

Most of us struggle our whole lives to be complete enough when we die to achieve a measure of grace. Few of us ever do. Most of us end up going out the way we came in, kicking and screaming. But somehow Izzi, young as she was, achieved that grace. In her last days, she became whole.

His father died, but Moses wouldn't believe it. He said if they dug his father's body up, he would be gone.

They planted a seed over his grave. The seed became a tree.

Moses said his father became a part of that tree. He grew into the wood, into the bloom.

And when a sparrow ate the tree's fruit, his father flew with the birds.

He said that death was his father's road to awe. That's what he called it: "the road to awe."

...But Not in This Lifetime

Just before the Miracle, when I was in the ICU and it looked like I was going to die and Mom was telling me it was okay to let go, and I was trying to let go but my lungs kept searching for air, Mom sobbed something into Dad's chest that I wish I hadn't heard, and that I hope she never finds out that I did hear. She said, "I won't be a mom anymore." It gutted me pretty badly.

I couldn't stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn't get it out of my head, how she sounded when she said that, like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn't.

Then spoke the thunder

DA

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

Introduction: The Way It Should Have Been

We'll drive. Keep driving. Head out to the middle of nowhere, take that road as far as it takes us. You've never been west of Philly, have you? This is a beautiful country, Monty. It's beautiful out there, like a different world. Mountains, hills, cows, farms, and white churches. I drove out west with your mother one time, before you was born. Brooklyn to the Pacific in three days. Just enough money for gas, sandwiches, and coffee, but we made it.

Every man, woman, and child alive should see the desert one time before they die. Nothin' at all for miles around. Nothin' but sand and rocks and cactus and blue sky. Not a soul in sight. No sirens. No car alarms. Nobody honkin' atcha. No madmen cursin' or pissin' in the streets. You find the silence out there. You find the peace. You can find God.

So we drive west, keep driving 'til we find a nice little town. These towns out in the desert, you know why they got there? People wanted to get away from somewhere else. The desert's for startin' over.

Find a bar and I'll buy us drinks. I haven't had a drink in two years, but I'll have one with you, one last whiskey with my boy. Take our time with it, taste the barley, let it linger.

And then I'll go.

I tell you, don't ever write me, don't ever visit. I tell you, I believe in God's kingdom and I'll see you and your mother again, but not in this lifetime.

You'll get a job somewhere, a job that pays cash, a boss who doesn't ask questions, and you make a new life and you never come back.

Monty, people like you, it's a gift – you'll make friends wherever you go. You're going to work hard, you're going to keep your head down and your mouth shut. You're going to make yourself a new home out there.

You're a New Yorker. That won't ever change. You got New York in your bones. Spend the rest of your life out west, but you're still a New Yorker.

You'll miss your friends, you'll miss your dog, but you're strong. You got your mother's backbone in you. You're strong like she was.

You find the right people, and you get yourself papers, a driver's license. You forget your old life. You can't come back, you can't call, you can't write. You never look back. You make a new life for yourself and you live it. You hear me? You live your life the way it should have been.

But maybe – and this is dangerous – but maybe after a few years you send word to Naturelle. You make yourself a new family, and you raise them right, you hear me? Give them a good life, Monty. Give them what they need.

You have a son – maybe you name him James, it's a good strong name – and maybe one day, years from now, years after I'm dead and gone, reunited with your dear ma, you gather your whole family around and tell them the truth.

Who you are, where you come from...you tell them the whole story.

Then you ask them if they know how lucky they are to be there.

Because it all came so close to never happening.

This life came so close to never happening.

1. The Love You Had, But Couldn't Leave; The Past That We Were Stuck Between

This was taught to me long ago, so please forgive me if I'm muddying some of the details.

The Upanishads speak of an ancient time when the force animating the universe had given rise to the gods. These beings were not as we would come to know them. They were unruly, chaotic, disobedient. The universe roiled with their disorder.

Then the force animating the universe spoke. It spoke in thunder, roaring a monosyllabic command to the gods: **DA**. But the deities did not hear **DA**. The thunder spoke differently to each, depending on the advice it needed to obey.

The first group of divinities heard **DATTA**: *give*. They were commanded to renounce selfishness, to embrace generosity, to share their resources, their talents, their time, themselves.

The second group of gods heard **DAYADHVAM**: *sympathize*. They were commanded to forego self-obsession, and to instead recognize what took place around them. Once they had increased their awareness of the larger world, they were to demonstrate compassion and sympathy for those inhabited it, and those who would follow in their footsteps.

The final group of deities heard **DAMYATA**: *control*. These gods, having failed to recognize their choices' consequences, were commanded to avoid decisions that could harm themselves or others. They were to practice self-restraint and exercise discipline rather than following every impulse and whim.

Give; sympathize; control. Thus spoke the thunder.

1984 arose from the ashes of a world decimated by madness, savaged by sadistic ambitions and salvaged at tremendous cost. The only thunder humanity could hear was the echo of doomsday weapons brought to bear against those who could not resist them.

But if violence and insanity shaped the 1940s, other forces shaped the 1930s. Driven to distraction by the rise of technology and the woes of economic ruin, humanity sought refuge in entertainment. *Brave New World* was a mirror held up to the present and shaken to distort it; one wonders why, if Huxley's warnings were so prescient, we have so utterly failed to heed them.

And before either dystopian masterwork hit the printing press, T.S. Eliot published a poem, *The Waste Land*, whose relatively short page count belies its astonishing complexity. At the time of its publication, the world reeled from the Great War of the 1910s; those who began the war had lost it, but those who had triumphed had lost their way. Eliot belonged to "The Lost Generation," the group of modernist artists who recoiled from their post-war society in shock and horror. He could not have predicted what Huxley or Orwell would write, but traces of both appear in his work: he saw a world ruined by Huxley's greed and excess, by Orwell's hatred and fear, and his poem spills over its edges with despair, frustration, and anger.

Yet it dares to reach, however desperately, for hope at the end; if we could remember what the thunder said, we could begin to rebuild, to recover. If Orwell and Huxley are indicative of anything, it's that we hadn't remembered that wisdom twenty years later.

We're closing in on the end of our semester, which means I can lay out the three questions that have guided us thus far, and that will take us the rest of the way home:

What have we given?

What are you doing here?

Do I dare disturb the universe?

2. I'll Give Up Something Else, and Maybe You Won't See

I sank, thrashing, into the dark gloom of the water, frightened beyond all reason, so frightened you couldn't even call it fear.

I couldn't swim, and I was underwater, alone, starting to fall towards something I couldn't fathom.

I was seven years old.

In some parallel universe...

That's the line. My former college roommate and I have conversations that eventually lead to one of us saying that line all the time. We're old friends, stretching all the way back to our orientation week at Occidental College, when he was one of the first people I connected with. It feels weird, today, to say he's an old friend, considering I first met him as an adult (hey, eighteen counts). But twelve years are twelve years, and while they've passed quickly, they're filled with a lot of shared history: quotes from shows we've rewatched dozens of times (we've probably memorized *Futurama* by now), anecdotes from our shared exploits and adventures, stories only we know the ins and outs of well enough to ever write down someday.

One of the benefits of having that sort of shared history with someone is that you can banter back and forth over a seemingly infinite number of hypotheticals – different ways that your futures, which inevitably became your presents and your pasts, could've unfolded.

If you'd had the guts to ask for that girl's number...

If you hadn't stayed out here in California...

If you'd stuck it out a little longer at that job...

If you hadn't given up running...

It's a game, an exercise in imagination, but we're both creative types and have never gotten bored with puzzling out existence's infinite unrealized possibilities.

Something will set us off – some prior acquaintance we both lost touch with years ago posts something that hits our NewsFeeds simultaneously – and soon enough, after the stories and anecdotes and commentaries have been exhausted, one of us deploys the line in some fashion:

In some parallel universe, I'm working in the 49ers' draft room this May.

In some parallel universe, I blew an entire decade working for the government instead of getting out after a year.

In some parallel universe, we're both writing for Grantland.

In some parallel universe, we've been coaching together for years.

In some parallel universe, I already have kids.

Some of the parallel universes are unnerving places (depending on how you react to the thought of tiny children of mine running around lecturing their fellow kindergartners). Most of them, however, sound pretty spiffy. And at times, I find myself genuinely saddened that our real universe didn't chart the same course as a couple of them; there are some roads not taken that hold at least the promise of something better than this.

Yet, for one reason or another, I didn't follow those roads. My travels led me here.

And every so often, long after the conversation circles back from alternate realities and into the existentially-safer realms of Albert Pujols's value to the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim (and whether that team name's any less ridiculous all these years later), whether IMAX truly increases the *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs' awesomeness (and whether we'd want to know if the Tyrannosaur's roar didn't actually sound the way it did in the movie), and whether we should start writing collaboratively this summer...

...I find myself peering into the shadows lining the roads not taken, and wonder whether I truly understand how, or why, I've ended up on this one instead.

In some parallel universe, I cheated on the take-home test.

My parents had taken me to the park bordering the middle school a couple of blocks away from my home. I loved that park. When I was six, they built something called the Super Playground there. That was definitely too lofty a title for it – there's only so much you can do with playground equipment, no matter how much sand, gravel, and woodchips you scatter around it. But the words rolled off the tongue so easily (even for those of us with speech impediments) that the name ended up sounding as natural as anything else.

My family had a stake, literally, in the place: when the town allowed people to carve names into the fenceposts lining the playground, my mother paid a small fee to have her recently-deceased father's name etched into one. For some reason, I couldn't ever remember where it was; the location refused to stick in my brain. But I liked looking for it when we'd visit.

I'd loved my grandfather, at least as much as a little kid could. In retrospect, I couldn't have seen him for more than a few dozen days, total, if that, before he'd passed away. But I wasn't exactly generating complex emotions at the age of six or seven. If you'd asked me, the only word I knew for what I felt was love – so love's what it is.

Now that I'm older, I know more about him, and I know I would've loved him today on his own merits had he lived long enough to see the rest of my childhood. He lived a life worthy of literature – opening a bar in a dry Utah county with his brothers, never drinking himself; raising his three daughters well enough that they attended each attended at least some college, something nobody else in the family had ever done; fighting off an armed robber with his bare hands during his milkman days (earning a bullet to the leg in the process, and becoming the first Feraco to appear on television afterwards). And even if he hadn't done any of those things, he was that seemingly rarest of quantities: a good man.

Then we lost him, just like many others lose many others: too soon.

There's still a black-and-white picture of him in his younger days hanging in the hallway outside my bedroom in my childhood home. He's in his late twenties, with a thick, dark shock of wavy hair pulled back only half as well as it should be, smiling from behind his glasses, even raising his eyebrows a little.

I've put my hand over the image's chin, and the rest of the image looks startling, almost unnervingly, like me.

I wish I'd known him better.

In some parallel universe, I was brave enough to pursue the career I actually wanted.

Whenever I finished running around the playground (when did I ever have so much energy?), my parents would take me to the pond beyond the fenceposts. While the Super Playground definitely had its charms – a mazelike system of tunnels connecting a series of castle-like structures, complete with embedded microphones you could use to excitedly shout at your friends in the tunnels across the park – the pond was just a concrete bowl full of some pretty unappetizing water and a single plant-supporting island.

Didn't matter. I loved it too.

I loved watching the tadpoles swim; I'd even raised some into frogs at home before releasing them into "the wild" there. I loved the ducks that nested on the island and swam in the pond; we would feed them breadcrusts we kept in the freezer, and I'd invent elaborate backstories and adventures for them in my head. My favorite was one with a fluffy patch of feathers on its head, a little tuft that looked for all the world like my unruly curls, the byproduct of my ongoing (at the time) fear of barbers. It was my little kindred spirit. It obviously didn't love me the way I adored it, but that's OK; when you're little, love can be a one-way street.

So my parents had taken me to the park, then let me run down toward the pond to look for my duck-friend while they went for a walk. I remember that the murky pondwater had receded for some reason, even though it was cold and cloudy out, exposing a dry, thin rim of the concrete bowl beneath the sidewalk.

When I got to the pond, my fluffy duck was nowhere to be found, but there were others on the opposite side of the little island. Upon running to that side, however, I found that the sidewalk didn't curve inwards enough before bending back towards the playground for me to get a good view of the birds. Disappointed, I hopped down onto the concrete rim; maybe I thought the extra two feet would give me a better vantage point. It didn't.

I turned and started running back towards where I'd come down to the pond in the first place, trotting along the water's edge on my little-kid legs. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was a good runner for my age. (Second-most laps in the school during the jog-a-thon? *That's* a claim to fame.) As a result, I was moving at a pretty good clip as I approached the drainage vent for the sewer.

There was only one gap in the concrete rim, and it was where the ground fell away to allow the water to recirculate through a sewer drain. It wasn't complicated-looking from the outside. It was just a big, dark hole.

And I was heading right for it.

In some parallel universe, Harvard accepted my sister on her second try.

She got into her dream school.

And she never met the man she'd happily marry.

I didn't learn how to swim until I was eight years old because I was afraid to put my head beneath the water's surface. Water didn't scare me – I actually loved playing in it, and had a penchant for making tidal waves in the bathtub, much to my parents' ongoing dismay – but something about being submerged always filled me with white-hot fear. I'd end up panicking, gasping for breath underwater and swallowing a whole bunch of liquid before someone pulled me, sputtering, back into the air. It wasn't a conscious, intentional response that I could control. Terror would take over, instinct would command me to **breathe now**, and the end result was always the same: a lot of sniffing and tears. I couldn't even put my head underwater in the bathtub without freaking out.

You would think, given this highly specific fear, that I would steer well clear of the pond's drainage hole. But I was trotting along happily, thinking about ducks, not about water.

As I neared the gap in the rim, though, I realized I was approaching the sewer. The smart thing to do, obviously, would've been to hop back up onto the sidewalk. The foolish thing to do, equally obviously, would've been to try to jump over the drain.

I jumped.

I misjudged my launch point.

I plunged into the drain.

And I sank.

In some parallel universe, you kept your mind long enough to remember I became a teacher, to remember I'd moved away, and you didn't cry because you thought I was trying to avoid visiting you.

I sank, thrashing, into the dark gloom of the water, frightened beyond all reason, so frightened you couldn't even call it fear.

I was underwater, alone, starting to fall towards something I couldn't fathom...

In some parallel universe, you still wrote me that note.

You still swallowed all of your pills.

And they didn't stumble upon you in time to save you.

It couldn't have lasted that long. Maybe a few seconds, at most. I think I remember what I was thinking, which just proves to me that I have a fertile imagination; there's no way I can remember what I thought as I dropped.

So what I *pretend* to remember goes like this:

- A blur of murk surrounding me (how could I have opened my eyes in that filthy water and been fine afterward?)
- A quick thought: *I'm going to die*
- Flailing desperately, both arms and both legs frantically going every which way
- My right hand breaking the surface of the water first and landing, completely by accident, on the edge of the concrete rim
- Somehow pulling myself with one arm halfway out of the water
- My chest flat against the concrete as I gasped for air, my legs still floating in the water behind me, not even able to scream for my parents
- And one thought, repeated over and over again with urgency

Hold on.

Hold on.

Hold on.

Hold on.

Hold-

In some parallel universe, you never left.

My parents didn't see me fall. My father told me, later, that when he'd looked down at the pond, for a single incongruous second, he thought someone's dog had fallen into the water and was struggling to get out.

Neither of my parents are particularly athletic, something I frequently cursed them for when I hit high school and had to start giving up my sports, one after another. But when that second ended, and both he and my mother realized they were looking at me in the water, they *ran* towards me.

And my father reached down, pulled me the rest of the way out of the water, lifted me up, and held me close, even though I was still soaking wet with filthy pondwater.

In the memory that can't be real, I felt the terrified reverberations of his heart slamming against his chest, faster than I've ever felt my own heart beating.

He held me while I cried, sobbing without reason, still sputtering for breath, my mind still lost somewhere underwater.

In some parallel universe, my parents lost their only son.

In the memory that can't be real, I lay with my chest flat against the concrete, gasping for air, my legs still floating in the water behind me.

And I saw both of my parents running towards me, looking for all the world like they would have done anything in that moment – anything – to save me.

As though they'd seen their world obliterated in a noiseless flash.

As though they'd never be okay again.

In some parallel universe, I hop up onto the sidewalk instead of running along the pond's concrete rim.

I stop looking for ducks.

I never fall in.

I never see that look on my parents' faces.

*I won't replay those specific expressions in my head until I fall asleep the night they tell me, three years later,
that they're ending their marriage.*

*And when I'll think that they didn't love me enough to stay together, that it was somehow my fault they fell
apart, I won't be able to use those expressions to banish the fear.*

I won't know.

I won't see.

3. Soon Enough, Work and Love Will Make a Man Out of You

The funny thing about clichés is that most of them have some sort of basis in truth. (Otherwise, how would they ever become clichés?)

Most (if not all) of us have felt as though, to dig up the old cliché, “the grass is greener on the other side.” We’ve seen greater possibilities beyond our current situations, yearned for a chance to have something else or have done something else, perhaps in the company of someone else. We watch *Eat, Learn, and Move* from school desks and feel the rush of knowing, conclusively, that there’s a larger, challenging, Technicolor world out there. Our imaginations race when greeted with possibility and promise. It’s what keeps our eyes on the stars instead of the ground.

But in the end, we’re bound by the tyranny of time. As best I can tell, we get one life, and we get one path. We can only take one road. We go left, and our life unfolds the way it has, erasing every other possibility as we walk.

But what if we had gone right instead?

What if I had gone to the soccer tryout first instead of the cross-country tryout before my freshman year of high school?

What if I never promised a cross-country coach named Troy Engle that I would visit him at Occidental?

What if my high-school version of Summer Finn had waited until after I’d committed to a college before asking if I wanted to resume our relationship?

What if I never fell head-over-heels for my fellow Lit Center tutor in college sixteen months later?

Never met and worked with the fourth-grader there who I couldn’t help?

Actually failed the standardized teaching tests I secretly hoped I’d fail so I wouldn’t have to become a teacher?

Landed a student-teaching placement in any classroom other than David Bellos’s at Francisco Bravo?

Applied for the English teaching job Arcadia High offered in June instead of the one it offered in August, competed against Matt Woodin, and lost?

Watched helplessly as the Arcadia High School teachers’ union decided to reject the pay cut offered by the district in 2009, or in 2011, and left me laid off and jobless?

You never would have met me.

And I never would have met you.

And neither of us would ever know what we’d missed. Take any of those steps away, and the whole Jenga tower crumbles, falls away to ash.

You all have Jenga-tower lives yourselves, sequences of moments and memories that could’ve branched into a million parallel universes only to combine to form this specific one instead.

The most incredible thing about my life, about all our lives, about this intersection point in D101 where we’ve all joined forces, however temporarily, in pursuit of whatever you’re pursuing, is this:

It all came so close to never happening.

During the first semester, we discussed the concept of inevitability as it related to choice, destiny, and time. If, in fact, time exists as a point rather than a continuum, everything that will happen is happening; everything that will happen has already happened. We don't have a choice. Things play out the way they're supposed to, the way they have to.

Even if time exists as we perceive it – as seconds and minutes and hours, not as a single concentrated instant – there are certain rules to existence. Every lifeform dies. It may take a matter of minutes or a matter of centuries (I grew up near a redwood forest, so I've seen some pretty spectacularly old trees), but everything ends. We only have so many grains of sand in our hourglasses, and it's not possible to get refills.

I told you before that I really, really didn't understand the "future" storyline in *The Fountain* during my first viewings. Part of that is due to my weakness for all things sci-fi: I understood that it was supposed to be a metaphor for the grieving process, but I also really, really wanted it to be a real story, in which Tommy's experiments on Donovan with the tree extract yielded a cure to aging. In other words, I wanted Tom-in-the-bubble to be Tommy literally, not just metaphorically. (I'd figure out how he jammed Izzi in the tree later, since nobody's been able to do so in a literal sense just by planting something over a grave.)

In that interpretation of the "future" storyline, Tommy hasn't played by the rules that govern life, death, time, and the universe. He wants to undo the course his life took, undo the tremendous loss he suffered, one he cannot begin to accept and recover from. So he fractures time's normal hold on us and defeats death – "curing the disease," so to speak.

Darren Aronofsky asserts that Tommy robs himself of his humanity in the process of "becoming immortal" – that he loses himself, a la Søren Kierkegaard's famous warning, to grief – a feeling of desire for the violation of all the aforementioned universe-governing rules. With no end point in sight, he has no reason not to continually fixate on his loss, no reason to live for anything else; we're reminded, uncannily, of Siddhartha staring hauntingly across the river for traces of his son.

As a result, the love that once bloomed between him and Izzi, the thing that once helped sustain him, becomes a desiccated, dying husk. When he eats the bark of the tree, he's merely chewing on his obsession, and it's not a nourishing meal.

But when Tommy accepts that he should play by the rules – that he shouldn't forget the wonderful times he spent with Izzi or render them meaningless merely because he didn't get enough of them – the tree erupts into beautiful, verdant life, bursting through the bubble that had served as its prison for who knows how long.

And Tommy remembers a time when he made the wrong choice (going back to work in the lab) and imagines he makes the right one (walking with his wife in the snow).

Death comes for all of us, the movie argues; we can choose to struggle against it in an ultimately futile and too-costly battle, or we can accept it and live on in the face of it, enjoying the moments we have for what they are instead of raging against them for what they are not.

Ishiguro once said, "There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter? Most of the things that concern them concern us all, but with them it is concentrated into this relatively short period of time. These are things that really interest me and, having come to the realization that I probably have limited opportunities to explore these things, that's what I want to concentrate on."

It's really easy to fixate on the grislier aspects of *Never Let Me Go*, on the tragic miscarriage of justice that defines Kathy's, Tommy's, and Ruth's all-too-abbreviated lives. Like most people, I found its ending deeply upsetting. And like most people, I should have seen it coming. I should have known better than to assume that a deferral system existed. What would be the point of one? How could one exist without destroying the entire donor system, which is predicated on the idea that these beings, these *things* we've created, are not like us, are not equal or equivalent to human lives? Acknowledging that certain among them have potential for more than "donation" forces one to consider that all of them could. We're able to justify, say, the consumption of animal meat because we do not value a chicken's life like our own. We could not justify the consumption of human flesh for the opposite reason.

And that is what the donation system entails: the consumption of one to perpetuate another. Ishiguro is rendering symbolically what Orwell and Huxley made explicit: the idea that forces beyond an individual's control could shape him against his will, and usually into something he didn't like. In both cases, quietly, the oppressive forces have also shaped themselves into displeasing shapes. Think about how desperate and hard-scrabble O'Brien's life actually is! His comfort is relative, and it's temporary – he'll be 101'ed eventually. Couldn't he have lived a better life had he been born in our era and not explicitly steered towards evil? And wouldn't Mond have led a more fulfilling, experiential, and experimental life had he been born into your world?

By the end of *Never Let Me Go*, one realizes, sickeningly, that deferrals *do* exist. Just not for donors. Every donated organ is a deferral for someone, whether they're defying death or simply time. But what kind of people could sustain themselves that way? Could we even call them human? Or have they lost themselves, just as O'Brien and Mond did – the price for power we were never meant to wield?

Look again at the Ishiguro quote above. He wants to know: *As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter?*

The people living in Ishiguro's parallel universe don't have to let time run out. As a result, their perceptions of their world, of the important things within it, are distorted necessarily. Think about the difference between the way you perceive an assignment when you receive it and when the deadline approaches. Or think about the conversations you're beginning to have with your friends, quietly freighted with the knowledge that all of this is ending – with the realization that some of your teachers no longer teach you as they once did, and that for all intents and purposes the existence that you led even as recently as junior year is over forever. No one will expect those things of you again; no one will treat you that way again.

I've hit that message over and over again this year: Time runs out for all of us. Are you aware of the things that matter? Or are you sitting here wishing for something else, or somewhere else, or someone else?

One of my favorite bands, Motion City Soundtrack, wrote a song called "Everyone Will Die." Cheery! But here are the lyrics:

*Everyone will die, and everyone will lose
So what you gonna do with the moments you have before it's you?
It doesn't mean goodbye, it's just a simple truth
The shedding of a lifetime of layers that once embodied you
Like winter into spring and summer into fall
The cycle of intense introspection before the curtain call
'Cause everyone must die and everyone must lose
So who you gonna love in the meantime before it catches you?*

We fear the end, and all it entails. But we don't only fear death or oblivion. We fear stepping out of our comfort zone and committing whole hog to something unlikely. That's almost always the greatest sort of regret: that fear or ignorance cost one a chance at something better. So when we look back, we're just as likely to look "forward" – to regret and reconsider a choice, and to picture what could've happened if we'd just chosen differently. We get one chance at life, and it seems like so few of us ever make perfect use of that chance; how often, one wonders, is that due to fear?

But look at what Tommy learns: that death is not necessarily something to fear, but a reality to accept – a reality that recontextualizes everything else. Death may not be the end – who knows what awaits on the other side? – but if it is, it's an ending written in ink, not an ending using an eraser. What stops doesn't disappear. You never have to let go, not of the good things, provided you don't distort them with the bad (tougher to do than it sounds).

And the same is true of Kathy, and Ruth, and Tommy. The part of the book that always hits me the hardest is Ruth's desperate, pleading apology for keeping Kathy and Tommy apart – that she feels like things should have unfolded differently, and now knows that she's powerless to shape things in any particular way. In her last days – she's not in really bad shape, but the end isn't that far away for her – she's starting to come to realize what matters, and wishing it had turned out differently. And her sadness blots out every memory of friendship she had with them; her pain stains everything.

I know that kind of regret. And it's exactly the kind of regret I have to try to move past.

For maybe all of this –
all the good and the bad,
all that I've given,
all that I've done,
the fears I've battled,
the love I've shared,
the lives I've impacted,
the things slipping down the memory hole,
the infinite possibilities that never came to pass –

Maybe all of this is how it was supposed to be.

+ How would your life have been different if you hadn't enrolled in this class, if you and I had never met, if you'd never had the chance to meet and work with your former Housemates? (If you jokingly say, "Well, I would have had a lot less homework," I will be forever displeased with you.)

+ Do you believe something lies beyond this existence – that we experience something after our corporeal forms expire? What is your "awe" at the end of the road like? What would you want it to look like?

+ How would you want to pay tribute to your family members? Would Moses Morales's method – planting a tree over his father's grave – resemble what you plan to do? Do you know what they would want?

+ How do you feel about *The Fountain's* central hypothesis: that life gains meaning because it ends, because these moments of ours are all we have? Is life, in fact, beautiful because we cannot enjoy it forever?

+ If you knew, heading into a relationship, that it would mirror Tommy's (i.e., you would truly love your time together with your partner, that it would end earlier and more painfully than it should, and that his/her loss would devastate you), would you still allow yourself to fall in love? Would you still want to?

+ Would you react differently than Tommy does if you lost your loved one?

+ Would you want your partner to fall in love again if you passed away first? What if, in the old quandary from *The Lady, or the Tiger?*, it costs you a shot at eternity together?

+ Do you believe you'll achieve "some measure of grace" before you go, as Izzi does...or will you go out kicking and screaming?

+ Write an alternate or symbolic narrative of your life and future (think of what Aronofsky does with Tommy's conquistador and traveler, or Monty's father does as he drives). You can be as blunt or oblique as you prefer, and end it where you choose. **(Please keep it school-appropriate for my sake.)**

Blog Title: *25th Hour*

Introduction: "Everything Must Go," Taking Back Sunday, *New Again*

Section Title #1: "Lonely One," Cartel, *Cartel*

Section Title #2: "Soon Enough," Constantines, *Tournament of Hearts*

Quotes on the First Page: *The Fountain, The Fault in Our Stars, The Waste Land*
