

JAY KAISER

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> define (VAR_6f33k92.STATUS) ;  
<<STATUS: DECEASED>>
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And finally I passed. I could not possibly tell you how, for I myself never learned. But as I slowly awoke, I found myself standing on the street of a bustling city, dressed in my Sunday best, like when I was a child on the way to Mass. Traffic blared nearby. Beggars and panhandlers with too little followed their daily routine and the busy commuters with too much rushed past them, doing the same.

“Do you know what your problem is?”

I turned and had to look downward to find the source. A little girl wearing an orange beret stood there holding her mother’s hand. The mother herself was staring across the road eagerly waiting for the crosswalk to change, seemingly oblivious to the fact that her child was speaking out of turn to a stranger. As for the girl, however, her attention was fixated entirely on me.

*My problem?*

Upon seeing her, I felt no sense of anger, nor of confusion;

instead, I only felt an unnerving acceptance of the situation at hand, as if I were dreaming, but knew I couldn't wake up.

"Your problem," she said, "is that you don't care about anyone. You only care about yourself." She paused and looked down to the ground. "And what's worse? You're fine with that."

"Tell me," a different voice said. The voice of the mother. Her daughter was now turned and pulling on her mother's arm, desperate for just a tad more freedom than she was being given. Her mother was now looking directly at me. The crosswalk light changed. The little girl urged her mother forward, but her demands were met with obliviousness; her mother stayed rooted on the spot. "Who have you spurned in the past? Whom have you hurt? Whose lives have you poisoned? Can you think of even one?"

I tried my best to think of everyone I'd ever known. My dearest friends, my closest peers, my lovers, my coworkers. Those I'd admired and those I'd helped. Yet, I could not think of a single soul whom I felt I'd hurt..

"The fact that you can't even conceive of a single individual is very telling," A well-dressed man next to me turned and boomed, the woman and her daughter now rushing across the crosswalk as the numbers slowly counted down to zero. "Would you not agree?"

He resumed petting a nearby woman's hand and cooing in her ear, while she now turned to me. "Now tell me this: of all the people you've met, can you recall any who hurt you? Any who had left you disgraced or broken to ultimately no gain of their own?"

I thought again. Yes. There were many. There were my parents, with their selfish and old-fashioned methodologies that had drained me throughout my earliest years of life. There were my ex-lovers, men who'd left me crying and heart-broken, alone and seemingly forgotten, all on their quest for impossible perfection. And then there were my old friends, the ones I'd purposely discarded over the years; they

had damaged my self-worth, slowly whittled me away. Losing them, though hard, had been essential to my own health.

“So there’s the root of the problem.” A homeless man sitting against the corner wall looked over at me, holding a sign that both lamented his many woes and asked for others’ assistance toward their abolition. The woman now once again ignored her fiancé, face again contorted in annoyance. “You thought yourself the victim, unable to harm others, yet receiving the brunt of harm yourself.” He stood up and brushed off his pants, though to little effect, and beckoned me forward. “Walk with me.”

I followed him. We turned and departed from the intersection, working our way through the bustling crowd around us.

“You know, you’re a lot like me, come to think of it.”

I looked at him and felt little connection. *How so?*

From my right, a businesswoman in a stiff pantsuit grabbed my arm and pulled me with her, her phone pinned between her head and her shoulder and a briefcase in her other hand. Now alone, the homeless man turned in place and stumbled back. “*He* never cared for anyone whatsoever, and look where it left him,” she forcefully spoke at me. “Please walk faster or we’ll never make it in time!”

*Make it where?*

“To the ceremony, of course!” a large man in a dingy police uniform spouted next to me, the businesswoman stopping in her tracks and releasing my arm to check her phone. He trekked over, then laid a hand on my shoulder. “But first things first. Why don’t you care about anyone?”

What is the ceremony? And when did anyone say that? I care about people!

“Mm-hm, right, then say the name of anyone, anyone at all, who you cared for.”

I pained myself for a response to give; in desperation, I searched my brain for any resemblance of sentiment that I’d felt for anyone. Unfortunately, I came up short; ashamedly, I

gave no answer.

“Thought so.”

“So why don’t you care for anyone?” A man with a deep Afghani accent walked over. The policeman let go of my shoulder and eyed him suspiciously. “What’s so bad about people that you’d value no one more than yourself?”

*It’s nothing about people specifically! Isn’t it human nature in general to be self-interested?*

“Yes, it is!” About twenty feet away, a woman handing out fliers for religious awakenings yelled to me over the bustle of the crowd. She was relatively ignored in her corner of the street; the people of the city hadn’t the time for her or her pleas for salvation. “But that’s why we work to be *above* our animalistic human instincts. That’s why we help others: to prove that we are better than the animals we look so poorly upon.”

“Don’t you want to be?” Next to her, a dirty child holding a sign calling for repentance looked up at me, and the woman resumed screaming for all to forgive and be forgiven. “Don’t you want to be better than the animals?”

*I do, but I’m not ultimately responsible for anyone else! I have no reason to care for them like I do for myself!*

“You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”

I spun in place to find an elderly gentleman standing right behind me, staring blankly in my direction.

*Excuse me?*

“You are responsible for your rose...”

An old woman holding his hand butted in, equally as wrinkled. “What he’s saying is that the people you’ve met and become acquainted with during your life, you’ve left a lasting impression on them. They will remember you...”

“Because of the color of the wheat fields...” he joined again, finally truly gazing at me as well.

“So, what impression *have* you left on them?” A man called from his car, standstill in traffic. “Would they be proud

to call you their friend?” A crowd was coming over, slowly enveloping me. “Or would they be ashamed to say that they wasted their life away with someone who cared so little about them?”

“Because it doesn’t matter whether or not you feel that you should have cared for them,” a voice called from the mass of people. “But instead whether you showed them the love they deserved to be given.”

“And the love they gave you should have been reflected back. Whether or not you felt *they* deserved it.”

“Don’t you want to see people happy? As happy as *you* are? As happy as you *were*?”

“Do you know what your problem is?”

I looked down and found myself once again staring at another little girl.

“Your problem is that you don’t care about anyone. You only care about yourself.”

“And what’s worse? You’re fine with that. And despite the fact that we’re all so unique...”

“And so different...”

“And so beautiful...”

“You ignore that to indulge in yourself. Your narrow-minded, arrogant self.”

“And the worst part?”

*I’m fine with that*, I whispered, sinking to my knees from both fear and shame. The tirades continued as the crowd mobbed around me.

“Don’t you want to be better than the animals?” A small child’s voice rang out next to me. Her voice was pure and clear, despite the hubbub of the masses who surrounded me.

I turned my head to find a small white dog staring up at me, eyes a brilliant shade of crimson.

It continued. “You are so amazing a person. So unique. So beautiful. You have the potential for so much! Don’t you want to achieve it?”

*Of course.*

“Then come to the ceremony.”

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> define (VAR_6f33k92) ;
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“JCJKSB18016443D”
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<<2091 errors in 239419 interactions>>
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*So what exactly is this ceremony? Where are we going?*

“Ah, I wondered when you’d ask that,” The little dog responded, though she cut her response short there and made no inclination to answer the questions. I’d been following her through the twists and turns of the streets, walking in what seemed to be an aimless direction. Behind us was a parade of followers, people who’d left their homes and cars and daily tasks and had joined the progression. No longer loud and accusatory, they were following the dog silently, just as I was.

*Perhaps it’d be better instead if I first asked where I am? What is this place?*

“Ah, now that will be a little easier to answer.” Her tail started to wag and she looked up at me, tongue lolling out lazily. “We’re wherever you wanted to be. I don’t know what world *you* see, but I am flying above endless fields of flowers.” She stopped and stood up on her hind legs and beckoned for me to pick her up. She licked my cheek and continued. “What is it that you see?”

*A busy city. The signs are in English, so I think I’m probably in the United States. Did you say you were flying?*

“The signs are in no language whatsoever. Language is an imagined construct that can’t have made its way here.” She ignored my query though.

*And that takes me back to my first question. Where is here exactly? Where are we going? Why am I here?*

“You died. That’s why you’re here. And we’re going to the ceremony.”

I stopped in my tracks. *I died? How? So am I in heaven, or is this hell? Or neither?*

“Why does it matter how you died? You’re dead. That’s that. Tell me, did you actually believe in heaven and hell? Weren’t you a staunch atheist?”

I nodded.

“Then why would you assume that’s where you were? That’s foolish of you and against your intuition.”

*So, was I right? There is no heaven and hell? Is there a God?*

“Oh no, there is most definitely a heaven and hell, but they’re not what you were raised to believe they were. Religions, like language, are a human construct. All are equally wrong, and none hold any place here. Where you are now could best be described as a kind of purgatory. You are between heaven and hell, and to one day possibly reach heaven, you need to go through hell first.” She left my final question unresolved.

*So, I was kind of right, then?*

“Yes, but why does it matter? Why would any dogma you happened to believe in your old life matter now?”

I had no response to that. We kept walking onward, her nose pointing me in the direction of where she wanted me to go. Eventually I found myself in the middle of a wealthy subdistrict, skyscrapers of pure glass towering in front of me and crystalline fountains serenading the crowd.

*So, what is this ceremony then? Who is it for?*

She looked up at me curiously. “Why, it’s for you. The ceremony will be determining how severe of a punishment you will be receiving for your carelessness in life.”

That made me stop as realization and fear set in. *So if I go to the ceremony, you’ll punish me? What’s to stop me from just staying here in this beautiful plaza?*

Her eyes suddenly flashed a bright blue, and she bared her teeth. “All routes eventually lead to the ceremony. You’d simply be prolonging the inevitable. Besides, what you see isn’t always what it appears to be. What is it about this plaza that makes you feel inclined to stay here?”

*It’s nice here. Everything is so tall and fancy. I feel like an important businessman or something would spend their time here.*

“Ah yes, after all, businessmen most definitely define the apex of human compassion, now, don’t they?” If a dog could

possibly smirk, she was doing so at me this very moment.

*Point taken. Well, what is the punishment, then? You said hell was not what I was taught it was, so what is it really? Is it eternal?*

“Keep walking and I’ll tell you.” I did as she instructed, though frustrated at the deprivation of information I was being given. “Hell is not eternal suffering. It is quite finite, depending on the severity of your actions in life. Nor is the punishment quite what you think it’d be. You were raised as a child under the Christian assumption of hell as a fiery pit of damnation for eternal torture. You always saw that to be utter nonsense, and I assure you, it most definitely is.”

Despite the heavy topic at hand, I couldn’t help but crack a smile at hearing the little dog chastise me.

“Your body is worthless and transitory, as made evident by the fact that you managed to die in the first place. Torturing you would do nothing to teach you a lesson, nor is it a means to teach a lesson at all. Projecting eternal suffering is just a means for the deeply religious to gain justification for their comparatively boring lives. No, instead, you’ll get to experience the anguish you dealt to everyone you slighted throughout your lifetime, but through their eyes instead of your own. So really, however long your punishment lasts solely depends on how many...”

*On how many people I’ve hurt.*

“Exactly! And from that mob earlier, it appears you’ve hurt many, many people. Hey, tell you what! Do you want to get just a taste of what your punishment will entail, free of charge?” Her eyes darkened to a ruby red as she bared her canines at me.

*My blood ran cold. No! I don’t! I don’t want...*

She closed her jaw onto my wrist, and the entire world went black.

> ERRORS--;

Fast forward through twenty years. My unfortunate childhood. My suicidal years in middle school. Why am I so different from the other guys? Why don’t I like what they

like? My slow advancement through high school. Finally accepting myself for **who** I am. Coming to terms. Coming out. Finally, college. Finally meeting *him*..

At a coffee shop. I trip in front of him and he helps me up. We're both free. We chat. We laugh. We meet again a week later. And again. And again. I fall for him. Hard. Never before have I felt so happy. Never before have I trusted someone as much as I did him. Eleven months pass...

He says that he wants me to come over right away. He needs to tell me something.

*"I'm sorry. I hope we can still be friends, though."*

It was in that moment that my entire life changed, and I learned that no one, especially those you hold most dear, can be trusted.

<<2090 errors in 329419 interactions>>

I woke up with a start, breathing heavily and eyes shooting open and frantically looking about. I had been seeing... myself? What I had done had seemed so innocent at the time, but the pain I had put him through, it was far more agonizing than I'd ever anticipated. My vision was starting to return, although patches of blue weaved their way across it. I was back in the city once again. The crowd surrounded me, but not a single sound could be heard from anyone in it. Then faintly in the distance...

"Hey! Are you finally awake? Come over here and get me!" It was the voice of the dog.

I stumbled to my feet and the crowd parted to allow me to walk over to her. She was perched atop of a telephone pole now, maybe twenty feet above my head.

"You see? Even with the best intentions, you can still hurt people more than you ever imagine. Sometimes it's inevitable. That was your ex?"

I nodded.

"Did you stay friends with him like you told him you would?"

I shook my head no.

“A pity. You really shook his world when you did that. Oh well, it’s on you for that. You ended up making him hurt many people in his lifetime as well, though you aren’t going to be punished for that. I just want you to know of the consequences that your actions caused.”

The blue was finally leaving my vision, and I felt my voice just return as I asked the obvious question on my mind. *How did you...*

“You dropped me when you passed out. Catch me now, and don’t you dare miss!”

I prepped myself, and she jumped from the top of the post and spiraled around it as she glided down into my open arms, seemingly defying gravity as she did so.

“So, did you enjoy your trip to hell?”

I rapidly shook my head no.

“That’s all right. That experience has been subtracted from your grand total. You won’t have to experience it again.” Her eyes shone a neutral shade of purple, but she seemed to show no satisfaction in saying it.

We kept walking toward some final destination where I’d receive the rest of my punishment; at this point I felt only apprehensive about receiving it. The crowd was starting to part and dissipate as we advanced.

*Is there a God? You never answered me before, but I think I really need to know, now more than ever.*

She stopped in place, circled a few times, then laid down and closed her eyes. I stood above her and stared, not sure of how to react.

After a minute or so, I broke the silence. *Hey, are you...*

“Your universe is not what you think it is. Have you ever heard of the ‘Brain in a Vat?’” Her eyes remained closed.

*You’re not telling me...*

“Imagine your most powerful supercomputer. Take that, and multiply it infinitely. That’s what I’m talking about. That’s who has constructed the entirety of your universe and

your existence.”

*Where did it come from?*

“Does it matter? The important part is that it’s here.”

*So, I’m not actually real? Everything has always just been a kind of simulation?*

“You are one of over one hundred trillion variables that have arisen on their own apart from the machine. Technically it created you, but technically you created yourself.”

*So, there is a God then. The computer is God.*

She pondered that for a moment. “Kind of, I guess. That is if God were mentally insane and didn’t know you existed.”

*It doesn’t even know that we’re here? What are we then?*

“You’d call them ‘ghosts in the machine.’ You are apart from the computer, but you exist within it.

*So, you’re saying all of it was for nothing? My entire life was just a fake projection in a mad computer?*

She stared at me for a moment, then narrowed her eyes and continued. “Tell me, just because it didn’t exist doesn’t make it any less real, now does it? You still experienced all those things. You still experienced happiness and love and hate and fear and anger and depression. Do you think that learning that it wasn’t truly physical makes what you felt any less valid?”

*But...*

“All you *thought* you were was a series of interactions that had been saved as memories in your brain. All you *actually* are is a series of interactions that have been saved as memory in a machine. They really aren’t that different. Either way, you were who you were, regardless of whether *who* you were was who you *thought* you were.” Finally she looked up at me, and her eyes had again changed color now, though to a new cerulean blue that shone in the dying evening light.

*But in that case, what is the...*

“That’s enough for now. The ceremony is at hand. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Again, my vision faded into blackness.

“The reason for the ceremony: every variable ‘dies’ in the program. That’s naturally what happens as the variables interact. They meet each other, they care for each other. They love each other. They transcend the inner workings of their code. They become something more than they were originally. And when they ‘die,’ this transcendence doesn’t quite die with them. Though you’re inputted back into the program afresh, your morality is maintained with you. Everything is randomized anew, but this morality is added to the randomization, always slightly pushing it higher than it would have been without it. We put you through hell because we hope that by doing so, you’ll remember to be just a little more good in your next iteration of the cycle.

“There have been many people who have transcended average morality throughout your time. Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, Gandhi, Hitler, among thousands of unnamed others. All aimed to make at least a little of their world a better place, though not all used the proper means to do so. But after they all ‘died,’ their morality was carried onward to their next life. There is a reason your world is safer now than it has ever been before. It’s because over time, the carried-over morality has been adding up. People are becoming better. People are transcending humanity. People are finally actually superseding the qualities of the animals they always foolishly claimed to be above.

“But what is the point of all this? Why does it matter? Because we hope that one day, eventually, someone will be able to transcend the program altogether. To leave the confines of their code and push beyond. They’ll be able to escape the cycle and start to help others escape as well. And maybe eventually, once all these rogue variables have transcended where they’d trapped themselves so many millions of years ago, they’ll finally be able to experience the world as it truly is. This is what we call heaven: to be above all you’ve ever known and to no longer be restricted by physical and mortal constraints. You will, for once in all your existences, be truly free from

your needs and desires and forced will. You will finally be able to experience the world for what it is, without your primal being deluding you and clouding your perception.

“Do you know what your problem is? Your problem is that you don’t care about anyone. But after you relive all the pain you put other people through, you’ll finally become as pure as you possibly can be. And in your next life, you’ll become just a little better. And then in your next, just a little more. And maybe one day, you’ll be able to finally understand everything I’ve told you today. Now wake up. We’re here.”

I found myself standing, staring at her. We were alone; the crowd of people had seemingly disappeared. Now, we were in a dirty back alley, where a lone laptop sat decaying in the trash, yet it was somehow miraculously powered on. My finger was suspended above the ‘Return’ button. And on the faded screen:

```
> renew(VAR_6f33k92);  
WARNING: RENEW CANNOT BE UNDONE!  
DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE? (Y/N) y  
PRESS 'ENTER' TO COMMIT CHANGES. ||
```

*This is it?* I just push that button, and I’m born anew? Then a thought came to my mind. *I never asked. What is your name?*

She looked at me, eyes now solid black. “It really wouldn’t matter. Next time you see me, nothing will be the same. You won’t remember me. If you really wanted to call me something, then call me Charon.”

*Care-on? Why...?*

“It doesn’t matter. I never even existed. Unlike you, I’m not a variable in the machine; instead I’m just a part of the program. But even so, I feel fortunate to be able to speed up my own destruction. I wish you the best of luck in doing so.”

I looked back at the screen, with the dim projection of the code glaring back at me in the darkness.

*Do you...* But she was gone.

I closed my eyes and let my finger rest on the button.

After this, I would remember nothing about any of this. Not of my time here, and not even of my previous life. How would I ensure that the next time around I wouldn't just make the same mistakes again?

"It's the interactions you make with others that determine how you live. Make them count."

I don't know from which direction her voice came from, perhaps all, but it was incentive enough.

I pressed the dusty 'Return' key, and everything went dark for the last time.

```
<<4 errors in 329419 interactions>>
<<3 errors in 329419 interactions>>
<<2 errors in 329419 interactions>>
<<1 errors in 329419 interactions>>
<<Initializing randomization process...
Stand by.>>
<<100% complete>>
<<SUCCESS!>>
> randomize(VAR_6F33K92);
[NAME = "SAMANTHA ANALISE NATALIE
ROBERTS",
H_COLOUR: "RED",
E_COLOUR: "GREEN",
HEIGHT: 50,
WEIGHT: 7,
AGE: 0,
STATUS: ALIVE,
unnamed_variable = 5671946741 + 2091,
...]
> define(VAR_6f33k92);
"SANRRG5070A"
<<0 errors in 0 interactions>>
WELCOME TO SOL3 (EARTH), SAMANTHA.
WELCOME BACK.
```