

Borrowed Time
by McFeely Sam Goodman

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145 Seaman Avenue, Apt. 5A
New York, NY 10034
m.sam.goodman@gmail.com

I. The Truth

*A dancer (B) does a dance of death.
All throughout the dance he is dying.
He knows he is dying but he does not let us know
and we would not be able to see it anyway because
he is dancing so well. All the same, his
impending mortality weighs on the whole dance.*

SPEAKER (A)

When I was 11, I was in a car accident. Nothing serious. We were driving home from my grandmother's and a guy ran a stop sign and pulled out in front of us. No one was hurt, but in the moments before the crash I said, or my mom said, or we all said "We're going to hit that car."

We pick the strangest moments to tell the truth.

I'm not talking about the truth like "Orange is really not your color" or "I'm cheating on you" or "I was the one who robbed the Isabella Stewart Gardener Museum on March 18th, 1990," though I think maybe the same holds.

I'm talking about our core truths. The truths we carry inside us. The truths that scare us. The truths we want so badly to tell, but can't or think we shouldn't.

These are truths that are always on our minds and in a split second, under duress or on a whim or when we can't be bothered to hold up the facade, we let them loose and watch them fly.

DANCER (B)

I'm so scared.

SPEAKER (A)

I keep reading that at Sundance, someone who didn't recognize him asked Philip Seymour Hoffman what he did.

PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN (C)

I'm a heroin addict.

SPEAKER (A)

The truth.

The truth as he knew it. As he felt it in those last days, maybe most of his life.

Told to someone who would dismiss it as a wry, self-deprecating remark. Someone who didn't even know who he was and who, only a few weeks later, after Hoffman died, would repeat the encounter to reporters.

He could only tell such a truth to such a person, a total stranger, someone who wouldn't know what it meant until it was too late.

My freshman year of college there were these two guys, roommates, juniors, who were legends on the ultimate frisbee team. They seldom played, but they were the life of all the parties. They were abroad my first fall, but their auras loomed large.

Flash forward to the first party of the year and there they are. I haven't met them yet, because they don't come to practice. I walked up to Peter Gardner and said, "Hi, I'm Peter Gardner, you must be McFeely Sam Goodman."

It took him a second, but he got a kick out of that. And I liked the look of surprise that flashed across his face. It made me feel like I had a little power over this Big Man on Campus.

Months later we were sitting with our trays on the lawn behind the dining hall, eating with some mutual friends. I still didn't know him that well. Peter asked me what my summer plans were. I told him I had an internship at a CBS radio station. He asked me how I had landed it and instead of telling him "A friend of a friend" as I had been telling people, I told him the truth:

McFEELY SAM GOODMAN (C)

It's through Hope and Heroes.

It's an organization for kids who have cancer.

When I was twelve I had cancer.

SPEAKER (A)

I was still a little intimidated by him and I wanted to prove to myself that I could still knock him off balance.

But, this time I didn't enjoy the look on his face.

DEATH (C) takes a bowling ball and throws it at the dancer (B) who even though he knows that this is how the dance ends cannot get out of the way.

The bowling ball hits the dancer (B) and he dies.

The Speaker (A) dances with death. Unlike the dancer (B), the Speaker (A) is afraid of death so he dances clumsily and keeps stepping on DEATH'S (C) toes.

The sun comes up

II. Dawn

A dance which calls the sun into the sky.

SPEAKER (C)

If there are any evolutionary biologists in the house you'll have to just stand up and shout if I get something wrong. I haven't studied this formally, but I've spent a lot of time thinking about it of late.

Many of the problems we face today on a day-to-day basis are the result of (self-induced) obsolescence, by which I mean that the human animal developed over the course of several million years compared to which the period of time that we call modernity is negligible. Even the approximately twelve thousand years since the advent of agriculture is insignificant. We live in a world for which we are not designed.

And we're not the only ones. On my iPhone, when I go to compose an email, a little set of imaginary buttons with characters shows up on my screen. To write something I poke at those little virtual buttons with my thumb. Tiny virtual buttons pressed with the largest of fingers. Some people use two thumbs. Some

people probably use an index finger. But the arrangement of those buttons was designed by someone who wanted to make it so that when a person used sequences of all ten fingers to push down actual levers to whip individual pieces of type against a page hard enough to make marks that would spell English-language words, the type bars wouldn't catch on each other.

And as human beings we are the same way. Our bodies are not designed for the lives we're living. Anxiety is a prime example. What is anxiety but misplaced fear? What do animals fear? That they'll be eaten by other animals?

But what do we fear? That we'll fall behind on our mortgages? That secretly everyone hates us? And then what? We'll fall behind on our mortgages and then we won't have our houses to protect us from being eaten? That secretly everyone hates us and will eat us? I doubt it.

I'm not trying to trivialize the fear of falling behind on a mortgage or of being hated. And I'm not saying that anxiety doesn't play a healthy role in keeping us current on our financial responsibilities or encouraging us to reach out socially. But it wasn't designed for that.

But, it's not all bad and this brings me to my point, which is actually not a point but a question:

Why is it that nothing makes me feel as organically happy as the sight of the sun coming up?

Is it just the quality of the light? The beauty? I don't think so. I've seen my share of beauty and I certainly appreciate it, but not the way I do the rising sun.

Is my joy vestigial?

When I see the sun come up, am I reliving the relief of my Cro-Magnon ancestors who feared it might never return?

Or do I, myself, fear that the sun might be gone forever? Is that why I'm afraid of the dark? I don't know.

I don't know. I've come all this way with you, bullshitted my way through a lot of made-up biology to realize I don't know,

but when it happens

on a winter morning as I get ready for an early class

or even more miraculously, waking at four in morning on a friend's couch in a converted warehouse apartment with enormous windows in Northern Liberties on the third of July, 2010, still a little drunk and standing in my underwear by the window trying to hydrate and watching the sky turn pink

and in that moment
I am not afraid of getting eaten.

please don't laugh.

I am not afraid of getting eaten
and I am not afraid of missing a deadline
and I am not afraid that no one loves me
and I am not afraid that I will get sick and die and I will never have a chance to create a Great Work of Art

because the sun is coming up.

III: Borrowed Time

Two clocks or an hourglass and a clock or two hourglasses or any two (or more) timekeeping devices dance a dance which expresses what it is to be borrowed by Jimmy Buffett and spent frivolously.

Or else Jimmy Buffett (C) dances in a carefree fashion with a clock (A).

Or a clock, alone on a Jimmy Buffett-themed cruise dances with a taxi-dancer who may or may not be a clock.

SPEAKER (B)

In August, when Philip Seymour Hoffman was still alive and I was in a hospital bed recovering from a thyroidectomy, I read a very short piece (350 words) on Jimmy Buffett in Rolling Stone in which he said, quote

JIMMY BUFFETT (C)

I've dodge a few bullets, between plane crashes and being shot at in Jamaica, so I'm on borrowed time anyway.

SPEAKER (B)

Borrowed time.

Since I was twelve, I've though of myself as a survivor. If I could handle cancer, I could handle anything. It didn't make things easy; cancer wasn't easy, but it gave me incredible inner self-confidence. And as that self confidence grew and as I began to have successes in life, as things started to fall into place for me and the years passed, it became more and more easy for me to imagine that surviving cancer had not only made me tough, it had made me invincible. At twelve, I had faced down a disease which most people use as short hand for death and I had come out on top. I had won. I had survived. Sure it was possible for a person to have cancer more than once, but what were the odds? I figured I was safe for at least another forty or fifty years.

And I lived with that confidence, that feeling of security for about twelve years.

And then this happened:

During a routine check-up at the Center for Survivor Wellness, a check-up so routine that even my parents (who take the sort of obsessive interest in my health that parents take when their son is diagnosed with cancer when he's twelve) don't come with me any more, so routine that they're even starting to suggest that maybe I don't need to go, that an annual check-up with my Primary Care Physician is enough so long as I stay in touch with the CSW and come back in twenty years for a celebratory round of scans, during this routine check-up my doctor, who is not the doctor who treated my cancer (that doctor is off treating kids who have cancer, which, after all, is what the Department of Pediatric Oncology is really for), this other doctor, whom I've been seeing for a few years, who sees long-term survivors, this doctor finds a nodule on my thyroid.

Long story short, the nodule turns out to be a lot of nodules, turns out to be what two endocrinologists agree is a "funky"- (that's the word they use, I swear) looking thyroid, which turns out to be even more funky-looking in person when the endo-surgeon gets a good look at it with his own two eyes under the bright, white lights of the operating theatre, as they call it.

Conclusion: It's got to go. Turns out a thyroid is easily replaced with a little pill taken every morning and after a couple months of fiddling with the dose, I won't even miss my funky old human tissue thyroid.

So, that's that. Out the thyroid comes. On further inspection, there's no cancer, just a lot of funky scar tissue.

But, as I lie in the recovery room, reading the 350 word piece on Jimmy Buffett, another way of looking at being a survivor makes its way into my anesthesia-addled brain. Maybe, not dying of cancer doesn't make you invincible. Maybe it just makes you not dead.

Maybe, in fact, it makes you weaker; it was the radiation they used to treat the cancer in the lymph-nodes of my neck that put the funk in my thyroid in the first place. Maybe every twelve years something like this will happen, until one day I don't survive. Maybe, I am living on borrowed time.

And that scares the shit out of me. And so I do what I do with things that scare me, I try to intellectualize my fear. And so I ask myself,

What do we mean when we say that one is living on borrowed time? Whom do we imagine that time is borrowed from? God? The Grim Reaper? In which case, aren't we all just borrowing time?

And when you really think about it, isn't borrowing time like borrowing eggs, or sugar, or thyme with an h and a y, in that you can't give it back, can you? You borrow it and you use it up.

But, actually, in the moment, I don't ask any of those questions. Those come later as I try to make sense of my fear and to figure out why it hasn't quite gone away.

Lying there in the hospital bed the only question I ask myself is how it came to be that Jimmy Buffett and I are both living on borrowed time.