

Renaissance, Fair

November 9th is the day of my death. It used to consume me and consciously, unconsciously, I would find myself in cryptic, unsavory places every year on this date. However, as the destination of my 20s turned into the journey of my 30s, and I better understand the use of perception, the idea of what November 9th represents has taken a hold on every day. Momentous living today is far more appropriate than holding a line for dying any other day, yesterday or tomorrow. However, this does not change the fact that I know I am going to die on November 9th.

It was during the final two weeks of my senior year at university. The atmosphere was seeping with congratulatory messaging and full of frivolity. A university of immense pride, two hundred fifty two years of academics and tradition found major restitution through garish campus-wide celebrations, hosted by alumni for the graduating class. Still, in this time of accomplishment, I found myself in the druthers of exhaustion, teetering on depression.

Trapped in the cycles of reflection, I rummaged through my belongings and revisited the emotional landscape of four intense years. Doing my best to generate positive memories rather than regrets and “what ifs”, I fell back into the spring of my sophomore year. Wrapped within the confusion of panicked roommates, the clamoring of emergency vehicles, the consciousness of passing out, down a flight of stairs, all the result of a ruptured ulcer. The culprit had been food poisoning, but my week in the ICU was still tough to swallow.

Living within the immortality of youth, the whole event seemed worth a chuckle two years later. I remembered the doctor had said I was lucky. “I’ve never seen so much blood loss,” he said, 48% of my supply, “and in such a short period of time,” he continued, in less than 12 hours.

Presently, this memory rearranged the truth of my past, and like a newfound secret, I whispered, “I almost died my sophomore year in college.” The darkness of the statement matched my disposition of uncertainty. I said it again. “I almost died my sophomore year.” Standing in realization, I almost started laughing. “I almost died my sophomore year in college.”

The gravity of the situation normalized into the moment. I stood centered in the truth and a small orb of light flew from behind me, circled once and exited towards the window. Chasing its tail, I opened the window and gazed down onto the scene of the light sweeping into a cast-iron lamppost, standing at the cross of two pathways below. This lamppost, antiquated though functional, turned on, soft, dim, buzzing, and vibrant, without a sound. I paused. I said, “Hello?” The light fluttered, ever so slightly, and then turned on, fully.

“Did you just turn on when I said hello?” The lamppost went out and then turned back on.

“No way. Did you just turn off and then on to my words?” Off. Wait. On. It wasn’t a flicker. It was far more deliberate.

“So, yes,” I asked, more as a statement, “by turning off and then on you mean yes?” Off. Wait. On. Yes. So it meant yes. I sat in wait for five seconds, or more. The light did too.

“Oh, you’re just warming up, aren’t you?”

The light went off and then turned back on.

“Wait, I’ll be right down.” But before turning from the window, I watched.

The lamppost turned off and then on, returning to a middle haze, silently buzzing, sustained in vibration.

Sweeping down the stairs from the fourth floor, the edge of each step rounded smooth from a century of residents, I busted into the courtyard of Pyne Hall. Passing south through the

breezeway, over the lawn behind my dorm, I directed to the lamppost. I was practically breathless, if almost speechless; it was buzzing, half dimmed. So was I. I could hear it.

“Wow.” I said.

The lamp turned on, fully, then off, completely, and then on again.

“Wow. Hello. Who are you?” The light turned off and then came back on, half dimmed.

“Hmmm...” Murmurs of mind brought forth stuttering words. I hadn't played 20 questions for many years.

The lamp stayed dim, but did not turn off.

“I don't know what that means?” I said, I asked.

The lamp turned off and then came back on, halfway.

“I don't know?” I asked.

It turned off and then on, fully. Half-dimmed meant “I don't know.”

The conversation moved forward, more dumbfounded than capable. My questions were no more detailed than if asked by a group of teenage girls on a oujia board.

“Am I going to die?” I asked.

Yes, it answered.

“Am I already dead?”

The light turned off. No.

I waited. “Really?”

The light turned on and the complications of double negatives, double speak and semantics started whirring my mind.

“So, am I going to be okay after graduation?” I asked.

The light turned dark and turned on, fully.

I could have continued, but I was done. Besides, it might have looked like I was serenading the lamppost. And no, the old joke about the drunk and the lamppost does not apply to this evening. I was not drunk. I had not been drinking, nor had I made any sort of mental alteration that night.

The evening closed and I quickly forgot the confirmations of the lamppost. Three days later, returning early from the senior dance, I was more depressed than ever. I didn't want to stay on the east coast and hadn't yet found a job in California. My prospects felt dim, if largely undetermined, and the fear of the unfamiliar was encroaching.

With childish ideations of suicide, I looked up from the path and saw the lamppost standing thirty feet before me. It was not yet dark and the scene was busy. A person, shadowed, passed directly to my right. A young woman with a purse crossed south from the dorm. A bicyclist, somehow involved with the color red, rolled towards me. The lamppost stayed off in each of those passings, until I arrived. Standing directly underneath, I looked up and said "Hello." My secret Magic-8 ball turned on in response. I immediately noticed four numbers, stickers actually, placed high up on the pole. 1109. One-one-zero-nine. Eleven-zero-nine, I whispered.

"Am I going to die on November 9th?" I asked.

The lamp turned off and then on.

"I'm going to die on November 9th?" I repeated.

It turned off and then on.

I found the resolution I needed at the time. I graduated June 2, 1998.

I honestly don't specifically remember my first November 9th five months later. I likely got really drunk, in preparation for death, buying rounds and waning far too romantically for my own good. I woke up the next morning, alive, and only slightly worse for the wear.

I quickly concluded that while I didn't have much understanding of life at the age of 22, it would serve little purpose to be overly indebted to my death. Moreover, I concluded that since I didn't know what year I was supposed to die, I could still hold on to the notion of free will. Yet, with the right set of circumstances, obsessing on the date could impel me to jump in front of a bus November 9th, 1999. Why define my identity exclusively by a number that only served to catalog the lamppost's identity to the campus supervisor?

I needed more information and decided to return for my 1-year reunion. Now, this may seem excessive, as most colleges don't celebrate reunions much beyond the 25th year. However, the trek to reunions to my alma mater is a return to a very magical place, of entitlement and esteem, of excess and grandiosity. Each year, the alumni, the old guard, the orange and the black, return to Old Nassau in droves numbering up to 25,000 people. With graduating classes not much larger than 1,200 students, this is not an insignificant number. And while I was excited to relive the days of memories past, the truth of my visit was to end the mythology of my death.

I arrived and partied with friends, reminisced amongst the shadows of a beautiful time and paraded through a beautiful place. Bumbling through my old behaviors, I almost forgot to complete my experiment. Sunday morning, waking amidst the dregs of a bonfire at my old club, I crept across the quieted campus. I greeted my lamppost behind Pyne Hall with a simple grasp of my right hand. I didn't look up. It didn't turn on.

West, about 25 feet in front of me, there was an identical lamppost. My hypothesis said that I would find the number one-one-zero-eight, or perhaps one-one-one-zero, in sequence to

the lamppost from the previous year. Such a discovery would liberate me from my own Narcissistic Easter Celebration every November. I arrived at the pole and swept my gaze up towards the stickers. There were only three numbers, but they couldn't have been more significant. So perfect, so obvious, that my darkest fears hadn't even prepared for it. Four-two-nine. The number was 429. Nothing really, except for the fact that I was born on April 29th. April 29th is the day of my birth, and this is a fact that I cannot change.

Or not.