

They are all around me, my children and their children, all looking properly sad...and I knew none of them cared that I was dying.

Being within a few months of my ninetieth birthday, I wasn't against the idea of dying. When my wife Mary had passed two decades ago, I'd almost prayed for death. But death had remained elusive until just a month ago. That morning, waking up in the predawn darkness with a pain in my chest like a giant's fist squeezing my heart, I had known I was in trouble. Part of me wanted to just lie there and wait for the end to come...but for all my desire for death, my fear got the better of me. My cell was next to my bed, and I had managed to call 911 before the pain overwhelmed me.

Waking in the ER was all I needed to tell me that I was not dead. The doctors had delivered the bad news, that my heart muscles were failing, and it hadn't really been a surprise. Nor was the next step in my life: hospice. My children could easily have taken me in, most of them had the space to spare with their children now gone.

But no, they were unwilling to take in, and take care of, their 'old man'. Oh, they came to visit me in the hospital, and later in hospice, quite often. But not one of them wanted me around 24/7. Sharon, my youngest daughter, spent much of her day with me, but that was because she'd cleaned her ex-husband out in their divorce.

The rest came, mostly in the evenings and weekends, but rarely more often, and never very many. Even if the doctors hadn't already told me, them being here told me I didn't have long to live. It was getting harder and harder to stay awake, and it wasn't just because my visitors were boring (which they were). No, I often found my mind wandering, and it wasn't uncommon for me to find myself speaking to one of my grandchildren, then to find them no longer present.

And the time I was not conscious was becoming more and more troubling.

Sometimes, I would remember my wife and our life together...both the good times and, sadly, the bad. Other times, I would remember everything I'd done in my life. The people I had worked with, most of them long dead but now seemingly alive again seemed to constantly remind me of all my failings. How I'd double-dealt my way up the corporate ranks. The way I had oppressed and stifled those who might rise to take my hard-won place.

Worst of all were the times I remembered my interactions with my children. How I had struggled to understand how to be the father I thought I should be. How they had never quite seemed to be what I had hoped they would be. The many, many times they had disagreed with him, often vehemently. But the worst had begun just today. Just before he had become aware the room was filled with his family, he had been in a gray void, a place unlike anything he had ever seen or imagined. And worst than the strange space had been the voices.

The first voice had been so calm, almost matter-of-fact, as it listed the many defects of his life. He hadn't wanted to listen, but even though it had seemed barely louder than a normal speaking voice, he could have no more block it out than he could have blocked to roar of a jet engine running next to his ear. It had seemed to come from everywhere, and nowhere, like an echo inside his own head. And it had droned on and on, unrelentingly reminding me what a complete and total bastard I'd been.

Then, silence...and a different voice had addressed him.

“Mr. Sanchez, your manifold failings have been duly noted. Have you anything to say? Any justification to offer?”

The strangeness, the complete and total bizarreness of the moment, stunned me into silence. After a pause, the voice continued.

“Very well. No defense having been offered, you are hereby found guilty of having wasted your life, and worst, of having made the lives of those around you miserable. We therefore condemn you to wander through your lives...all your lives, in all the many different universes you exist in. It is hoped you will learn from how the other versions of you have lived their lives. You will, of course, be allowed a final chance to make amends with your family, and if we find your efforts sufficient, your sentence may be amended. You are free to go, and may the multi-verse have mercy on you.”

The room comes back into focus, and my family around me still. They are all keeping their distance, staring at me while they wait for me to die. Not one of them approaches to ask how I am doing, or if I need anything. I think of what the voice had said, that this was my chance to “make amends” with them. *Fuck them. They don't love me, and they wouldn't care what I said.* The thought has barely gone through my head before I find it hard to breathe. The room, and everything in it, begins to dim and fade..and in my head, I hear the voice that had pronounced my sentence speaking again.

“Very well, Mr. Sanchez. If you refuse to take advantage of the mercy of this court, your sentence will be carried out immediately.”

With those words, the world goes black and I feel myself falling a fall that seems to continue forever. Then the voice speaks again, one final address to me it seems.

“You, who have spurned human contact and the very concept of helping others, shall learn of the value of volunteering to help...and the price it extracts. The soldier will be a good first example for you....”