

# *Waiting*



*Waiting was something he disliked these days because it made him realize how much time he had on his hands.*

—Armand ML Inezian, “See Me”

# Waiting

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conversation at the base of the  
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the spirit father

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DENNIS CASS

**Hello?** Is anyone there? Yoo-hoo!  
You made it.  
I did.

Did you cross the Vast, Deep Ocean?

Yes.

What about the Obstacle Mountains?

Of course.

Have you slain the Twelve-Headed Ogre?

Dude, if I hadn't, then would I be talking to you?

Good point. What do you want?

My boon.

Your boon.

Yes, my boon. The boon that was promised to me. For undergoing  
the aforementioned trials, not to mention several others.

Aren't your accomplishments enough?

I didn't think that was the point.

Because it would seem to me—and this is just me talking—it seems  
to me that the journey would be its own reward.

No one is knocking the journey.

Then it's settled then.

I'm starting to sense that either you don't want to grant me the  
boon, or that you don't have it.

Of course I want to grant you the boon.

Then grant it.

Slight problem.

What.

What if I said I don't exactly have it *on* me? That it's around here  
somewhere.

Define 'here,' please.

The Cosmic Space Egg.

You mean the endlessly unfolding vessel of Space and Time, that which holds everything that is known and unknown, and yet is without shape and without end.

So you've heard of it?

How long is this going to take?

It's not what you'd call a small egg.

Because I have to get back.

What's the rush?

My people. They're waiting. A lot is riding on this boon.

Let me guess: salvation.

Not just salvation, but all that comes with it. Which, as you can imagine, is a lot.

So you go out, risk your life, undergo trials, are yourself forever transformed by said trials and they expect *you* to save *them*?

You have an alternative?

I don't. I'm just saying that if I were you, I would be out shopping for new people.

Just grant me the boon. Every hour I spend talking to you is the equivalent to ten years in mortal time.

You want to get back in time to enjoy the fruits.

Are you even looking for it?

I am . . . but like you said . . . endlessly unfolding, without end, blah, blah, bl—.

Boon, please.

Okay, okay. Sheesh. You'd think being the Spirit Father would get you a break.

Give. Me. My. Fucking. Boon!

Fine. Here.

Wow.

Nice, huh?

Yeah . . . I mean . . . wow.

Worth the wait?

Well worth it! Goodness . . .

What's wrong now?

I don't know . . . I guess I'm looking at this boon and wondering if anyone will believe it.

I'm sure they'll be very accepting.

You don't know these people.

Well, you'll just have to take your chances, won't you?

I suppose I don't have a choice.

You don't.

Well.

Well.

I guess this is goodbye.

Goodbye, Hero.

Goodbye, Spirit Father . . . and about before—.

Don't worry about it.

I could have been nicer.

You could have.

No hard feelings?

No hard feelings, my Son. You're a Hero. You solve puzzles with your wits. You face grave dangers with your courage. You slay beasts with your strength. Nowhere is it written that you also have to be patient.

# the room where you will die

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DENNIS CONROW

**This** is the hardest part: the sitting, the watching. Waiting for this special moment, as if worlds are so clearly demarcated. This part is hard. It's dragging on for *days*. And by days, I mean years, decades. It's that secret, unnamed fear that we're born with, and I'm waiting to face it head-on. Never has time moved so slowly. Thank god for the nurses coming in every hour for another morphine injection. At least something happens, I have something to look at, someone to make small talk with. In the meantime, I count the moments with each

labored  
breath.

They tell me it's going to be tonight. Probably tonight, yeah. They don't know how much longer it can go on. But they've said it will be tonight every night for the past week. They've said it's constantly imminent. I don't go to work anymore. Not until this is over, at least. Inhale. (*wait*) Exhale. (*wait... is it now?* No.)

There's nothing left to do. It's been so long coming. I began grieving at the diagnosis. We said everything to each other as though it was the last. We had so many "I want you to know this" conversations, only to feel silly when there was still more breathing. There was more breathing, there was more talking. For over two years, we made every conversation count. And then when we didn't, we talked about our bowel habits. After conversations and confessions and intimacies, feelings felt and feelings unfelt, why not talk about consistency, looseness, color? It was something to pass the time. We were waiting for now.

Here.  
This.

Another gasp. Another sigh. The eyes, no longer yours, are closed; it's like they're sleeping. Like I sleep after a bender. All you need is one foot on the floor to complete the illusion. No one is around, not even you. It's just me and the not-yet corpse. Inhale. (*wait*) Exhale. (*wait... is it now? No.*) I lift your eyelids, thinking that by just doing that, you'll start awake. *Inhale. Exhale.* I pinch the flopping skin on your side. *Inhale. Exhale.* I kiss your forehead. *Inhale. Exhale.* I sit back down, and I wait. *Inhale. Exhale.*

It's Indian summer. I can see it outside this window. The trees are so pretty this year. It looks like the perfect afternoon to rake up a pile of leaves, and jump in them, like I was six years old. Is this where you are now? Are you reliving the numbers of your days? The good times or the bad times? You always said it was so hard to know which were which. *Inhale. Exhale.*

When you knew its name, you said "Well, now I know how. I just don't know when." Nonsense, I told you. "You could be hit by a bus tomorrow, or you could die of a heart attack 30 years from now." But, no, I was wrong. You met your assassin at the doctor's office, and it's been a waiting game ever since. And now, the killer is in the room, extracting life cell by cell, capillary by capillary, organ by organ. *Inhale. Exhale.*

I remember—since that's the only thing to do here—that someone asked you, "What if you could see the place where you would die?" You said, "I'd make sure I never went within ten miles of the place." But here we are. *Gasp. Wheeze.* It's a place we've driven by a thousand times, never realizing that it was going to play in our destiny. Never even realizing what it was. Never realizing that there were other people in here, waiting like me. Never realizing that I won't be the last. If you could see this room where you will die, would you picture it looking like this? Would you see the outdated curtains, the harsh lighting, the ugly, donated wing chairs, obviously from the estate of someone else who expired in this very room? Would you see the immigrant nurses who struggle to find the switch to the oxygen machine? Would you see yourself turning blue like something out of a Marx Brothers film, with you playing the role of The Body? Would you see the surprisingly large cast of strangers who wander into this, your final scene? Would you see me sitting there, waiting? Waiting for what? For your last breath? For that final release? *Huff. Puff.* Could you see how incredibly bored I am? Would you forgive my prayers to god that it happen sooner? Just get it over with.

You breathe, heavy, exhausted. Though no one is ever finished, you soon will be. The sunset colors the sugar maple out the window the most brilliant golden red. I want to jump out the window and chase it. I want to grab you off this stupid bed, heal you, and together we will run. Run like we were both boys, like someone was chasing us, like we could outrun Death

himself. Over the interstate, through the cemetery, to our house. But he knows where you live. No, let's keep going; we are healthy now, our bodies perfect. We can run, no, look, we can fly. Let us hop, skip, jump and take to the air. Let us soar out, over and away, let us forget to remember pain, sorrow, regret and heartache. Let us remember that we were always birds in human costume, though we never knew it until now. Together you and I will fly, flap our newly sprouted wings so hard that we turn back time, out this window, away from this awful room with its ugly curtains, away from this appointment for which you're far too early. Inhale. Exhale.

No. No? No. No!

There goes your bladder. There goes your liver. There go your kidneys. He's already taken your most of brain, your bones, your blood. I sit, waiting. He's coming for the rest of you; will I recognize him? Will I even see him? If we cannot leave together, why are you still here?

You said you didn't want to do this alone. I am here. I am with you. Do you know?

The nurse comes in with her hourly injection. It's two in the morning. It's been a long time. You're getting very sleepy. I'm getting very sleepy. I know it's coming, but it's *been* coming. "Would you like your father to be more comfortable?" the nurse asks. She sees my weariness. She sees the last of you holding on. She draws the needle deeper.

She makes

you

more

comfortable.

inhale  
Exhale

~~There goes your heart.~~  
~~There goes your brain.~~  
~~There goes you!~~

# why i have never been good at cartwheels

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ADRIANNE MATHIOWETZ

I have been waiting for the #122 for ten and a half hours.

If this were January in some cooler climate, or if the bus stop were unsheltered, or it began raining especially hard with even just a little wind—I may have given up sooner. I'm not an unreasonable person. I dislike cold, wetness, discomfort like anyone else. If any of these things had been present, I would have picked up and left for—where? Home I suppose. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that you can always return home. Conveniently, you can also, always, leave again. Any time you like. Home was created to be returned to, abandoned, reclaimed.

But today we're in luck: today, it has been beautiful at the bus stop.

The sun is shining, the grass is thick and rich. Removing my shoes to enjoy the grass was, in fact, my second order of business. The first order of business was to stand there absently for a good while, staring into the distance, checking my watch, kicking small rocks in the road and creating little mushroom clouds of gold dust. It began to dawn on me that the bus might be more than five minutes late.

But really, it's so hard to tell with buses.

We resort to superstition. And so I was certain—in the same way that I should have known not to watch for it, to jinx it like that—that the minute that I sat down and began enjoying the day, the #122 would whip around the corner to find me completely unprepared for its arrival. Laying prostrate in the grass. A few crucial coins of the fare, fallen out of my pockets, the silver pieces burying themselves into the dirt around me like renegade seeds. I could even have lost a shoe, carelessly kicked it into a nearby shrubbery. My hair matted and wild, perhaps the wolves would have adopted me as one of their own—we would be hovering white-toothed and evil-eyed over some split-open carcass, the very moment that goddamn bus turned the bend. How tragic, how typical! I could see myself scrambling to stand upright, knees wobbling and hands

shaking, struggling to simultaneously salvage the remnants of my civilized self and dig ninety cents out of the ground. Would the driver wait for me to tie my shoelaces, wipe the blood off my gaping maw? Would he resignedly pull over and shut off his engine, flip open a magazine? Or would he stare, eyes big and white, only to speed away the minute he came to his senses and leave me there, abandon me with the wolves?

He's already *four hours* behind schedule, after all.

I could *have waited*.

He's only *human*, in his fear of the unknown, his desire for productivity in the workplace.

He can't *make any more exceptions for wolf-orphans*.

I could *have waited*.

Yes. All things considered, I thought, he'd probably leave me just like that, stranded on the side of the road of Monteverde, with a mere eighty cents to my name—and another dime, if only I could find it.

**Hoping to avoid awkward situations like these**, I waited an hour before removing my shoes.

The bus stop was off a winding dirt road at the top of a hill, a hill overlooking other hills, other winding roads. Some of the hills had horses grazing on them, fenced in with brightly-painted wooden planks. The grass was glowing radioactive in the sunlight, the leaves on the trees meaty and dark, the sky a thin blue glaze. Everything felt clean and new. Every minute, clean and new. I watched a trail of ants emerge near the root of a tree, and briefly considered eating them, if it came to that.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. If you hold your watch up to your ear and listen very carefully, you can convince yourself that it's stopping. Each second seems jilted, a little longer or shorter than the last. Tick . . . tock. Ticktock.

I pulled off my socks and threw them over my shoulder.

"I can go home any time," I thought. "Three seconds from now. Eight days." I rolled over in the grass, and casually glanced down the road.

Three hills away, I could see someone exiting their home with a basket full of wet, white sheets balanced on their hip.

There was something about them.

Something familiar and something new, like anyone else I have ever loved.

They began pinning the sheets to a clothesline, and a breeze filled and deflated the sheets, like massive cotton lungs. This person pushed the hair out of their eyes. They bent over to drag the basket closer. They stood up, a clothespin held in the teeth. Oh no. I love you. They reached their arms over their head, they shielded their eyes, they looked up the hill. I love you. They bent down, picked up one more pillowcase, it fluttered and yearned away in the breeze. I love you, I love you! I almost shouted it. I stood up, nearly waved my

arms, but stopped. They must have seen me.

The basket was picked up, the faceless figure returned inside. I laid back, propped on my elbows.

Very few cars come along these roads. Occasionally, of course, you'll see a bus, stopping at one of the shanties—bus stops around here are unglorified lean-tos, propped up with metal beams and occasional advertisements for orange soda or canopy tours. They don't do much for precipitation or wind, but do offer shade, occasionally a bench to sit on.

I think my bus stop has a bench. I haven't really investigated it thoroughly. I'm leaning on my backpack just outside the shanty, feeling the ground against my feet and watching the sky slide overhead. Occasionally I stand up, stretch, and relocate into the shade of orange soda and cloud forests, leaving my shoes and socks in a pile. My feet become dirty, and watch their progress with satisfaction.

What do we leave when we leave home? What do we take with us?

I look in my bag for answers. Tick, tock.

I could *have waited*.

**Around six hours later**, I feel like doing some cartwheels, so I do.

I've never been very good at cartwheels because I'm a coward. Just as I begin getting enough momentum, the kind of force that could propel a person from the edge of, say, a left palm to the edge of, say, a left foot (from that point on, I should think the rest would be relatively easy) I become hesitant. I pull back, I slow myself down. For a brief, impossible moment, I am hovering upside-down, balanced on two arched hands, then—thud. Thud, thud, thud.

How many cartwheels before it has been nine hours? Ten? Hard to say.

At possibly my five thousandth cartwheel, I land on my back and don't get up. My watch has fallen off—maybe it was crushed in some abrupt landing, perhaps it flew into the shrubbery. I can't hear it any more.

Thud, thud, thud.

There was a flash of color overhead. I wonder if it was a toucan, or a parrot—it could just as easily been the blood rushing to my head, a flash of impact. But I'm pretty certain that it was the most beautiful bird in the universe, completely undiscovered before that cartwheel. Nearly extinct, probably. A solitary, unappreciated wonder, like everything I have ever loved. It had been just out of the corner of my eye—a magenta and cerulean and goldenrod—goldenrod!—striped body, with long translucent wings. One of them reaching down to me, here on earth: in that split second I couldn't focus.

I lay there, watching, waiting for it to come back. It could be five minutes. It could be thirty-seven years. What is the life span of a tropical bird?

I close my eyes.

# the plow driver

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BRENDAN SULLIVAN

He had never been much of a smoker before. Socially, experimentally, empathetically at gatherings, maybe. But never the kind that lit up because he successfully put on a seat belt or took a ten minute walk down the street. But now his favorite place to smoke was just outside the hospital entrance. There, in the cold, under dramatic florescent light of the automatic sliding doors. Just him and, inexplicably, all the nurses from the night shift.

There he stood. Waiting. Taunting death, goading it into coming downtown to answer a few questions. Nightly he braved the looks of the other visitors to the cancer ward. Me? I'm nobody. Most of them had parents and loved ones inside on coarse white sheets, breathing through tubes and watching late night television on small screens while they waited for answers that no one wanted to ask. Most of these parents would love to have the energy to scold their children for smoking. (And most of their children would love to hear it for once.)

He also hadn't worked in two months. Not since the last leaf in his territory was bagged, mulched and prepared to become this spring's flowerbed for some client up in the hills. It used to be that landscapers worked right up until that first snowfall and then they spent countless hours of overtime shoveling, plowing, and otherwise defrosting their clients' houses.

Usually in September and October you were so full of overtime that you couldn't wait for those late mornings, the days off. The end of the seasonal barrage of leafs and sticks on every client's lawn. After the grass stops growing and the sprinklers are bled and shut off, after the rotted pumpkins get hauled away, after you clean the shop and file all of your papers then—then you are done. And he knew that getting into this.

But what he didn't count on was the waiting. It used to be that he got up for work everyday at the same hour and passed out at roughly the same time each night. But now. Now he could be on-call at anytime. And thank God. (Or not.) Now he never went to sleep without checking the weather report. His head never hit the pillow without questioning, secretly, what kind of qualifications it took to become a "meteorologist." A four a.m. snowstorm would put him back at the shop by three to strap on the plow and stock up on hot snacks for the night of he was in for. Sometimes these days lasted twenty hours. Do you have any idea how much that is in overtime?

Tonight, though, tonight was different. Tonight he turned up the ringer on his phone loud, real loud. He needed the money. He needed the job. He needed the phone to ring and tell him everything was alright. He needed to know there was a reason for him to be up all night. He needed that phone call not to be from the hospital.