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This Is It

When you open your eyes again you watch him fingering the rosary beads, murmuring in Latin. You know what it means. It's the third time you've gained consciousness. Each one is more ominous than the previous. But this takes the cake. Three strikes and you're out. (Words escape you, so you fall back on clichés.) The first time the black nurse refused to answer a basic question: Am I going to die? The second time you can tell from the look in your mother's eyes you will never see her again. Hearing the last rites seals it: You won't be alive much longer. You're a dead man before you've had time to become a man. Sadness and remorse flood every strand of your being. You're awash with intense emotions and the intensity of the moment. This is it: The End.

And what a foolish way for it to happen, you think. It's a hollow, inconsequential death born out of a selfish, asinine life. If there is an "if," you know you'll do it differently. For a moment books surround your bullet-ridden body. The vision lasts only for a moment. It soon vanishes. Back to reality and the mess you're in, all because of how you lived. Or didn't live. Or didn't live a-live. Or something. No time to mince words. It doesn't matter anyway. It actually makes perfect sense. Such a stupid death should follow such a thoughtless life.

So you accept it. There's really nothing else to do. You're certainly not going anywhere. It is what it is. For some inexplicable reason, you're not afraid. You're not afraid to die; maybe you just don't want fear to be the final feeling, the last emotion or thought you'll ever experience or have. Maybe there's something better to go out with than dreading the

unknown. So you stick with the explicit tangibility of the moment, however searing it is. In fact, its strength is something undeniable, something to grasp.

Besides, there's no hiding from the stark truth of this particular moment; its clarity is practically blinding: This is the final moment. *The Moment*, with a capital "M" and a weighty stress on the "the." It's not "a" moment. There may never, ever, be another one you'll ever experience, ever again. Strangely, the laundry list of stupid thought and action has brought this most disarming moment together. But your (foolish) life doesn't flash before you. Possibly you don't want it to. If it did, you wouldn't be riveted inside the moment. Instead, the past actually melts away. And there's no horizon. There's no future either. It starts to feel palpable, as if this tiny moment has taken on a life of its own, outside of all the other moments, yet inside all of them at the same time. It begins to feel like an eternity, as if it might last forever. Something extraordinary is taking place. Heightened consciousness seems transformative. It's deliberate. You're not looking to get out of it, to escape this horrible final moment. You've got your head fully wrapped around it. At the same time, there's something inescapable taking place. Free will and inevitability joined together. This exact moment has specially arrived—as all of them do, you'll discover. For the present, it's right now. It's happening, pure and simple, this irresistible moment in time . . . as you're about to die. There's no getting around it. No getting around that fact and its place in the present.

And you don't want to get around it, or over it, or past it, because it could be lost. To lose the last moment you might ever have would be as wasteful as the life you've lived up to this point. You stay with it, grasp it for what it is, possibly your last experience. You might be dead after it—ever after. So you don't wish for some other moment to save you, or crave to be someone else, or desire to be somewhere else. If you did, the present moment would vanish into thin air. Besides, it's useless to think otherwise, to evade *this* moment with thoughts of the past or the future. There's no avoiding who you are at this present time. You can't dance around the fundamental reality that you're a fifteen-year-old kid on the verge of death after having been shot by a cop while trying to rob a pizza delivery driver. There it *is*. You're in a hospital so close to the end that you're receiving the final church sacrament. Nothing else matters. No other *it* exists. Nothing exists. And nothing will matter or exist ever again. You have no past. You have no future. You have only the moment. It's all right here before you. This. Is. It.

And that's when it hits you: The Moment. The absolute present. You

exist purely inside existence and living eagerly deep down inside of *the* moment like never before, as if it's your last, which it very well could be. That's why it feels the way it does, as you draw the entire world into it with you, becoming conscious of the forces at work. The mind is infused with total awareness of the purity and beauty of this exact moment. Nothing else. There is nothing else. No before, no after. Only now.

The here-and-now is the burning sun of enlightenment. Accepting it brings a groundswell of enigmatic energy and power. You feel more alive than you've ever felt in your life: here and now on the brink of death. And then you're free. You're free from a conceptual past and an illusory future. If you die now, you know that you've lived more extraordinarily inside this moment than all the others combined. It makes you aware that of all the billions of moments that took place in the past and of all of the billions of moments that will take place in the future, there never has been, nor will there ever be, a moment like this one.

When you wake the next day you realize it's true of all the moments, not just yours, but also only yours and yours alone, and everyone else's, alone, and theirs separately, all because of consciousness, in all its clarity. It's a marvelous paradox: Each of our lived moments is unique, except yours is more unique than theirs and theirs is more unique than yours.

Being shot was the worst thing that happened to you; it was the best thing that happened to you too. It couldn't be any other way. The experience can't be divided into more or less acceptable parts, no more than any moment can be divided into anything other than what is being completely offered. You spend the rest of your life attentively enfolding the fineness of each and every moment to the best of your ability. It's perfect and complete as it is. In doing so, it slowly dawns on you that by being present in the present the past will be marked by the wonder of each brilliantly lived moment and the future will arrive astoundingly as each brilliantly lived moment moves toward it.

At the finest point of death you learned life must be lived expansively at each tiny trace.

What began as a wrong ends up as a rite of passage.

Sometimes the best education begins closest to The End.