

When I Woke Up I Knew I was Dead

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to Hope Goodrich, who provided editing as well as creative inspiration.

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When I woke up I knew I was dead. I got up, brushed my teeth, showered, got dressed, and did everything that I normally did. Then at breakfast I told my parents I was dead. I don't know why, but they gave me this look I'll never forget.

“Honey, what on earth are you saying?” I'd never seen my mother's eyebrows raised so high.

“Are you feeling okay, Sean?” My father had the frown of an elderly man whose doctor just told him he couldn't eat salty things anymore.

“Yeah, I feel fine, you guys. Dying doesn't really hurt.”

I don't know why they made such a fuss about it, but for almost an hour they tried to convince me I wasn't dead. First they calmly explained to me that science had cured death a long time ago. Then they got angrier and said that dead people don't walk around, they don't talk, they don't eat cereal, and they don't do math homework. But I didn't really understand how they would know, because I knew they weren't dead. I told them that they would understand when they died, but for now they would just have to believe me. The thing is, they wouldn't.

Eventually my dad started yelling at my mom that my delusions were somehow her fault and that if she had just allowed him to get me to play football, none of this would be happening. My mom burst into tears and wailed giant puddles onto the floor until my socks got wet. I have to admit, it was one of the most dramatic moments my family has ever had. I tried to tell my dad that it wasn't delusions at all and that it certainly had nothing to do with mom, but the veins on his forehead were pulsing like crazy and for a second I thought he would snatch me up in his gigantic hands and pound me against the wall.

“Goddamn it, Sean, if you say that you're dead one more time I'm going to throw you out this fucking window!”

After that ordeal I decided that I wasn't going to tell anyone I was dead anymore. If my parents had reacted that way, I figured there must be something unacceptable about it. On my way to school I sat in the same spot I always sat in, right behind the driver. He was texting pictures of boobs to his friends and not paying much attention to the road. I didn't really care.

This girl I was friends with sat next to me when we were about halfway to school. She was wearing a short skirt that flattered her legs but brought attention to her love handles. Before I died I had a sneaking suspicion that she had a crush on me.

“Hey, Sean. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Alice.”

“Aren't you dressed kind of warm for today?”

I looked down at my all black apparel. I didn't feel hot, but I figured it was probably because I was dead.

“I guess, but I feel fine.”

She gave me that look girls give when they're trying to figure out if your penis is big enough for them.

“Well, okay then. So, are you going to the party this weekend?”

“What party?”

“You can't tell me you forgot. The one at Jared's house, like half the school is invited.”

Some vague part of my mind was telling me that I should probably invite her as my date, but I found it hard to get myself to do it.

“Oh yeah, Jared's party.”

She looked at me expectantly as if I were a gumball machine she had just inserted a quarter into.

“Well?”

“What?”

“Are you going to ask me to go with you or not?”

I sighed. I was hoping she wouldn't be so up front about it, but turning her down now would lead to my reputation as a kind-of-nice-guy to be ruined. It crossed my mind that dead people probably shouldn't worry about their reputation, but I decided that since I still had a few years of school ahead of me, it would probably be better not to risk it. Plus, among the girls at school, Alice was probably my favorite. She wasn't an emotional wreck, she made some semblance of sense, and she dressed in scandalous outfits. I liked that.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that was what you were asking. Yeah, I'll go with you.”

“Okay, good. For a minute I thought you were going with someone else or something.”

“Are you kidding? Of course not.”

“Okay, then.” I thought she had rolled her eyes but I couldn't say for sure. Suddenly, she got a scared expression on her face and started rummaging frantically in her backpack.

I almost didn't care enough to ask, but out of common decency, did. “Forget something at home?”

“Yes, shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. My paper for history, I must have left it on my desk or something.”

“Oh, that sucks.”

“Wait a minute, Sean. Where's your backpack?”

I looked automatically at my feet and realized there was no backpack next to them. I blamed my parents and their fit of rage.

“I must have left it. Damn.”

“How could you forget your entire backpack?”

“My parents were mad and distracted me. They didn't believe me when I said I was dead.” The words came out before I could even realize there was something bad about them. When I looked over Alice was inches from my face, her eyes wide. I tried to lean away from her, but my head hit the window instead.

“Wait, did you say someone died?”

“No.” The vibrations of the glass made my head ache.

“You definitely said something about death.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Yes, you did.”

The one thing I didn't like about Alice was her stubbornness. She continued peering into my eyes like an inquisitive dog.

“No, I said my parents didn't believe what I said about Ted. They got mad.” It wasn't the best substitute, but I was having trouble focusing. Finally, she moved back and I was able to lift my head from the window.

“Wait, you mean about that fight he got into? It was in the newsletter.”

“They didn't see it. They didn't think Ted would hang out with those guys.”

“Are you lying to me, Sean?”

“Damn it Alice, why would I say something about death? I'm not stupid. You just need to get your hearing checked.” The problem with Alice was that, once something left my mouth with her, I could never take it back. Whether it was a dumb joke or a clearly unintended statement. I knew she wouldn't believe the truth anyway.

“Wow, that was harsh. Fine then, I won't ask.”

We were silent for the rest of the drive, though everyone around us continued being loud and obnoxious. Bus rides were probably my least favorite part of the day. It felt like a decade by the time the driver finally finished covertly texting boobs and dropped us off. Alice got up first, and I got a nice glimpse of her underwear. Before I knew it we were leaving to our respective lockers and heading to class. I wasn't thrilled about leaving her, but I wasn't all that upset either.

It wasn't until I sat down at my desk that I remembered I still didn't have my backpack. When I was alive this kind of thing mattered to me, but now it seemed meaningless. I looked around the room as students handed in their work, feeling only the slightest guilt. There was only one other person who didn't make a movement. It was a girl in the back of the room, I believed her name was Tracy. She hardly ever spoke. Her face was very rectangular and she had an underbite that made her whole chin jut out at least a centimeter too far. Sometimes people would pick on her, but she didn't ever make any reaction. But there was something else about her, something that I hadn't noticed before.

Suddenly it clicked in my head. Tracy was dead, too. I immediately stood up and walked over to her. Nobody even had time to open their mouth before I had my hands on Tracy's desk and was staring into her glum, green eyes. She slowly looked up at me as if coming out of a trance.

“Tracy, you're dead like me, aren't you?” She just stared at me without blinking or moving her head. For a second I thought she had fallen asleep with her eyes open.

“Sean, you are disrupting the class. Get back to your seat, now.”

“But professor, give me one more second.” I didn't want to peel my gaze away from Tracy, not until I got an answer. Even when the professor had grabbed my arm and was dragging me away, I still kept looking at her. It was only when I was back at my desk when I caught, out of the corner of my eye, an imperceptible nod. I had never been so happy.

After receiving a long lecture from my professor about proper behavior in class and being given a referral note, I went to look for Tracy. I caught sight of her by the lockers and waited for her to start walking to class, but instead she started heading for the auditorium. Not knowing what to expect, I

followed her. The place was completely empty except for Tracy, who was sitting a few meters away on the bleachers. I sat next to her. She didn't look at me.

“Do you realize how crazy you acted back there, Sean?”

It might have been the first time I had actually heard her voice. It was surprisingly light and girly.

“I realize that everybody thinks I'm crazy when I tell them I'm dead.”

“Exactly. So you definitely shouldn't go around asking people. What if I wasn't? I would have screamed and you would have been packed away to an asylum.”

I thought about this for a moment, and concluded she was right. “Yeah. But I just didn't know what to do. I had a feeling, I just knew that you were dead, too.”

“Yeah. It's been a while now. If you're here for answers though, I'm sorry to say I have none.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked straight at me, a sliver of irritation bringing electricity to her eyes.

“I mean exactly what I say. I. Have. No. Answers.”

“But you said you've been dead for a while.”

She sighed and looked at her feet.

“Yeah, well. I have no idea why everybody is ignoring it. For all I know we're both in an alternate reality or something. You're the first other person I've met who is dead. I thought I would be the only dead one in this world forever.”

I could barely hide my disappointment. Here I was, thinking someone might finally explain to me what was going on, but instead it was another dead end. Still, I was glad to find another dead person.

“Well, if there's two of us now there must be others.”

“Maybe.”

“We could form a dead person alliance or something. Then maybe someone would believe us.”

“Haha. Right.”

“You could at least pretend to be supportive.” I tried glaring at her to see if it would make a difference. Instead, I realized that there were droplets on her cheeks. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Of course I'm not okay! What would you do if you've been wandering around for the past ten years or so, knowing you are dead even though everyone else tells you you're not. Then, after all that time, suddenly having some guy appear and tell you he's dead, too. Wouldn't you be a little suspicious?”

Now she was glaring at me, her underbite more prominent than ever as she gritted her teeth in frustration.

I didn't know what to say. “Well, yeah. I guess I would be.”

“Why should I even believe you?”

“I'm not lying. I can feel it. I noticed you were dead, didn't I?”

“Just because you noticed doesn't mean you're dead, too. This is probably some kind of conspiracy or something.”

“What? You don't actually believe in that?”

“Well, I didn't believe in a world where I was the only dead person either but I guess I was wrong.”

I sighed. This conversation was getting difficult and I didn't want to upset her anymore. It didn't seem worth it. “Touché. Except that you aren't the only dead person. You're not alone like you thought. Maybe there are others.”

“Just go.” Tracy wiped away her tears and her sadness seemed to evaporate in front of my eyes, replaced with a grim frown. “And please, don't talk about this with anyone.”

“Fine.” I got up and left, ignoring the gnawing feeling that I would regret it later. The heavy auditorium door slammed shut behind me before I could look back. I had trouble believing Tracy couldn't sense who was alive and who was dead. She had to be lying to herself. In denial, like the rest of them.

The second I stepped out of the room a hall monitor came over and yelled at me to go to class. He was built like a sperm whale. I practically ran away from him.

For the rest of the day all I could think about was my conversation with Tracy. I couldn't believe that I had ignored her deadness for so long. I had been just like everyone else, blissfully unaware. But now I knew, and there was no going back. Maybe Tracy was right, maybe there was a conspiracy. Maybe the whole world was under some kind of hypnosis, and Tracy and I were the only ones who had snapped out of it. It seemed like a far fetched notion, but it was the only thing that made any sense.

I kept nurturing this tender theory until the final bell rang. Walking to my locker in a daze, I saw that Alice was waiting for me.

“Hey, Sean.”

I knew the conversation wouldn't go anywhere, but responded anyway. “Hey.”

“You look out of it. What's up?”

“Not much. Just tired.” That was the excuse I always had.

“Yeah? It was a long day.”

“Yeah.” The horrific prospect of having all my conversations turn into this meaningless banter was almost too much for me to bear. Only the comfort of knowing I would see Tracy the next day was keeping me from blurting anything out again.

When I entered the front door of my house, I saw my mother sitting in a rocking chair a few feet away, clearly awaiting my arrival.

“Sean, welcome home.”

“Thanks, mom.” There was something strangely tense in her expression, and she was looking at me way too closely. Even her nostrils were flared as if trying to guess by my smell if I was still 'confused.'

“Do you want anything to eat?”

“Not really.” I had eaten during my lunch detention, but I wasn't about to mention that.

She frowned. “Are you sure? Your father made burgers for lunch, they're delicious. I can heat one up for you.”

“Alright. Sounds good, I guess.” There was no use arguing with her, I could tell she was determined to get me to talk to her.

“Perfect.” My mother stood up from her rocking chair as if on springs and practically ran ahead of me into the kitchen. I watched as she got out a plate and recovered the burger condiments from the fridge. Before I knew it, she was balancing a plate with the beef on it, ready to place into the microwave. It was astounding to me how fast she could work in the kitchen. Then she turned to me, plate tilting precariously in her hand. I stared at it to avoid eye contact.

“How was school?”

“Fine.” Yes, it really was quite fine.

She frowned and I immediately knew it wasn't the answer she wanted. “Do you have a lot of homework?”

“No, not really.”

“That seems strange, since it's Monday.” She wasn't even trying to mask the sarcasm in her tone.

“Really, mom. Do you think I'm lying to you?” I had no idea what she was getting at, and finally broke my staring contest with the plate to look at her. It took all my willpower not to step away from her.

“Lying? I don't know what to think anymore, Sean. I don't know if you're sick, or if you're overwhelmed, or if you don't trust me. But there is definitely something wrong, and I need to know what that is. Your father and I are both worried about you.”

Her hand was shaking and I was sure the plate would fall to the ground, and yet, at that very moment, she shoved it into the microwave. I repressed a sigh of relief. “You don't have to worry about me, I'm fine.”

“Oh, really?” She gave me an incredulous look, her eyes bulging. “Last time I checked, fine people didn't go around saying that they are dead. The lunatics who say that kind of stuff are put in the asylum along with the people who eat paint.”

“What? Mom, I'm not crazy.” I knew what she really wanted to hear, but I couldn't bring myself to

say it.

“Sean! I want to believe that very much, so you have to tell me what on earth made you act that way this morning.”

Thinking fast was never my strong point, but I attempted to improvise. “I was really tired this morning, I think I hadn't woken up yet. I must have been sleepwalking or something.” I winced at my own words, examining my shoelaces. “Like, I remember saying stuff, but not really.”

“I don't believe you.” She spoke so coldly that my eyes snapped up against my will, fearful. I sensed the dreaded command on the tip of her tongue. I couldn't let her say it.

“What? But Mom, come on! Please, believe me.” I clenched my fists. It was more anger at myself than anything. Telling my parents I was dead was an obvious bad move, I should have realized that before it was too late.

“I haven't heard you say it yet.”

Fear was spreading through my body like ice. I wasn't about to open my mouth.

“Sean? Say it. I want to hear you tell me that you're not dead.” My mother's face was inches away from mine now, and she didn't turn away, not even as the microwave finished heating the burger meat and a loud beeping filled the air.

I wiped my leaking palms against my pants for the millionth time. Anger and frustration were building up in me like cancer and it took all my energy to keep it from consuming me. I knew I couldn't let myself act on it. I didn't want to hurt my own mother, but what she was asking me to say was so wrong. I couldn't let her put any doubt in my mind. I knew I was dead. Yet, if there was absolutely no denying it, then why was I so afraid of a few little words? I searched frantically inside myself for the answer. Because it just seemed wrong to make someone lie like that out loud, that was why. But she didn't believe I was lying. If I didn't say it, she would think I was crazy. That was the part that made the anger inflame me. I wasn't crazy. I wasn't going to let her think that. I took a deep breath, just as my mother was about to turn away hopelessly. “I'm not dead.”

My mother looked at me closely for almost a minute in complete silence, then finally smiled. “I believe you. Thank god, my son isn't crazy. Please, don't ever scare me like that again. I love you.”

She gave me a hug, squeezing my back like she used to when I was a child. But I didn't feel like a child. The moment those words escaped my lips, I was empty. “I love you too, mom.” But really I wanted to rip away from her, rip away from everyone that had ever doubted me and therefore forced me to doubt myself. The second she let go of me I took my opportunity. “What I did lie about was the homework. I better go work on that now.”

My mother laughed. “Alright, well at least let me make the burger for you.”

But I couldn't wait any longer. I had to prove, once and for all, that I truly was dead. "Can you just bring it up to me?"

"Ok, sweetie." She smiled at me with so much love that I almost forgot that my confusion was her fault.

"Thanks." I managed to muster, trying to look away.

"Don't get used to it."

"I won't." I was already leaving the kitchen, my feet moving of their own accord. I dashed up the stairs before she could keep me any longer.

In my room, I immediately fell onto my bed and cried. All the tears of frustration and anger finally came out of me like a raging waterfall. There was only one thing left for me to do. The taboo of suicide had been discussed in my school since I was five. I never thought that knowledge would have come useful to me, but it was the only option I had left. If I was dead, suicide wouldn't affect me at all. I knew it wouldn't. I could prove to everyone that I was truly dead.

I looked around the room for ways to kill myself. Bashing my head on the dresser seemed too violent, jumping out of the window would attract too much attention. Finally, after considering using everything from a pencil to a lamp, my eyes fell onto the door to my parents' bedroom across the hallway. It was perfect. My dad kept a rifle in his closet for hunting. It would be quick and easy, just turn off the safety and pull the trigger. I almost tripped over myself in my eagerness to retrieve it. The metal pressed against my forehead. It felt cold and unnatural, but I didn't allow myself to think about that.

When I woke up I knew I was dead.

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