

That Which Happens After;
OR
Petrichor.

By: Rynn Acker

I. Afterlife

None of it is true.

We've been led to believe lies.

Afterlife there is no great light, no everlasting joy, no immediate return, just a room. It is not entirely small, nor is it quite large; not entirely unfurnished, nor completely furnished; not entirely unfamiliar, but more like a distant memory, like a room you used to know well. It's a waiting room, where you sit, not entirely occupied, but not entirely expectant either. It's a perfectly generic room, but not so perfect that it undermines its banality with any kind of suspicious or interesting liminality or boredom in any degree above the first.

When I died I heard whispers.

There was a Storm, a great storm, which we thought would put an end to life as we knew it. Call it what you like: apocalypse, cataclysm, rapture, the end of the line, ascension, ragnarok, the great death, global extinction, NTHE, the End. It came as a storm, almighty, and great.

Before it arrived I hardly believed it would actually happen. I thought the scientists had formed some kind of doomsday cult, that they made up some big storm just to scare people. They had, in a way, but not quite the way I thought, or you probably think.

See, the storm was real, very real and very big, a massive hurricane swirling on the radar. And when it came we all knew what it was, and called it by some name. We all reacted differently. Some ran to buildings that collapsed, some hid in bunkers that caved in, some built ships which waves crunched to driftwood, some fled to planes which crashed into mountains, some did nothing, and some, myself included, walked out into the rain, just to see it, feel it, firsthand.

It pattered on my umbrella like it was any other storm, with a pleasant absence of structure or tempo. Rivers were already forming on the asphalt and concrete roads, overwhelming the city sewers. The weaker buildings could be heard crumpling far out from the city center. Lightning struck, dodging the burnt out rods and finding us. It took a moment, just a blink, to understand I was dying, and where the pain came from.

On the ground. All the grass was bending, all the flowers had closed, some trees cracked, some just bent and lost their leaves. That's when I heard it, the lightest whisper, as if it were coming from inside my brain. It said "well done" and then it was done.

Then there was a room, just a room. A quiet room, filled only by my noise and what seemed like the distant hum of an air conditioner, though I couldn't tell for sure. There was one

door, a polished wooden door that I would guess I came in from, a coffee table with nonsense magazines, and five blue faux-leather chairs. My clothes were soaked. I reached for my phone. My pockets were empty: you can't take it with you, I guess, though at least there's some sense of dignity, even if I didn't get to change into my funerary dress.

I didn't recall it all immediately. Nothing flashed before my eyes either. I just had to piece it together from memory. Here's how it goes:

I'm born in '98 like a normal kid, live a pretty standard life, and, by all measures, died a statistically median death for my time. For my whole life I think death's going to be some big deal and what's after is some great, uncertain thing that might be nice, but it's just a room, which smells a bit damp, but not quite wet.

My whole life I'm told there's gonna be this big disaster: in church it's about horsemen, in class it's a catastrophic predicament, and in my last 5 years it's a storm. It all sounds the same. It all ends up being true, each one in it's own way, even if they all lied about what comes after, each one in their own way.

I was an anesthesiologist. Briefly, at least. I worked the register at a few fast food places as a teenager. I used to eat family dinners and talk a lot, but I got quiet and wanted to be alone more and more before I went to college. I kept to myself mostly, head down, got good marks, made a few friends, even got engaged, though the marriage was rained out.

I was happy, as far as I would know, happy enough to call myself happy after all. Though, in my own way, I guess. Not everyone would be happy with a quiet life and a few friends. Whether I was happy because of or despite the circumstance could be debated. But there was joy to be found in my life, and I found it.

I worried a lot about the Storm, even before it was a storm. Like, damn, the world really is going to end, huh? That's awful. If I could get past the overwhelming anxiety of that, there was just despair, disappointment, frustration. It hit us first. So at least I didn't have to worry about the anticipation of it coming towards me for too long.

I worried most of my life about something like the storm, even walked in a few protests, did a few minor crimes that I was punished for and a few major crimes which nobody ever found out about, I rolled it back to planting trees on the weekends after that. I wanted to do my part. I wanted instructions, something to be loyal to. I was like a stray dog for most of my life, before I curled up and found an apathetic home beneath a dumpster and resolved to give up.

I never saw an apple tree. It feels insignificant, but it would have meant a lot to me. My great grandfather filled me with stories about an orchard he lived by when he was a kid, and ever since then I wanted to see one, at least one tree. I never got to see Venice either, or go to New York City or Shanghai. Those were supposed to be great, real icons of human civilization. Shame I never found the time to make the trips. Kinda makes it feel like I fell short on the whole "human experience" thing. Even if it wouldn't have made me more human it might have at least made this whole thing feel more eventful. Not much else of substance to look back on.

I suppose I haven't said that I gave Clementine, my fiance, that was her name, strawberries when I proposed. Not exactly Nobel-prize material, but it made her so happy I can't

let anyone forget it. She cried. I cried. I'm about to cry thinking about it. It took days to pick them all out, months to make sure nobody else took them. It was so worth it. It would have been worth my life if I could see her that happy again. Fuck. I wish there had been a wedding.

She drove home before the Storm to see her parents. I stayed because it was supposed to be safer in the city. Another lie. Par for the course.

Her parents were old blood. Real traditionalists, farmers even after the old crops stopped growing because of the heat. Knowing Claire, she held back from scolding the hell out of them over not evacuating or maybe over not stopping the worst of it before it was bad. She loved them too much for that, loved them forever. I get it. I loved my folks to death.

The door opened. I sat up. There was nothing behind it. Just empty space. Something came through. They began to speak in a droning, monotonous voice.

“Hello.”

“Hello.” I slowly gave back.

It contorted its face, as if it didn't know what to say or how to speak at all. “You're dead.”

“I think I got that.”

“Just making it clear.” For a bit it just stared at me with deep, focused eyes.

I needed to break the silence. “So... the soul thing, that must have been right.”

“No dear. The soul is corporeal too. It's gone. This is all the work of the brain.” They took a second. “You're not following. Think of it like this: when you died, the entirety of your body shut down, stopped working, all of your remaining living apparatus retreated up your spinal cord and into your brain, where you created this room. It was a last second retreat from living, a reflexive flinch, like an armordillo curling up at danger.”

“So I'm not dead yet?”

“No, you've been dead for some time now.”

“Who are—” they impatiently cut me off.

“I'm an aspect of your cognition created from your hindbrain. My job is to communicate things I — you — already know from ancient genetic memory into a language you can understand. I am part of you, I know what you're thinking. You don't need to ask the questions outloud.

“I do not know if a hotdog is a sandwich. Please try to focus. Correct, I'm not omniscient.

“What you are beginning to feel now is the redistribution of your cognition, including your consciousness, into the remainder of your body. You will feel thoughts and sensations coming from each part. They will gradually become slower and more distant as the body decays, time will thus seem to grow wider, without necessarily going faster or slower. You will become a more broad notion of being, as your thinking system is diffused across the planet. Limbs will feel like they're numbing, they are rather becoming more alert to the impermanence of feelings. Only the longtime feelings will matter, everything your senses once perceived will cease to be important as you transform.

“Yes, you will be alone. There will be much time to think, and far more time to feel. You will likely not forget your life. It is hard to forget that even if you try.

“No, you are not special. No, humans are not special. This happens for every living thing from every kingdom of life. Even the most basic algae live on in these diffuse thinking systems, some of which likely extend to the edges of the galaxy. That process was, indeed, partially accelerated by human space travel, even if some life got there without you.

“Yes, every single living thing. There is a great depth of history and intelligence stored all over the planet, sending signals hardly anything can perceive.

“Yes, some small signals could have been sensed by humans. No, not like ghosts or gods, but more like connections, like spiritual threads, pulling on your mind, as if you were sewn to something by a long, elastic string. This also has nothing to do with the soul.

“The soul is a confused, human construction used for understanding various connections between what you would call metaphysical and physical phenomena. It’s not immortal because, broadly speaking, it is just a middleman between your psychic and somatic systems. It is very real. But, as a rule, it works differently for everyone. Yes, it is very much like a personality.

“I would say I experience affects, to be more precise, but more or less yes, I do feel something like emotions. I only know the difference insofar as you do. I do not know more words than you do, no. I draw on your knowledge alone.

“Partially yes, humans do share a sense of collective genetic memories, but not beyond very basic facts, and they are not as clear as memories in the common sense. They wouldn’t have helped you get along and they hardly amounted to a ‘general human spirit’. You share basically the same collective memories with mushrooms and witchgrass. I’m not sure how different it is from DNA. I don’t know much about DNA. Genetic is just the best word you know for it. I wish it was clearer too, but there’s not much else I can say.

“No, I don’t have access to your personal memories. Really I am just a different kind of memory. I’m almost like a different person, but just in the same body.

“I said you would be alone because I’ve only temporarily been separated from you. We will soon be reintegrated. After that “us” becomes just “you”. Technically speaking, you are already alone, and just talking to yourself.

“You imagined the afterlife like that because you’re afraid it’s like the perpetual stillness of being alone. It’s not like either. It’s a motion so fast and constant it feels still. It’s a stillness so pervasive it never stops. You will see a world of rainbows, breaking into color from every possible angle, a world you couldn’t even imagine. Why does that scare you?”

“It’s—”

“I get it. It’s not as bad as you think, existing at the edges, immaterial. It’s not like being alone because there’s no concept of ‘together’, even in your body. You’re disconnected even from yourself. In the positive sense, you’re more a part of everything than you ever could have been.

I began to shout, overwhelmed and frustrated. "But I want to be me!" I spoke over an attempt to continue. "I want to touch the grass, I want to pet a dog, I want to hug another person and have a body, through which I feel the things close to me!"

They waited patiently for me to finish. "But you'll do more. You won't have to quench your wants with the merely superfluous senses of touch, feel, or love, but with the ultimate, real, *being*. You don't have to just touch the grass, you will *be* the grass, forget yourself, and finally achieve the fullness of connection for which all that touching was a substitute."

It was getting harder to think clearly, to think at all. I could feel my brain fading away, shrinking, as if whole sections were disappearing. I could barely listen anymore. All other senses faded, I focused fully on the words.

"Like I said, you'll be yourself. But you won't have a self. Sorry, I'm running out of time to explain that. There's no notion of identity — you'll forget that. You'll be you, just you, and you won't have to think about it. Do you have any more questions?"

"No. The Earth will be fine. Life is not as fragile as your sense of it would suggest.

"Yes. No. No. No. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. Yes. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. No. No. Yes. Yes. No. No. Yes. No. No. No. Yes. Yes. No."

And then they were gone. I was gone, the room was gone. Briefly, there really was nothing. Then I began to feel different, I was opened, released into the world, dispersed as particles like a spray of dust as you clap out old blackboard erasers at the end of a day's classes, fading quickly from a small cloud into invisibility on the air.

II. Afterdeath

Yeah, it was made up.

That storm didn't end it all, forever and for good. It wasn't over, just different. Very different. So in a way it was over, in the sense that the world they were used to was over. The old maps wouldn't be accurate and the old ways wouldn't work and the old people were gone, but It, the whole thing, the big idea of It all was still living on.

After all, the ocean kept churning, the air kept moving, the world kept spinning. Even if the Storm had managed to wipe out all complex life it wouldn't have lasted forever. Something else would have come from the sea a long, long time after.

But the anthropocene was over. A mere blink in the lives of the carbon that defined it, music to the ears of the people that it hurt. The whole hierarchy tumbled down, mostly literally. Metals melted back to ore, cement turned back to sediment, sediment turned back to magma. The world moved on. Some of the world (beneath the ground, deep underwater) didn't even notice.

Yeah, it was partially right, I'll give them that. Tons and tons of life was ended, a near monumental extinction event did occur. Things died everywhere, on a scale you couldn't comprehend. But things lived. It wasn't everything.

The people (the few, human people, in that narrow sense of the word_ who did make it were the ones who clung on with everything they had to the few things they held closest. When cities were all turning to Dresden in the Storm, a young girl clung to her dog. When forests were up in fire she ate dandelions and shared the dog food to survive. When there was nothing to eat, she covered her face in cloth and waded through the dust storms to find more.

It was in one of those storms when she found another person. She told her about a camp, a little village that had managed to dodge the worst of it. During a gap in the storm she invited the dog and they sprinted a half-marathon from her little house. Everything was made of old, dry wood that creaked when you stepped on it. The place looked like it would have fallen down in a light rainstorm. It probably had. But the people knew how to live with that. She unpacked a pencil, a school notebook, a photograph her father kept on his desk of him with his father and her mother all dressed up for something, peppermints which she had been saving as a peace offering in case the stories about raiders (another popular lie) came true, and as much dog food as she could manage when a compassionate family offered to take her and her friend in.

They weren't quite nuclear. The father had gone off to help a bunker take people in and never came back, leaving a mother and son alone. When she found this, the little girl explained her parents had done the same, and promised they'd be back, and said they loved her. They hoped for years that the bunkers had just stayed closed past the storm for some good reason.

It would make sense, the world was only partially habitable to humans. The air was warmer, the droughts were longer, the rain was harder. But they made it. They planted what they had, remembered what they didn't, and ate just what they needed.

Most of them thought they, too, were totally fucked. Some of them knew that, but they tried to keep going anyway. Some others gave up, walked away, sank into the mud and never appeared again, or tried to appeal to anarchy as a way to justify their plunder or violence.

A few rough groups of thieves did form, but didn't last. None of them understood that power in this world, unlike in the one just before it but quite like ones before that, was earned through giving, not having, that it was defined by what you could offer, not by what you took away.

The little town has some remains of technology, which made some things easier, but had no gas after a while, which made things harder. Some of the people they had collected from all over, all in a similar way to the girl, knew a few things about technology and helped build a humble electrical infrastructure. Some people were engineers, some were amateurs, some knew more about people and helped solve problems, some told stories or cooked food or negotiated, and everyone did their part.

As things got more efficient, there was more and more time for fun. They found ways to play old movies, run old games, set up libraries, make new games, make new movies, and entertain each other between work and during the roughest storms. They found ways to build

shelter for animals so they could rest too, to plant crops that would grow in this, to stay social in the face of this. They figured out how to call each other, and text and talk while they weren't nearby. Someone was on the phone when they were choked out by a flash fire in a sudden dust storm. Another got eaten by one of the many hungry carnivores.

It was brutal, yeah, but they made it. They mourned their dead, like anyone else would. Most people felt horrible guilt for just being alive, but they tried to work through it together. Lots of people loved to pet the dog, and the dog lovingly welcomed the kinship. When it died, in a time when the girl was more properly called a woman, they all mourned together.

They hurt a lot. More than I could know. Those hurt people still fought and hurt each other more, and in other places, where two towns formed close enough together, they fought in groups and hurt each other in groups, raging, but people lived. Once the son tried to take some peppermints, and the girl fought him. They bit and pulled hair, and the mother came and stopped them and they both started crying. They lived together after that, because they needed to and because they wanted to.

Point is humans made it, which is probably what you're wondering. They got up from the ashes, and built something new out of an old sense of compassion. It isn't perfect, it isn't even finished, but it's getting there. I can't help but think people didn't have to die for this, but somehow it took a storm to remind humans that life isn't a convenient coincidence, but a broad, existential thread bursting with vitality. Only people who knew that before the storm really survived it, though that's not to say they all did, or that people who didn't know that didn't *live*, just that the lucky, living people with knowledge, were the only ones who *survive*.

The same news that gutted me prepared them. The same news of a storm for years in advance was taken not as a prophecy, but as a threat. They got mad, not at anyone, or anything in specific, but at whatever vast notion tried to take away the life that was theirs. So they fought for it, and the way they fought this time was together, with compassion.

I used the last threads of my disintegrating sense of particularly-human empathy on hoping beyond anything that that girl would be okay. And in her own way, she was — she got married, because she thought it would be fun, and I think she had kids.

When that particular empathy faded, a new compassion rose, and bloomed into a general hope for all life and non-life to continue within the forces of change.

I felt the last House Sparrow die, as I assume many people did, either with that species, or one of the unlucky varieties of life that ended with a brief sense of crushing loneliness made to punctuate the moment before their reintegration.

Poor thing ended up sick. It had inhaled something it wasn't supposed to, coughed and flailed for a bit. Tried it's best to fly, fell more and more and more as the hours pressed on, then just layed there, probably counting the seconds, trying to cough it up. It made one last stand, then fell like a rock, resolute, quiet, dignified.

I knew it was dead when it first fell. I knew it was alone in the world before that. But I still hoped I was wrong, or that it would at least get up. I watched and hoped all I could, rooting

for life in the face of Certainty because the Certainty didn't need the help. This time we lost, but it was a good try. Well done. We'll get 'em another day. I'm sure of it.

Its body was embraced by all kinds of matter: first dirt, then ants, then cockroaches, then worms, briefly, a hungry cat, then the dirt again. They cleaned and blessed the body, in their own ways. Then they spread all over, carrying what they could to other places, so it could see other things.

I was particularly fond of one roach that set out on a valiant southward journey, starting from the mountain that bird fell near and working past rivers and deserts to find another burrowing place. Her story is long, but quite worth your time if you can imagine it. You don't have the patience to experience all of it. It would bore you, the roaches' ideas of entertainment are an acquired taste.

They're much more interesting than we give them credit for. The stories they tell would amaze you, if you could hear, read, or, most accurately, smell them. You probably do have the sense for it, if you would just train it. You might not have to die to find it out. Give it a try, at least.

But I'm not here to clue you in to all the mysteries of other existences — I'm still not clued into most of them either, though they're more open here, they're still not known. I'm supposed to be telling you what's up and up — what to do. That's what you're here for, right? None of this sentimental stuff, this living-after-disaster burlesque, you want the truth, you want to know what to do.

Sorry. I've already said most of what I've got. Odds are, plants have used the rubble of what was once your house either as structural foundation or a stock of nutrients, and they are thriving. A certain new mythology has been going around in a few human circles saying that the Storm was a retaliation against the anthropocene produced by a conspiracy of plant life, especially trees utilizing advanced biological warfare. As usual, it's only half true.

It really doesn't matter how true it is. It's helping people try to get past it. Because you have to get past it. See over the line, hold onto what you care for, and cross over. You have to do it eventually, you may as well prepare for it. Do something, contribute, change the material conditions where you can and if you don't know how to do that email your local arborists. Meet people, have fun, turn off the machines for an afternoon and have a picnic, dance when it rains and sometimes when it doesn't, have the audacity to look death in the eye and smile and maybe tell a joke because you both know the outcome's inevitable, you may as well enjoy it. It will make it easier to get past it. Because we're going to have to get past it.