

A popular phrase among people naive enough to assume they'll continue to be not dead for the foreseeable future is that you only live once. Ironically, this statement is usually made moments before taking part in reckless or unnecessary behavior, like jumping off a balcony into a hotel swimming pool or entering a Swedish meatball eating contest on a whim. But I contend that this cliched declaration of ignorance is completely false. Ideally, you live every day. The only thing you do once is die.

Commented [CS1]: Love this.

Commented [CS2]: ha

Commented [CS3]: nice

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean the figurative cloaked hood and bony finger of death won't make its presence felt every once in a while. And as I situate myself on the sharp-cornered metal bench adjacent to the entrance of Bellevue High School, I am once again reminded of its tendency to lurk.

Glancing over my left shoulder, I spot the rectangular dedication plaque displaying the name of a teacher in emboldened, gold letters who booked his one way ticket to the great beyond six years before I was even a freshman. I have a basic idea of the type of life I'd like to lead, namely, a long and cautious one, but can't decide if having a bench made in my honor would mean I did something right or didn't do enough.

Commented [CS4]: nice

Out of necessity, I slide down to the end of the bench so the plaque is no longer in my peripheral. Without this distraction, I have a perfect vantage point to observe the river of limbs and backpacks rushing by, the afternoon current taking them every which way but school. And I can't help but wonder how many of my fellow students I am going to outlive.

Take Kendall Gill for instance. Her legs are long enough to bridge the gap between subway platforms, which she uses to her advantage on the track team during long distance races. I've got nothing against running. I'd do it in a pinch, like if I was being chased by something.

But Kendall's physical makeup combined with her affinity for running on purpose has me thinking she'll live longer than me. Which is totally fair.

Now, the guy she's walking with, Rony Seikaly? His glamor muscles may be the centerpiece of what he brings to the table: thick biceps, titanium abs. But his extracurricular of choice is the pole vault. Have you witnessed this insanity? The goal is to stick a pole in the ground, go ass backwards into the air and 'vault' yourself over a *second* pole without knocking it over. I mean, let's be real. That is absolutely a gateway activity to other death wishes disguised as sports like rock climbing or, I don't know, poison snake kissing. I don't care if the dude could probably bench press a Prius. I am so outliving Rony.

I certainly don't *hope* for anyone's death. I'm not a monster. These are just educated guesses. But for obvious reasons my preoccupation with dying and how to avoid it at all costs has tipped the scale towards obsession recently. So it's hard to untangle myself from these thoughts.

Thankfully it's not long before Mom's Subaru Forester, the second highest-rated car in its class when it comes to safety, pulls up to the curb. I push myself off the bench-o-death, step around a triumvirate of girls who are somehow both talking to one another and using their phones at the same time, open the rear door, and slide into the middle seat. I latch my seatbelt before saying hello.

After securing myself, it's hard not to notice that we aren't moving despite the fact that there are no other cars in front of us. I look up at Mom, who, for some reason, is leaning across the center console observing the bench area I just came from.

"Uh, Mom? We heading out or what?"

Commented [CS5]: nice. I like the way this obsession is introduced.

“Oh, sorry,” she says, settling back into her seat. “I was just checking to see if there are any other seniors getting picked up by their mommies.”

Commented [CS6]: ouch

I catch Mom’s eyes in the rear view mirror. She doesn’t blink.

I sigh. “It was funny the first time you pointed that out,” I say, placing my backpack in the perfectly-sized gap between the front of the back seat and the back of the front seat to my right. “But I’m not concerned with other people. You should know this by now.”

“Yeah. Especially me,” she says, waiting for a stray freshman to scamper across the pick up lane before pulling away. “You know I have to close the store to come get you.”

I nod. “I am aware of this. But on the days when D can’t drop me off, this is the only way.”

I catch Mom’s eyes in the rear view again. “Is she still doing Comedy Club? I thought you said that was done for the year?”

My girlfriend D and I are the founding members of Bellevue High’s first ever after school club devoted to stand up comedy. My friend Lee is in it as well. We spend most afternoons referencing stand up bits we like, but we’ll occasionally test the waters with our own jokes. Mine are mostly met with nods of reassurance that what I’m saying is funny, but not actual laughter. Which is essentially like confessing your love to someone only to be told they like you as a friend. Still, it always feels good to release a joke from my notebook into the wild to see if it’s got any life to it.

Commented [CS7]: love both of these

But I recently decided to step away from Comedy Club, for no other reason than it’s impossible to do comedy when everyone knows the least funny thing about you. I came to this conclusion after the modestly attended show we put on before winter break. My best jokes were

no match for the one thing I could tell everyone was thinking about and I was trying to ignore.

So technically speaking Comedy Club is still happening, just not for me.

“It’s still going on,” I say. “You need me to work though, right?”

“I do. But I also told you we could figure something out.”

I shake my head. “No. It’s fine.”

“Well my point is, this is most certainly not the *only* way for you to get to the store. We do have another car sitting in our driveway.”

“OK, it’s the only way that involves me not driving.”

“Gary, you need to become more comfortable behind the wheel,” she says.

“Well, clearly I don’t *need* to, seeing as how, you know, you’re currently driving me.” I lean my head back against the cloth headrest and look through the sunroof of the car, envious of the clouds floating by at their own pace. “Again,” I say. “One. In. A hundred. Well, technically one in a hundred and three. Those are the odds of the driver dying in a car crash.”

“OK then, I’m certainly glad to see you’re not afraid of putting *my* life in danger,” says Mom. “And I know the odds, Gary. You’ve told me the odds.” She straightens her back and sits up, both hands on the wheel. “But if you pay attention and obey the laws of the road, you’ll be fine. It’s not like you haven’t done it before.”

She’s got me there. I technically know how to drive. When my twin brother Hazen and I turned 16, I knew he would get his license without any issues, the same way he effortlessly did anything. Well, *almost* anything. So learning how to drive would be only slightly less traumatizing than having to explain to people why Hazen had his license and I didn’t.

“Yeah, I know I’ve done it before. Which is also how I know it’s something I don’t enjoy. It’s the same reason I retired from little league.”

Commented [CS8]: I’m not sure how this line figures into this conversation?

Commented [CS9]: So, when people introduce themselves these days a lot of times “my preferred pronouns” is included in that introduction. I would love some preferred pronouns from this MC earlier on in the story because knowing who I’m reading about is helpful for the same reason “my preferred pronouns” is helpful in an introduction—so we don’t assume anything. In a story, your reader might assume things one way or another and then be jarred from the story when their assumption isn’t correct. If you WANT gender to be something that isn’t identified then I can see that being a thing, but it would need to be very consistent through the book!

Commented [CS10]: Nice. Hazen and Gary, huh? Interesting pairing of names for twins. Most parents go traditional or not, but these two are split down the middle.

I am instantly curious about where Hazen is.

“I really don’t think it can be considered a retirement if you stopped showing up halfway through the season.”

“Retired, quit, had the sense to not want baseballs chucked at me every Saturday afternoon. Call it what you will.”

“Well, if I’m going to be driving around my 18 year old son who happens to have his license, the least you could do is sit up front so I don’t feel like a chauffeur.”

Commented [CS11]: Probably spell this out?

I roll my eyes. “Safest place in a car is back seat, middle. Plus, the potential for a quick nap makes it an easy choice.” I adjust myself so I’m lying flat on my back across the row of seats. “It’s just common sense.”

Commented [CS12]: This is funny, but also not the correct application of a seatbelt, which, based on the character so far, makes me wonder things?

Mom presses her lips together and shakes her head. She does that a lot. “Can we at least talk about what I need you to do today?”

“Uh, let’s see. Sit behind the cash register and take peoples’ money in exchange for our goods and services. It’s the thing I do every day.”

“Well, yes. But I also need you to water everything outside. It’s starting to get warmer and hasn’t rained in a few days. Figure the ferns could use a drink.”

“Not a problem,” I say, sitting back up. I preemptively roll up my sleeves. Not that I was outside at any point in the day on account of being trapped in school, but I could sense how nice out it was. And not just because the sun made an all day appearance. The buzz of energy in the halls is noticeable when the temperature finally starts to turn. Soon enough, the days will be getting longer, I can start wearing flip flops. The freedom that summer provides is on the horizon, for both me and my toes.

“Terrific,” says Mom, who adjusts the radio to a volume that suggests she’s no longer interested in continuing our conversation. A downer of a song leaks slowly through the speakers. She lets it linger a moment before changing it to something more upbeat.

Commented [CS13]: Eeeeeek!

We pull into the parking lot of Mom’s flower shop, Botanical Arrangements, and of course there are a couple people waiting by the entrance.

“Oh great,” says Mom, taking the nearest parking spot. She hustles out of the car. “Don’t forget to water,” she calls out over her shoulder before slamming the door behind her.

I feel a tinge of guilt about the people waiting, but if you think about it, any time there’s a line for something, it makes other people want to join, even if they don’t know what it’s for. So maybe I contributed to a few extra customers today.

Out back, I grab the hose, extend it out to the ferns and other larger potted plants strategically placed at the side of the store that gets the most sun, and begin to dole out liberal doses of water.

“Drink up fellas,” I say, adjusting the nozzle to the ‘shower’ function. I shamelessly love talking to the plants. They’re a very captive audience. Plus I feel like I read somewhere that they grow better when you talk to them. Or was that babies before they’re born? Possibly both. Either way, I continue: “It’s happy hour, first round is on me.”

Commented [CS14]: haha

Aiming for a big mother of a fern, a Gary-shaped shadow stretches across its leaves as I step in front of it. I watch as the water darkens the soil, turning it squishably soft as the plant’s theoretical thirst is quenched. Then the water starts to rise. I make sure to move on to the next pot before it overflows. Water’s a tricky thing. An absolute necessity for life, but there’s a fine line. You take from it to a point, then, when it becomes too much, it takes from you.

Commented [CS15]: the beginning of a theme/foreshadowing?

When the watering is done, I turn off the hose and wind it back into its stand, but return to the troop of plants before heading inside. “Alright fellas, that’s it for today,” I say. “Time for me to *leaf* you alone.” The moment the words escape my mouth, the wind picks up, rustling their collective leaves and pedals. It sounds like they’re giving me a miniature applause. I bow my head in reverence. “Oh, you are too kind. Same time tomorrow?” I point a pair of finger guns at them. “Great.”

Yeah, same time tomorrow and the next day and the next day. But hopefully not for long.

I quickly walk back to the car to grab my backpack before heading for the glass door entrance. I hold it open for someone on their way out, clanging the bells hanging above us.

“Only me,” I say, as I weave through the few tiered table displays of colorful spring flowers in glass vases and some pastel Easter decor. Then set myself up behind the register.

I actually don’t mind helping out. Now that I’m no longer an active participant in after school activities it gives me a chance to make a little money. And there’s really not much work involved. I mostly listen to my favorite comedy albums, catch up on some late night sets on YouTube, or, as an absolute last resort, do some school work. Plus, I’m pretty good at smooth talking the customers. And they seem to appreciate my efforts. Well, for the most part.

There was this one time an elderly gentleman came in for a bouquet. He mentioned his wife was on hospice, had only a few more days to live, and he wanted to leave some flowers by her bedside to brighten up the room. As I handed him a fresh bunch I was like, “Well, with any luck these will last much longer than that.”

I know. Not exactly comforting. It was like the Appropriate Thought Police went on break at the worst possible time so my mouth ran amok. I told him right away I didn’t mean it

Commented [CS16]: Huh. Intriguing

Commented [CS17]: Nice. I feel like we have a pretty good beginning to this kid—I like the way it’s set up and how the details are given. It feels like it’s all going to mean something.

the way it came out. But judging by the scowl on his face and the way he asked for and proceeded to berate the manager, AKA my mom, I don't think he believed me.

It's in these moments when I feel like Mom wouldn't mind having anyone else but me at the register. But seeing as how Botanical Arrangements is down one employee since my brother's **incident**, I'm kind of the only option. Beggars can't be choosers, as they say.

I settle onto the stool, unzip my bag and fire up my school laptop. I select the Chrome icon and immediately hear little blips, a whirring fan, and other computer-related noises coming from its insides, like it's a tiny factory that produces the zeros and ones and algorithms and whatever dark magic makes the Internet possible. Unfortunately the noises don't equate to any actual progress when it comes to getting online.

"Mom," I say, calling over my shoulder. "Feel like the Wifi's bugging again." I press hard against some random keys on the keyboard. This obviously doesn't improve my laptop's interneting capabilities, it's essentially the tire kicking of computer repair, but it at least makes me feel like I'm doing something.

"OK," she says, from the back room behind me. Her voice is slightly muffled since she's probably got a few bobby pins clenched between her lips. "Is there something you'd like me to do about that?"

"I don't know. Is there any way to make it less...worse?"

"I'm a florist, Gary. Not the IT department. Maybe it's slow because you aren't using it for anything school related?"

I press my foot against the body of the counter, spinning the seat of the stool around to face her. Mom's head is down, her attention on arranging some baby's breath into a pink corsage. "Everything's school related if it's on my school computer."

Commented [CS18]: Incident is different than accident, so I'm assuming now that he's not absent for physical reasons, it's for behavioral reasons.

Could be an assumption that doesn't play out, I'm intrigued.

Also, does this mean he usually doesn't work at the store, only his brother does?

“Mmm hmm...” says Mom, rightfully skeptical of my claim.

I hop off the stool, crouch down behind the counter, and open the cabinet door where we keep the modem. Turning it off then on again, I wait for the little lights to start blinking when I hear the bells above the store’s entrance do their thing. I make sure all the wires are snug in their respective sockets before coming up for air and immediately lock eyes with a man grabbing a bouquet of mixed flowers from the large, refrigerated glass case on the left side of the store.

Donned in a short sleeved dress shirt tucked into high waisted khakis, his wispy, gray hair sprouts from everywhere but the top of his head. You could make an argument that over time all his hair migrated off his head, trickled down his forehead, and collected at his caterpillar-sized eyebrows. Perhaps the graying stash under his slightly bulbous nose is the final hair destination. Regardless, it’s a face I’d recognize anywhere. Dr. Alfred Galen, LPCMH.

Commented [CS19]: Not sure this is correct usage of donned?

I’ve spent many an afternoon with Dr. Al, each one as awkward and uncomfortable as the last. And from the looks of it, we’re picking up right where we left off.

Commented [CS20]: funny

“Hello Gary,” says Dr. Al, walking toward the counter. His distinguished baritone only deepened by the fact that he’s a smoker. Not that I’ve ever actually seen him smoke, but woof, whatever gum he chews does very little to mask the stench. His lips curl just so, matching the upward curve of his eyebrows. “What a pleasant surprise. How are things?”

Commented [CS21]: intentional fragment?

“Dr. Al,” I say, situating myself back onto the stool. “Hi. Things are fine?” I say, but more so as a question than a statement. “Did you need help with something?”

“Nope,” he says, then holds up his bouquet. “Found what I was looking for. They’re for my granddaughter’s dance recital tonight.”

“Very thoughtful,” I say, nodding. At that, I reach forward, grab his bouquet, and ring him up.

“You know, in all our sessions you never mentioned you worked so close to my office. I walk by this place almost every day on my way to get coffee.”

I shrug. “Guess it never came up.”

He nods. “Well, we did have a more pressing issue to discuss, certainly.

“Right. I remember that.” I hand Dr. Al his flowers and credit card. “So yeah, my mom owns the store. Which means I’m here a lot. Helping out. Like, every day basically. I used to split time with Hazen, but you know.” I lean forward and say with a hushed voice, “I’ve had to fill in for him recently.”

“Of course,” he says. He tucks his bouquet under his arm. “I’m sure your sacrifice is appreciated.”

“Maybe,” I say. “I mean, I’m assuming it would be *more* appreciated if things were back to the way they were.”

Dr. Al nods again. “Yes, well, if only that were possible. But as upsetting as death can be, it has a way of providing pathways toward moving beyond the pain of losing a loved one. Bringing those affected closer together. You know, a door closes, a window opens. That sort of thing.”

It always amazed me how nonchalantly Dr. Al is able to talk about death. Like it’s on a checklist of small talky things you might discuss with a neighbor when there’s nothing of substance to say. Like, *‘Hey Mark, how ‘bout this weather we’re having? Hot enough for ya?’*

‘Ah, yes. On account of the Earth being closer to the sun these days than it was 6 months ago, no doubt.’

‘So, anyone you know and love die recently?’

‘Nope! But hey, it’s only Monday. Anyway, see ya ‘round the neighborhood!’

Commented [CS22]: Huh. The top sentence doesn’t make me think his brother is dead, so Dr. Al chiming in about death is surprising to me.

I kind of assumed his twin had died what with the death fascination, but there are other clues through here that made me reassess (like the word “incident” and this pp here. I’ll ask the others what they think.

Commented [CS23]: Wouldn’t this have been something they covered in their sessions?

Things we like:

- The voice comes across strongly from the first paragraph. Agreed, I feel like the voice very firmly establishes a lot of things about the MC without having to say them--his fascination with death is really nicely introduced and immediately put into context the first time he mentions his twin who is conspicuously absent. I really love the thoughtful, philosophical flavor.
 - Some lines I liked: A popular phrase among people naive enough to assume they'll continue to be not dead for the foreseeable future is that you only live once. Ironically, this statement is usually made moments before taking part in reckless or unnecessary behavior, like jumping off a balcony into a hotel swimming pool or entering a Swedish meatball eating contest on a whim . But I contend that this cliched declaration of ignorance is completely false. Ideally, you live every day. The only thing you do once is die. **I really loved this, too**
 - About his standup...“Which is essentially like confessing your love to someone only to be told they like you as a friend. Still, it always feels good to release a joke from my notebook into the wild to see if it's got any life to it.”
 - **I really loved the part where he says that he quit comedy club because everyone there knew the least funny thing about him.**
 - This line that feels like the beginning of a theme or foreshadowing: Water's a tricky thing. An absolute necessity for life, but there's a fine line. You take from it to a point, then, when it becomes too much, it takes from you. [CS1]
- I really liked that the main character was more safety conscious than the mom.
- I liked the hints that everyone knows something scandalous about the main character.
- I love the mom. I won't say that I *liked* the mom, I thought she was terrible. But she was very distinctly written, which I liked. **I didn't think she was terrible! I liked the mom a lot, and depending on how long ago Hazen died, Gary's mom is dealing not only with the death of one of her sons but also Gary's inability to care about anyone more than himself. It's like a giant pile of trauma.**
- I was instantly curious about Hazen the missing twin.

Things that might need a second look:

- I really liked how solid the voice is from the beginning but I wish we had some more tangible facts about the main character on the first few pages--like gender or perhaps what they were wearing. Just some small details to give me a sense of who they were. Agreed--when people introduce themselves these days a lot of times “my preferred pronouns” is included in that introduction. I would love some preferred pronouns from this MC earlier on in the story because knowing who I'm reading about is helpful for the same reason “my preferred pronouns” is helpful in an introduction—so we don't assume anything. In a story, your reader might assume things one way or another and then be jarred from the story when their assumption isn't correct. If you WANT gender to be something that isn't identified then I can see that being a thing, it would just need to be very consistent through the book? **Yeah, it took until page 4 to have anything that definitively gave me a name or a gender for the MC so I spent the first four pages convinced he was a girl.**
- A lot of good voicey stuff to love here, but it felt like the inciting incident was a little delayed. It did feel a *little* slow to me--some of it seemed like voice for voice's sake rather than things actively contributing to the story. I was engaged enough to keep reading.

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This is a very VERY small thing, but I wanted to put it to the group: so with the fascination with/fear of death, I immediately assumed Gary's twin passed away. However, there were a few moments in the chapter that had me reevaluating and they're such tiny nitpicky things: saying "ever since Hazen's incident the store was shorthanded" made me think it was actually some behavioral problem and that Hazen is still around somewhere. Another one was his reaction to Dr. Al--he says he knows his mom appreciates his help but that things would be *more* appreciated if things were back the way they were, which, to me, sounds like they could be back to normal, just aren't yet. SO nitpicky, especially because Dr. Al confirms the brother's death in the next paragraph. I didn't mind this at all because it felt clear to me that Gary is deep in the dead-twin trauma. Part of him is obsessed with death but the rest of him is firmly in denial--he won't talk about his brother's death unless forced to and even stops Comedy Club to avoid the topic, so to me this tracked as a logical sequence of events for a guy who just lost his twin.