really didn’t have to work ever again, though. If life was just the precursor to death’s great adventure, what was the point of wasting time with trivial things like taxes and accounting and moving another person’s money around if it was all meaningless in the end? This became my new obsession.

I thought a lot about my future. *Was I just going to wilt away at a boring job?* Yes, probably, because I did need money. Though that was a decision I made, in part out of necessity, but also due to

the desire to pour over countless books I had ordered. I was hungry to understand. I knew I didn't need money just to waste it, though. Gwen still wanted a dog, and to go swing dancing, and countless other things that I just couldn't bring myself to justify. And Gwen. I hadn't begun to think about her yet. Where were she and I going, where we going to be when the world ended, and death engulfed us all.

We had been together for going on three years. We'd met in college, moved in afterward, and here we were. I knew I didn't want to marry her.

As soon as I thought that, I realized where she and I were headed. I didn't want to marry her now. The world ending any day now had a funny way of putting a pressing urgency on things. I wasn't ready to be married right now, and I felt that the whole world was now asking me for my decision right then and there. So, I think I said my second most regrettable statement ever, all in the span of a week.

"Oh," she said, taken aback by the suddenness of my declaration hitting her as she walked in through the front door, grocery bags still in hand.

"I'm just can't be married right now," I repeated to myself out loud.

"That's fine, I'm not either," she said. "I wasn't trying to pressure you or anything."

'I know, but there are just more important things to think about right now,' was probably the stupidest thing I had ever said. The only issue was that I had said it. Followed up by something worse, from a certain point of view.

"I hope we can still go swing dancing, before the world ends."

But as I turned around and saw piles of philosophy books on the kitchen counter, a spilled carton of orange juice on the floor, and the front door slamming shut, I knew that it already had.