

*Krapp's Last Tape* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London on October 28, 1958. It was directed by Donald McWhinnie and played by Patrick Magee.

## *Krapp's Last Tape* by Samuel Beckett

*A late evening in the future. ★*

*Krapp's den.*

*Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards audience.*

*Sitting at the table, facing front, i.e. across from the drawers, a wearish old man: Krapp.*

*Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed.*

*White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven.*

*Very near-sighted (but unspectacled). Hard of hearing.*

*Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation.*

*Laborious walk.*

*On the table a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes.*

*Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness.*

*Krapp remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table. He stoops, unlocks first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a reel of tape, peers at it, puts it back, locks drawer, unlocks second drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a large banana, peers at it, locks drawer, puts keys back in his pocket. He turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of banana*

*in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing to and fro at edge of stage, in the light, i.e. not more than four or five paces either way, meditatively eating banana. He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over the edge of stage into pit. He resumes his pacing, finishes banana, returns to table, sits down, remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, takes keys from his pockets, raises them to his eyes, chooses key, gets up and moves to front of table, unlocks second drawer, takes out a second large banana, peers at it, locks drawer, puts back keys in his pocket, turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, tosses skin into pit, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he*

can muster backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds. He comes back into light carrying an old ledger and sits down at table. He lays ledger on table, wipes his mouth, wipes his hands on the front of his waistcoat, brings them smartly together and rubs them.

KRAPP

(briskly). Ah! (He bends over ledger, turns the pages, finds the entry he wants, reads.) Box . . . three . . . spool . . . five. (He raises his head and stares front. With relish.) Spool! (Pause.) Spoooo! (Happy smile. Pause. He bends over table, starts peering and poking at the boxes.) Box . . . three . . . three . . . four . . . two . . . (with surprise) nine! good God! . . . seven . . . ah! the little rascal! (He takes up box, peers at it.) Box three. (He lays it on table, opens it and peers at spools inside.) Spool . . . (he peers at ledger) . . . five . . . (he peers at spools) . . . five . . . five . . . ah! the little scoundrel! (He takes out a spool, peers at it.) Spool five. (He lays it on table, closes

box three, puts it back with the others, takes up the spool.) Box three, spool five. (He bends over the machine, looks up. With relish.) Spoooo! (Happy smile. He bends, loads spool on machine, rubs his hands.) Ah! (He peers at ledger, reads entry at foot of page.) Mother at rest at last . . . Hm . . . The black ball . . . (He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.) Black ball? . . . (He peers again at ledger, reads.) The dark nurse . . . (He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads.) Slight improvement in bowel condition . . . Hm . . . Memorable . . . what? (He peers closer.) Equinox, memorable equinox. (He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.) Memorable equinox? . . . (Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads.) Farewell to—(he turns the page)—love. He raises his head, broods, bends over machine, switches on and assumes listening posture, i.e. leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine, face front.

## TAPE

(*strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time.*) Thirty-nine today, sound as a—(*Settling himself more comfortably he knocks one of the boxes off the table, curses, switches off, sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground, winds tape back to beginning, switches on, resumes posture.*) Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the...

(*hesitates*) ... crest of the wave—or thereabouts. Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the Winehouse. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelope. Good to be back in my den, in my old rags. Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition. (*Vehemently.*) Cut 'em out! (*Pause.*) The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round

me I feel less alone. (*Pause.*) In a way. (*Pause.*) I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to ... (*hesitates*) ... me. (*Pause.*) Krapp.

*Pause.*

The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean ... (*hesitates*) ... I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has—when all *my* dust has settled. I close my eyes and try and imagine them.

*Pause. Krapp closes his eyes briefly.*

Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman though. Connaught, I fancy.

(*Pause.*) Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever am? No. (*Pause.*) Did I sing as a boy? No. (*Pause.*) Did I ever sing? No.

*Pause.*

Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but

it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business. (*Pause.*) Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. (*Pause.*) Incomparable! (*Pause.*) Ah well . . . (*Pause.*) These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them—(*Krapp switches off, broods, switches on*)—a help before embarking on a new . . . (*hesitates*) . . . retrospect. Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone.*) Statistics. Seventeen hundred hours, out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20%, say 40% of his waking life. (*Pause.*) Plans for a less . . . (*hesitates*) . . . engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness.

Unattainable laxation. Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it's over. (*Pause.*) False ring there. (*Pause.*) Shadows of the opus . . . magnum. Closing with a—(*brief laugh*)—yelp to Providence. (*Prolonged laugh in which Krapp joins.*) What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?

*Pause.*

When I look—

*Krapp switches off, broods, looks at his watch, gets up, goes backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Pop of cork. Ten seconds. Second cork. Ten seconds. Third cork. Ten seconds. Brief burst of quavering song.*

KRAPP (*sings*).

Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh-igh,  
Shadows—

*Fit of coughing. He comes back into light, sits down, wipes his mouth, switches on, resumes his listening posture.*

## TAPE

—back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is perhaps a glint of the old eye to come; there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying; in the late autumn, after her long viduity (*Krapp gives a start*), and the—(*Krapp switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on*)—a-dying, after her long viduity, and the—

*Krapp switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of "viduity." No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word.*

## KRAPP

(*reading from dictionary*). State—or condition of being—or remaining—a widow—or widower. (*Looks up. Puzzled.*) Being—or remaining? . . . (*Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.*) "Deep weeds of viduity" . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird . . . Black plumage of male . . . (*He looks up. With relish.*) The vidua-bird!

## TAPE

*Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.*

—bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone. (*Pause.*) Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs. I got to know them quite well—oh by appearance of course I mean! One dark young beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, most funeral thing. Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her—not having been introduced—she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! (*Laugh. Pause.*) The face she had! The eyes! Like . . . (*hesitates*) . . . chrysolite! (*Pause.*) Ah well . . . (*Pause.*) I was there when—(*Krapp switches off, broods, switches on again*)—the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white

dog, as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (*Pause.*) Moments. Her moments, my moments.

(*Pause.*) The dog's moments. (*Pause.*) In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. (*Pause.*) I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. (*Pause.*) I might have kept it. (*Pause.*) But I gave it to the dog.

*Pause.*

Ah well...

*Pause.*

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision, at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the

day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that... (*hesitates*) ... for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely— (*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most— (*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire— (*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

*Pause.*

Past midnight. Never knew such silence.  
The earth might be uninhabited.

*Pause.*

Here I end—

*Krapp switches off, winds tape back,  
switches on again.*

—upper lake, with the punt, bathed off the bank, then pushed out into the stream and drifted. She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed. Sun blazing down, bit of a breeze, water nice and lively. I noticed a scratch on her thigh and asked her how she came by it. Picking gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(*pause*)—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in. (*Pause.*) We drifted in among

the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (*Pause.*) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

*Pause.*

Past midnight. Never knew—

*Krapp switches off, broods. Finally he fumbles in his pockets, encounters the banana, takes it out, peers at it, puts it back, fumbles, brings out the envelope, fumbles, puts back envelope, looks at his watch, gets up and goes backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Sound of bottle against glass, then brief siphon. Ten seconds. Bottle against glass alone. Ten seconds. He comes back a little unsteadily into light, goes to front of table, takes out keys, raises them to his eyes, chooses key. unlocks first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside, takes out reel, peers at it,*



locks drawer, puts keys back in his pocket, goes and sits down, takes reel off machine, lays it on dictionary, loads virgin reel on machine, takes envelope from his pocket, consults back of it, lays it on table, switches on, clears his throat and begins to record.

KRAPP

Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. (Pause.) The eyes she had! (Broods, realizes he is recording silence, switches off, broods. Finally.) Everything there, everything, all the—(Realizes this is not being recorded, switches on.) Everything there, everything on this old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of... (hesitates) ... the ages! (In a shout.) Yes! (Pause.) Let that go! Jesus! Take his mind off his homework! Jesus! (Pause. Weary.) Ah well, maybe he was right. (Pause.) Maybe he was right. (Broods. Realizes. Switches off. Consults envelope.) Pahl! (Crumples it and throws it away. Broods. Switches

on.) Nothing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. (Pause.) Revelled in the word spool. (With relish.) Spoooo! Happiest moment of the past half million. (Pause.) Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known. (Pause.) One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt. (Pause.) Crawled out once or twice, before the summer was cold. Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. Not a soul. (Pause.) Last fancies. (Vehemently.) Keep 'em under! (Pause.) Scalded the eyes out of me reading *Effe* again, a page a day, with tears again. *Effe*... (Pause.) Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. (Pause.) Could I? (Pause.) And she? (Pause.) Pahl! (Pause.) Fanny came in a couple of times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn't do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch. The last time wasn't so bad. How do you manage it, she

said, at your age? I told her I'd been saving up for her all my life. (*Pause.*) Went to Vespers once, like when I was in short trousers. (*Pause. Sings.*)

→ Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh-igh,  
Shadows—(*coughing, then almost inaudible*)—of the evening  
Steal across the sky.

(*Gasping.*) Went to sleep and fell off the pew. (*Pause.*) Sometimes wondered in the night if a last effort mightn't—(*Pause.*) Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivell in the morning. Or leave it at that. (*Pause.*) Leave it at that. (*Pause.*) Lie propped up in the dark—and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. (*Pause.*) Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. (*Pause.*) And so on. (*Pause.*) Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*)

Once wasn't enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down across her.

*Long pause. He suddenly bends over machine, switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away, puts on the other, winds it forward to the passage he wants, switches on, listens staring front.*

TAPE —gooseberries, she said. I said again I

thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(*pause*)—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in. (*Pause.*) We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (*Pause.*) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

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*Pause. Krapp's lips move. No sound.*

Past midnight. Never knew such silence.

The earth might be uninhabited.

*Pause.*

Here I end this reel. Box—(*pause*)—three, spool—(*pause*)—five. (*Pause.*) Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.

*Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.*

CURTAIN

*Beckett, Samuel. The Collected Works of Samuel Beckett: Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces. Grove Press, Inc.: New York, 1970. Print.*

**All  
That  
Fall**

**A PLAY  
FOR RADIO**

THE  
NEW YORKER

## QUESTIONS FOR ME ABOUT DYING

By Cory Taylor July 31, 2017

*The questions, as it turned out, were unsurprising. These were the same questions I'd been asking myself ever since I was diagnosed with cancer, and my answers haven't changed since.*

A few months back, I was invited to take part in a program for ABC television called "You Can't Ask That." The premise of the show is that there are taboo subjects about which it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation, death being one of them. The producer of the program explained that I would be required to answer a number of questions on camera. She said questions had been sent in from all over the country, and the ten most common had been selected. I wasn't to know what these were until the day I went into the studio for the filming.

It turned out that the producer of the program herself had a need to talk about death, as she had recently lost her father to cancer, and was struggling to cope. This is so often the case with people I talk to about my situation: they listen for a while, then they tell me their own death story, but always with a vague sense that it is shameful, that the whole sorry business is somehow their fault. In taking part in "You Can't Ask That," I wanted to do my bit to change things around, to win back some dignity for the dying, because I don't think silence serves the interests of any of us.

The questions, as it turned out, were unsurprising. Did I have a bucket list, had I considered suicide, had I become religious, was I scared, was there anything good about dying, did I have any regrets, did I believe in an afterlife, had I changed my priorities in life, was I unhappy or depressed, was I likely to take more risks given that I was dying anyway, what would I miss the most, how would I like to be remembered? These were the same questions I'd been asking myself ever since I was diagnosed with cancer, back in 2005. And my answers haven't changed since then. They are as follows.

No, I don't have a bucket list. From the age of fifteen, my one true ambition in life was to become a writer. It is my bliss, this thing called writing, and it has been

since my school days. It isn't just the practice that enthralls me—it's everything else that goes with it, all the habits of mind.

Writing, even if, most of the time, you are only doing it in your head, shapes the world, and makes it bearable. As a schoolgirl, I thrilled at the power of poetry to exclude everything other than the poem itself, to let a few lines of verse make a whole world. Writing for film is no different. Emma Thompson once said that writing a screenplay was like trying to organize a mass of stray iron filings. You have to make the magnetic field so strong that it imposes its own order and holds the world of the screenplay in its tense, suspenseful grip. In fiction, you can sometimes be looser and less tidy, but for much of the time you are choosing what to exclude from your fictional world in order to make it hold the line against chaos. And that is what I'm doing now: I am making a shape for my death, so that I, and others, can see it clearly. And I am making dying bearable for myself.

Yes, I have considered suicide, and it remains a constant temptation. If the law in Australia permitted assisted dying I would be putting plans into place right now to take my own life. Once the day came, I'd invite my family and closest friends to come over and we'd have a farewell drink. I'd thank them all for everything they've done for me. I'd tell them how much I love them. I imagine there would be copious tears. I'd hope there would be some laughter. There would be music playing in the background, something from the soundtrack of my youth. And then, when the time was right, I'd say goodbye and take my medicine, knowing that the party would go on without me, that everyone would stay a while, talk some more, be there for each other for as long as they wished. As someone who knows my end is coming, I can't think of a better way to go out. Nor can I fathom why this kind of humane and dignified death is outlawed.

No, it would not be breaking the law to go out on my own. The newspapers are full of options—hanging, falling from a great height, leaping in front of a speeding train, drowning, blowing myself up, setting myself on fire—but none of them really appeals to me. Again I'm constrained by the thought of collateral damage, of the shock to my family, of the trauma to whoever was charged with putting out the flames, fishing out the body, scraping the brains off the pavement. When you analyze all the possible scenarios for suicide, none is pretty. Which is the reason I support the arguments in

favor of assisted dying, because, to misquote Churchill, it is the worst method of dying, except for all the others.

No, I haven't become religious; that is, I haven't experienced a late conversion to a particular faith. If that means I'm going straight to Hell when I die, then so be it. One of my problems with religion has always been the idea that the righteous are saved and the rest are condemned. Isn't that the ultimate logic of religion's "us" and "them" paradigm?

Perhaps it's a case of not missing what you have never had. I had no religious instruction growing up. I knew a few Bible stories from a brief period of attendance at Sunday school, but these seemed on a level with fairy tales, if less interesting. Their sanctimoniousness put me off. I preferred the darker tones of the Brothers Grimm, who presented a world where there was no redemption, where bad things happened for no reason, and nobody was punished. Even now I prefer that view of reality. I don't think God has a plan for us. I think we're a species with godlike pretensions but an animal nature, and that, of all of the animals that have ever walked the earth, we are by far the most dangerous.

Cancer strikes at random. If you don't die of cancer you die of something else, because death is a law of nature. The survival of the species relies on constant renewal, each generation making way for the next, not with any improvement in mind but in the interests of plain endurance. If that is what eternal life means, then I'm a believer. What I've never believed is that God is watching over us, or has a personal interest in the state of our individual souls. In fact, if God exists at all, I think he/she/it must be a deity devoted to monumental indifference, or else, as Stephen Fry says, why dream up bone cancer in children?

Yes, I'm scared, but not all the time. When I was first diagnosed, I was terrified. I had no idea that the body could turn against itself and incubate its own enemy. I had never been seriously ill in my life before; now, suddenly, I was face to face with my own mortality. There was a moment when I saw my body in the mirror as if for the first time. Overnight my own flesh had become alien to me, the saboteur of all my hopes and dreams. It was incomprehensible, and so frightening I cried.

"I can't die," I sobbed. "Not me. Not now."

But I'm used to dying now. It has become ordinary and unremarkable, something everybody, without exception, does at one time or another. If I'm afraid of anything, it's of dying badly, of getting caught up in some process that prolongs my life unnecessarily. I've put all the safeguards in place. I've completed an advanced health directive and given a copy to my palliative-care specialist. I've made it clear in my conversations, both with him and with my family, that I want no life-saving interventions at the end, nothing designed to delay the inevitable. My doctor has promised to honor my wishes, but I can't help worrying. I haven't died before, so I sometimes get a bad case of beginner's nerves, but they soon pass.

No, there is nothing good about dying. It is sad beyond belief. But it is part of life, and there is no escaping it. Once you grasp that fact, good things can result. I went through most of my life believing death was something that happened to other people. In my deluded state, I imagined I had unlimited time to play with, so I took a fairly leisurely approach to life and didn't really push myself. At least that is one explanation for why it took me so long to write my first novel. There were others. I had been trying to write the story of my parents for years, making character notes, outlining plots, embarking on one false start after another. But again and again I failed to breathe life into the thing, constrained by the fact that my parents were still alive to read what I had written.

Once my parents were dead, I didn't have to worry so much. I could say what I liked about them without hurting their feelings. And once I knew that my own death was looming, I could no longer make any excuses. It was now or never. I wouldn't say that made the writing of my novel "Me and Mr. Booker" any easier, but it spurred me on.

It was a feeling like no other, in late 2011, to hold a copy of my first novel in my hand. When Patricia Highsmith's publisher sent her copies of her first novel, "Strangers on a Train," she couldn't believe how much space they occupied. It seemed so brazen to have made an object that took up room in the world. I knew what Highsmith meant. I'd stuck my neck out at last, staked my claim to be taken seriously as a writer, and here in my hand was the proof. Now, I thought, I can die happy.

Yes, I have regrets, but as soon as you start rewriting your past you realize how your failures and mistakes are what define you. Take them away and you're nothing. But I do wonder where I'd be now if I'd made different choices, if I'd been bolder, smarter,

more sure of what I wanted and how to get it. As it was, I seemed to stumble around, making life up as I went along. Looking back, I can make some sense of it, but at the time my life was all very makeshift and provisional, more dependent on luck than on planning or intent.

Still, as the British psychotherapist and essayist Adam Phillips says, we are all haunted by the life not lived, by the belief that we've missed out on something different and better. My favorite reverie is about the life I could have led in Paris if I'd chosen to stay there instead of returning home like I did. I was twenty-two. I had a standing invitation from my cousin and his wife to visit them in Paris, so I emptied my bank account and bought a ticket. I remember standing on the deck of the ferry leaving Folkestone one blustery November afternoon and thinking that my life had just begun, that this was the start of my great adventure.

My cousin met me on Rue Mouffetard, and I followed him around while he bought the ingredients for dinner. So many cheeses, wines, pastries, charcuterie. So much seafood, all so fresh it gleamed. And so much beauty, in the passing faces, in the sensual language, in the storybook houses winding down the hill. I could barely breathe for happiness. I could have stayed if I'd really wanted to. I was broke, but I could have found work if I'd tried. My cousin taught English, or I suppose there were au-pair agencies I might have telephoned. I spoke bad French, but I could have learned the language.

The problem with reverie is that you always assume you know how the unlived life turns out. And it is always a better version of the life you've actually lived. The other life is more significant and more purposeful. It is impossibly free of setbacks and mishaps. This split between the dream and the reality can be the cause of intense dissatisfaction at times. But I am no longer plagued by restlessness. Now I see the life I've lived as the only life, a singularity, saturated with its own oneness. To envy the life of the alternative me, the one who stayed in Paris, seems like the purest kind of folly.

No, I don't believe in an afterlife. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes sums it up for me. We come from nothingness and return to nothingness when we die. That is one meaning of the circle beloved of calligraphers in Japan, just a big bold stroke, starting at the beginning and travelling back to it in a round sweep. In my beginning is my end, T. S. Eliot says. Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth / Which is already flesh, fur and



faeces / Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. When I first read “Four Quartets,” at school, it was like a revelation. The world was just as he described it and no other way, a place where beauty and corruption cohabit and are often indistinguishable.

When the Buddhist nun who sometimes visits me asked if I believed in an afterlife, I said I thought we are only remembered for so long, by the people who knew us, and that after friends and family are gone we’re forgotten. I told her about the cemeteries in the Japanese porcelain town Arita, where my husband, Shin, and I have bought a house. I told the nun that Shin, a painter, had decided to move to Arita because he liked the idea of painting on porcelain instead of on perishable materials like paper or canvas. Arita is littered with porcelain shards everywhere you look. Shin likes to imagine that four hundred years from now shards of his work might be unearthed and collected by some curious traveller, just as he likes to unearth and collect fragments of work painted by his predecessors. In that way, he says, he will have achieved a degree of immortality. I say that I feel the same way about my work. I like to think that, long after I’m gone, someone somewhere might read a book or essay of mine in a last remaining library or digital archive and be touched in some way.

The nun listens politely to my theories of the afterlife, but I can tell she doesn’t agree with me. I get the feeling that for her things are not as simple as I describe them. I don’t pretend to understand her belief system, but I imagine it assumes the existence of another place, separate from this one. What else can she mean when she describes the essential spirit departing the body for the “ether”? This is where religion gets too cryptic for me, or maybe it’s just that language is inadequate to describe the indescribable.

I’m much more drawn to all of the ordinary ways in which we cheat death. It might be through the evocative power of the objects we leave behind, or it might be in a form of words, a turn of the head, a way of laughing. I was sitting at dinner the other night with some very old friends of ours. They’d met my mother many times, back when she was still herself, before she became ill. The wife looked hard at me for a while.

“You get more and more like her,” she said.

It felt for a moment as if my mother had joined us, that us all being together had conjured up her presence at the table. It was only a fleeting thing. But then I can’t

imagine an afterlife that consists of anything more than these brief and occasional visits with the living, these memories that come unbidden and out of nowhere, then vanish again into oblivion.

No, my priorities remain the same. Work and family. Nothing else has ever really mattered to me.

To say that family has been my other chief priority in life is to understate the case. Marriage, children, the whole catastrophe, as Zorba called it. To become a mother is to die to oneself in some essential way. After I had children, I was no longer an individual separate from other individuals. I leaked into everyone else. I remember going to a movie soon after Nat was born and walking out at the first hint of violence. It was unbearable to think of the damage done. I had never been squeamish in my life before, but now a great deal more was at stake. I had delivered a baby into the world. From now on my only job was to protect and nurture him into adulthood, no matter what it cost me. This wasn't a choice. It was a law.

That makes it sound like a selfless task, but it wasn't. I got as much as I gave, and much more. The ordinary pleasures of raising children are not often talked about, because they are unspectacular and leave no lasting trace, but they sustained me for years as our boys grew and flourished, and they continue to sustain me now. I can't help but take pleasure in the fact that my children are thriving as I decline. It seems only fitting, a sure sign that my job in the world is done. It's like the day Dan, then in the fourth grade, turned to me twenty yards from the school gate and said, "You can go now, Mum." I knew then that the days of our companionable walks were over, and that as time went by there would be further signs of my superfluity, just as poignant and necessary as this one.

No, I am not unhappy or depressed, but I am occasionally angry. Why me? Why now? Dumb questions, but that doesn't stop me from asking them. I was supposed to defy the statistics and beat this disease through sheer willpower. I was supposed to have an extra decade in which to write my best work. I was robbed!

Crazy stuff. As if any of us are in control of anything. Far better for me to accept that I am powerless over my fate, and that for once in my life I am free of the tyranny of choice. That way, I waste a lot less time feeling singled out or cheated.

As I told the young psychologist, I rely on friends to divert me from dark thoughts. I don't have a lot of friends, but the ones I do have are so good to me, so tender and solicitous, it would seem ungrateful to subside into unhappiness or depression. And then there's Shin, without whom I'd be lost. He's been so good-humored and loving; I owe him no less than my sanity. If I'm ever depressed or unhappy, I hide the fact from him as best I can. It's the least I can do.

No, I'm not likely to take more risks in life, now that I know I'm dying. I'm not about to tackle skydiving or paragliding. I've always been physically cautious, preternaturally aware of all the things that can go wrong when one is undertaking a dangerous activity. Paradoxically, it was Dad, a peripatetic airline pilot, who taught me to be careful. I don't think he was temperamentally suited to flying; the risks played unhealthily on his mind and made him fearful, tetchy, depressed. At the same time, he was addicted to the thrill of flying and couldn't give it up.

His ambivalence about danger confused me while I was growing up. He never discouraged me from taking up risky activities; instead, he filled me with fear about the possible consequences, with the result that I was never any good at them. When he taught me to drive, he made sure to emphasize the fallibility of the machine, something he would have learned during the war, at flying school, where mistakes could be fatal. He liked to open the bonnet of the car before we set off, and run through a sort of flight check with me to make sure everything was hooked up to everything else. These were good lessons and they've served me well, but I wonder if a certain enthusiasm for risk drained out of me as a result of his teaching methods, and whether that wasn't his intent. It strikes me that I might have turned out differently if he'd taken me for a spin one day in one of the Tiger Moths he loved so much, shown me what had turned him on to flying in the first place, emphasized the mad joy rather than the danger.

The irony is that, despite my never having tempted death the way daredevils do, I'm dying anyway. Perhaps it is a mistake to be so cautious. I sometimes think this is the true reason for my reluctance to take my own life. It is because suicide is so dangerous.

I shall miss you so much when I'm dead: Harold Pinter, dying of cancer, speaking of his wife. I know exactly what he means.

The short answer to the question of what I'll miss the most is Shin, my husband of thirty-one years, and the faces of my children.

The long answer is the world and everything in it: wind, sun, rain, snow, and all the rest.

And I will miss being around to see what happens next, how things turn out, whether my children's lives will prove as lucky as my own.

But I will not miss dying. It is by far the hardest thing I have ever done, and I will be glad when it's over.

*This text was drawn from "Dying: A Memoir," by Cory Taylor, which is out August 1st from Tin House Books.*

*Cory Taylor was the award-winning author of "Me and Mr. Booker," "My Beautiful Enemy," and "Dying: A Memoir." She died on July 5, 2016. [Read more »](#)*

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