

Things  
I'm  
Seeing  
Without  
You  
Peter  
Bognanni

Chicken  
House

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*For Kathy Bognanni*



**T**he morning after I dropped out of high school, I woke up before dawn in my father's empty house thinking about the slow death of the universe. It smelt like Old Spice and middle-aged sadness in the guest room, and this was probably at least part of the reason for my thoughts of total cosmic annihilation. The other part I blame on physics. The class I mean. Not the branch of science. It was one of the last subjects I tried to study before I made the decision to liberate myself from Quaker school, driving five hours through Iowa farm country to make my daring escape.

I did the drive without stopping, listening to religious radio fade in and out of classic rock, which sounded something like this: '*Our* God is an awesome Godddddd and . . . Ooooh that smell. Can't you smell that smell? The smell of

death surrounds you!’ All I could smell was fertilizer. And as the empty fields and pinwheeling wind turbines passed by my window, I tried not to think too hard about how I had let things get to this point. And I tried even harder not to think of the improbable person I had come to love, who would no longer be in my life.

But back to the universe for a moment.

There seems to be no real consensus about how it’s all going to end, and that’s what had me worried in the predawn hours. If the worst is going to happen, as it always does, I’d at least like to know some details. But current theories are too varied to be of any real help.

Some people think the Big Bang is just going to happen in reverse. Like: *BANG!* Everything to nothing! Deal with it fools! Other people think that outer space is just going to go dark and cold, stars blinking out like candles on an interstellar birthday cake. And still others think that time itself will come to an end like an old man’s watch that someone forgot to wind.

If forced to choose, I’d probably go with the last option. Not because it sounds like a barrel of laughs. But if it’s all going to freeze like the last frame of an eighties movie, I think I could deal with it as long as I get to pick the right moment.

For example, I could be jumping off a cliff, locked in flight like a majestic Pegasus. Or I could be mid-hiccup, frozen in a deranged bodily spasm for all of time. Or maybe I could just round up all the people I’ve disappointed in the last few months and issue one giant apology before it all goes

still. I could shout it through a megaphone. I AM TESS FOWLER AND I HAVE MADE TERRIBLE MISTAKES! MY BAD! PLEASE ENJOY THE VOID!

And I guess if someone twisted my arm I might also opt for an eternal orgasm.

The Long Bang, if you will.

But the key here is that I want the power. I want to know when it's going to happen, and I want the ability to choose my last act when the time comes. Because, lately, I've been feeling like I don't have much control at all.

Dropping out of high school, as it turns out, is only mildly empowering. It is remarkably easy, though. All you have to do is wake up one morning and realize that you are failing the shit out of all of your classes, you have alienated most of the people who were once your friends, and you haven't really felt like a functioning human being for well over a month.

At which point, I recommend stealing the last emergency joint from your room-mate's Mickey Mouse Band-Aid tin, walking to the two-lane highway that frames the entrance to Forever Friends Quaker Academy, and puffing away while saying goodbye to a place that almost felt like home for a while. Then I suggest you get in your Ford Festiva and blow town like a fugitive.

I neglected to wake my room-mate, Emma, before I took off. She had snuck her boyfriend in again, and they were locked in a pornographic pretzel hold that defied the imagination. Seriously, they were like conjoined staircases in an Escher drawing, only naked and with more body hair.

So, instead of saying goodbye, I left her the twenty-five bucks I owed her, along with the rest of my orange ginger body mist, which she was always stealing anyway. Then I walked out and closed that door for ever.

It sounds harsh but we never really had an honest conversation in our seven months together. Or even a fight. True, I was with her that time she didn't get her period and we watched clips of *Teen Mom* on YouTube and cried. But we weren't best friends. I'll never be her maid of honour, giving a tearful speech at her wedding. And I probably won't be giving her a kidney. At least not my favourite one.

But, for the last few months we slept two feet apart in a room the size of a prison cell. We shared a toothbrush holder. We held each other's hair when we got too drunk on Malibu and our barf smelt like suntan lotion. There's an intimacy in that.

I also declined to notify Elaine at Health Services, which I imagine will come to bite me squarely on the ass sooner or later. Elaine is the woman who has been talking to me about my 'grieving process' for the last month or so. She is nice enough, I suppose, and she gives warm hugs. But when I see the pictures of her dog dressed in Halloween costumes, I am sad for her. It's like all the problems of girls like me have zapped her ability to have a real life. Now all she can do is worry and walk her spaniel.

Ultimately, though, I just couldn't deal with another one of her phone calls, where she asks such painfully earnest questions while not-so-secretly trying to ascertain whether or not I am going to off myself at her school. Well, I'm gone

now, Elaine, so you don't need to worry about that any more. I give you permission to be relieved. Have an extra drink at the staff happy hour this week. You deserve it.

I suppose it's worth mentioning here that I am squatting in my father's home at present, with no immediate plans to leave it. The house is a sagging two-bedroom in Minneapolis where he's lived since his marriage to my mother unravelled like a bad sweater. And I am back living in it for two reasons that I can discern.

The first is that it is only a morning's drive away from my hippie school in Iowa, and that seemed like a good amount of time to be in a car with myself. The second is that my mother is currently on an extended retreat in India with her new boyfriend, Lars, practising something called ashtanga yoga, which I take great delight in not picturing. So, I journeyed to Dad's bachelor rental, where he runs a funeral-planning business out of my former bedroom.

Yes, you read that correctly.

For the last few years, my father has been trying to find exciting new angles in the Death business. He has been doing this despite any real training and a steady lack of encouragement from nearly everyone he knows.

There are still piles of unfinished coffins in the garage from his first attempt at 'artisanal caskets'. And now that he's trying to work as a funeral planner, there are pamphlets all over my old bedroom that say 'Plan for the Party of Your Life!' (Which really means your DEATH. Surprise!)

This is not new behaviour from him, unfortunately, and



it's very much part of the reason we don't talk too often any more. If I had to be more specific, I would say that most of the reason we don't talk is the fact that he drained a college fund in my name to cover costs for another of his 'ventures'. That one was a mobile spa unit he could drive to the homes of the elderly to perform hot stone massages on their semi-nude bodies in their driveways. Sweet idea, Dad. How did that fail to take off?

He was, of course, going to pay the money 'right back'! But somehow he just ended up borrowing more from my mom . . . without asking her. Yet, despite all this, I called him last night in a moment of weakness. Or desperation. Or maybe just to give him fair warning about my ruined life.

Anyway, when I got through, I caught him on a beach in Nantucket, where I immediately heard what sounded like fireworks launching into the night sky.

'Duncan Fowler!' he shouted over a prolonged screech.

'Dad?'

'Hello? This is DUNCAN!'

'DAD. THIS IS TESS!'

The screech came to an end.

'Tess,' he said. 'What's wrong?'

I couldn't blame him for asking. The only time he ever got a call from me was when something was going horribly.

'Nothing,' I lied. 'Nothing is going horribly.'

A deafening explosion stepped on my line.

'What?' he said.

'NOTHING IS WRONG!' I said. 'EVERYTHING IS PERFECT!'

Silence.

'Dad,' I said. 'What the hell is going on? It sounds like an air raid over there.'

'I'll be honest.' He sighed. 'You haven't caught me at the best time, kid.'

I couldn't remember a time when I had.

'I just have to tell you one thing,' I said. 'I'll be quick.'

I took a breath and made sure another boom wasn't coming.

'I'm quitting,' I said.

I didn't wait for him to respond.

'I gave up. On school. I'm quitting and coming home, probably for ever. I hope that's cool with you.'

I expected a gasp. Or at the very least a sigh. All I got was another crackle in the air.

'Dad?'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I lost you for a minute. Did you say something?'

I closed my eyes and mouthed a few f-bombs.

'Forgive me, Tess,' he said. 'The ceremony isn't going so great here. The rockets just went off ahead of schedule and people are kind of freaking.'

'Wait a minute. Rockets? What are you talking about?'

'They were supposed to go off at twelve, but it's only eleven thirty. I'm not sure why that's such a big deal, but apparently Zebulon was born just after midnight ...'

'Who is *Zebulon*?' I asked.

I both did and did not want to know.

'A borzoi!' he said. 'Beautiful dog. At least, he was. He's

been through a cremulator now, poor guy. He belonged to a famous science fiction writer. Thus, the rockets. And the name Zebulon, I guess. He's being launched as we speak. It's really quite—'

Another staccato of bursts.

'Hold on. You're doing dog funerals now?'

'Well,' he said, 'this is technically a *life celebration*, but yeah. It's sort of an untapped market. Anyway, I'm kind of busy. And it's almost exam time for you, right? What do they have you doing at that school, birthing a calf?'

For a moment, I considered telling him the truth. I considered telling him that I was no longer learning things at the expensive private high school where my mom had sent me to 'self-actualize', and 'build community'. I considered telling him I was, instead, at his house in Minneapolis, eating out of his sad bachelor fridge and getting ready to sleep in my old room – which now looked like a cross between a home accountant's office and a prostitute's garret – but then I heard some shouts from a faraway crowd.

'Oh crap,' he said. 'Not good. The smoke is blowing back towards the beach. I need to move the old people. We'll talk about this later, OK, Tessie?'

And then, just like that, he was gone.

So, I closed my eyes and lay back on the bed.

It was and still is a single mattress bought for a smaller me. A smaller me who peed the bed well into her sixth year and was afraid of the dark until fifteen when she discovered Xanax and droning guitars. I hadn't slept on it in almost a year until last night. Now the springs are shot and the

mattress dips in the middle like a hammock. But, still, I tried to find sleep in the office of death.

It was too quiet, though. I had been conditioned by Quaker school, and now I needed the sound of shouts echoing down the residence hall, and the rustles and shuffles of Emma and her boyfriend trying to have considerate sex across the room when they thought I was sleeping. I needed the sounds of other people, whatever those might be. Reminders that I wasn't completely alone.

So my attempt at shut-eye didn't last too long. And instead of making some tea, or meditating, I got up and I sent a long message to the Facebook account of a person who no longer exists.

The vacant person's name is Jonah.

His account is vacant because he's not alive any more.

Still, despite his un-aliveness, I sent my message to him.

I told him about trying to go to bed in a room full of eerily upbeat death brochures. I told him about an iPhone app that identified constellations when you point it at the night sky. I told him I missed his late-night texts, his rambling emails, and the sound of his laughter on my voicemail. And I told him that I was home, but it didn't feel like home any more.

I also told him that everything happening to me was entirely his fault.

That if I hadn't known him, hadn't fallen for him against my better judgement, none of this would be occurring. I wouldn't be wearing the same clothes I wore yesterday. I wouldn't be lying on my sagging mattress from sixth grade, unable to move. I wouldn't be a high school dropout. And I

wouldn't be barely holding in the full-body heartache that threatened to swallow me whole whenever I looked at his profile picture.

Then I waited two hours for a response that I knew would never come.

Which finally leads me to everything that happened this morning, and the story I intended to tell in the first place before I began talking about other doomed things like the universe and Zebulon the rocket dog.

So, I'd like to give this another try, if you don't mind. My English teacher, Mr Barthold, once told me that I need to 'trust the process', when crafting a piece of writing, and that 'the essential truth is a slippery thing'.

Duly noted, Mr B. Even though you are an embittered man clinging to a single published novel like a participation trophy, you sounded genuine when you said this. So I shall heed your advice and trust the process. OK?

Fantastic.

Here goes.