

1: Fireflies

This was not the day I had planned for myself. All of the wreckage around me was a stark contrast to how I thought today would start.

I had been waiting at the bus park for almost 30 minutes. In that time my mind had wandered, but it only ever returned to one thought: her. My eyes drifted over the dark tar, tattooed with tire marks and a few dusty footprints. What wasn't I doing right? Where could it all have gone wrong? I kept shifting restlessly on the bench.

Beside me, a boy was blasting music out of his mini black speakers. He could not have been more than 18 or 19, and I found the music atrocious, to say the least. But in time I too was bobbing my head. I needed every distraction I could get.

When the bus arrived, everyone stood up to board. I was still lost thinking about her and stayed seated too long. When I finally peeled myself off the wooden bench, the bus was already crowded. Speaker Boy and I were left, and only the front seat was open. I glanced over at him, our eyes communicating silently. We both needed to get to our destination and, well, we had started to bond over the music, so we were going to share that seat.

The rumble of the bus beneath me filled me with excitement. I had made up my mind and knew exactly what I was going to do: I was going leave her behind and make things right with Dani. It was definitely the right choice, and yet I could not stop thinking about her.

I was in a state of extreme dissonance. I felt deep down that she was my soulmate, practically knew it, but every second I spent with her seemed to drive her further away. Getting on this bus, going to see Dani, was an attempt to get her off my mind but ironically, all it did was help her further fill it.

As I drifted further into my thoughts, I heard the bus wheels start to screech. I snapped out of my reverie and realized that the driver was struggling. The brakes had failed and he couldn't maintain his grip on the steering. People around me began to shout and cry, fear plastered across everyone's faces.

In between holding on to his speaker and trying to keep his seat, the boy with me was flung against the windshield. Other passengers began to lose their seats to the momentum of the bus. With the chaos inside the bus increasing, the driver glanced at me for a heartbeat and I could see the fear in his eyes. He did not want to die. No one ever does.

We crashed into a street light, and while that wasn't nearly enough to stop a bus this size, it did slow us down a bit. The force knocked out the driver and I jumped forward, struggling to straighten the wheel as the pandemonium worsened. We were heading straight for a freight truck and I knew there was no way we would survive the collision. I swerved. Hard.

"Help me, please, God, I don't want to die," Speaker Boy screamed, and I stretched out a hand to try and get him upright. He regained balance and in a moment of clarity, pulled on the hand brake, but it was too late.

The bus tipped over, sliding with a garish screech of metal on asphalt. It had stopped sliding when it crashed into the ground floor of a casino, sending debris everywhere and crushing some of the passengers, including me.

Like I said, definitely not the day I had planned for myself.

When I had woken up this morning, I felt like it was going to be a good day. If nothing

else, the gentle breeze sweeping into my room and teasing my hair felt like the world saying “Hi.” I had learned not to ask too much from life, and to be content with all I had, so the little things felt like bliss— like I was an important part of the world and it was excited to see me. I hadn’t guessed I was going to die today. Again.

You see, when you’ve died as many times as I have, you get used to it. It no longer fills you with the pain and distress it once did. In a sense, you begin to enjoy the opportunity to try it all again. My soul has been around for a long time, and I’ve lived through, well, pretty much everything. I’ve been rich, I’ve been poor. I’ve been a loner, and I’ve been popular. None of those details really matter; it all ends the same way.

One second you are thinking about your life, the next you’re sliding across the street into a casino and a metal pole impales your chest and that’s it. Gory, I know, but that’s just it. Life ends.

A part of the casino’s top floor fell in and crushed the spot where my body lay, but by then, my soul was watching it all like a movie.

As I looked around to get a sense of what was happening, I noticed that Speaker Boy was here with me too. On the “other side”. He was way more disoriented than I was and I remembered how that felt. That moment when your soul leaves its body for the first time and you have no clue what’s happening.

I watched him as he struggled to make sense of it all and I knew I would help him understand this. I had to.

When we think about dying, we imagine an end. A conclusion. Some of us imagine the curtains falling on what we hope was a good show and the audience, standing up to bow as we fade into darkness. For others, it’s complete silence. The kind after a job well done, peaceful and sated. Death is many things to many people, but if there’s one thing I have learned in my few dozen lifetimes, it’s that death is not the end. Not by a long shot.

As I looked at my crushed body, the bus flipped on its side and all the chaos around me, I couldn’t help but reminisce on what my life had been. I guess that’s the one part about dying that everyone gets right. You do think about your life, or in my case, lives. It all comes rushing in and through it all, the one constant thing, is her.

All the memories from all of your past lives come back in full detail once you die. I was flooded with scenes spanning centuries, and I needed time to reorient myself. Once I did, I realized a few things.

First off, no one else had died yet. The two of us were the only ones on the other side of this chaos and Speaker Boy was staring at his body, trying to understand. I saw the driver across the street with half of his body covered in darkening bruises. Hurt, but alive. Everyone else was escaping through the back of the bus, scrambling for safety.

I had taken the day off work today, I just thought it was too beautiful of a day. My job was nothing important. I worked in the retail world, a big box store. I knew they wouldn’t miss me. I had just needed time to clear my head, and find her. My soulmate worked there too, and I could just see it in her eyes that I irked her. Our souls were drawn together, like they had been for so many lifetimes, but for some reason her soul’s memories made her hate me. We became this tide, slowly oscillating between the beach and the ocean’s depths, without any stability. There hadn’t been stability for a long, long while.

We found each other centuries ago, and loved each other life after life. Do you know what that’s like? To meet a person and realize that they are the one? That you have always loved them and you always will, come hell or high water? Well I do. Or, I did.

Now it was all different.

Everyone was out of the bus now and they huddled around someone, doing their best to save a life. I couldn't see who it was and at that moment, I didn't really care. I returned my attention to Speaker Boy.

"Hi," I said.

Still reeling from the shock, all he could do was stare at me, glowing the same as him, with questioning eyes. I knew the question he was about to ask, but I let him get there in his own time. There was no particular rush.

"Am I dead?" His voice was shaky, the phrase more a statement than a question. He knew the answer as well as I did.

"Yes." There was no point in sugar-coating it. That life was over.

"So, where am I?" A natural follow-up question. Where to begin? I decided to fill in as much as I could.

"Now, I don't know it all, but here's what I do know: what happens after death is nothing like we often imagine. Usually we imagine that we will immediately face judgment, and either suffer eternal bliss or eternal doom. Truth is, when you die, the universe decides if you're ready to move on, or if you need to go back and try it all again. I've done this so many times, it just feels natural at this point."

I didn't think I was doing this enough justice, but I continued nonetheless.

"No matter what is going to happen, whether you move on or try again, your soul lingers for a while, usually until your body is attended to. I say usually because sometimes, it's not possible. I have a nasty experience with the ocean that I would rather not talk about, but I'm sure you get the gist.

"So it's the experience of dying that matters the most. That, and the aftermath. How you die is such an important detail for your soul, it essentially shapes your fears and desires for a considerable time. As your soul rises out of your body, it takes in all that you see. The grief, the panic, the screams, the silence, it's all an important learning experience for your soul. "

He was staring at me intently now, hanging off my every word. His face no longer bore the grimace it once did, and I could see the confusion in his eyes transitioning to calm.

I continued.

"When you die, there are a lot of soft, glowing lights that start to form from your body. That is why we are glowing right now. It's like a thousand fireflies all over you, and they pull your essence from your body. You feel weightless, untethered in space, and the world begins to grow quieter. In these moments, you are no longer a participant, just an observer."

I pointed at the accident scene that had just claimed our lives.

"You can see, and even have a heightened sense of, all that's going on. Your mind becomes freer, no longer shackled by the weight of a physical body, and a lot begins to make sense. Once the aftermath is over, one of two things happens: You either move on, or you go back to start your journey all over again. I've gone back so many times that I've lost count. And before you ask, I honestly have no idea what waits for us beyond. My guess is Heaven. I don't know but God, I hope it's Heaven. I've seen people make it, and it sure does look glorious.

"Sometimes you die alone. Other times, like this, you have someone else with you—and I imagine there would be many more of us if you hadn't pulled on that brake when

you did." I smiled at him.

He didn't smile back, but his face settled into a genial expression, and I realized just how young he truly was. He had never gone through this before, and I was glad I was there for him. It took me a few deaths before I finally had someone who could explain it all to me, and the not knowing was hell.

I decided to continue explaining.

"The souls that move on experience the aftermath just like everyone else, but then slowly drift upwards until they disappear into the sky. From my usual point of view, all you can see is those thousand fireflies dancing away. Those of us that need to go back again get a feeling inside that's kind of like butterflies in your tummy, but all over your whole body, and then you start to fade away." I paused. "I like to wiggle my fingers in front of me as I go, and watch as I disappear. Seems like the right thing to do."

He chuckled that time and it made me happy, but my face got serious as I continued.

"Dying is an unfortunate truth we all have to face. Sometimes we're young and full of life, sometimes we're old and wise, but no matter what, we need to learn from it. In truth, it's easier said than done. The first few times, I really struggled with coming to terms with all of it, and accepting this as, well, the reality of life. But I guess that's the real magic of time— we heal and we learn."

I was about to go on when I was interrupted by a scream.

"She's losing a lot of blood! Apply pressure on that wound, and someone call 911 for God's sake!"

The lady was screaming at no one in particular. I sort of felt bad for her.

She seemed to be the only person with a real sense of what was happening. Everyone else was still too shocked to do more than stumble around and try to process what had happened.

They were still huddled over what I now realized was a lady — the person who screamed said *she* is losing a lot of blood. Try as I might, I couldn't see who it was. At first I didn't care, but then a thought came into my mind: will I need to explain this whole story again?

They were all out of the bus, and they realized that the two of us in front hadn't made it out. Someone tried to rush over, but the building collapsed further. It was obvious that there was no saving us, so they gave in. A good thing, too: now they could focus on saving the woman.

I wanted this person to survive, to live a full life and find what happiness she could before she became like me and Speaker Boy. I hated seeing lives ended so short — just like many of mine had been.

"What is the point of all this?" Speaker Boy's voice interrupted my thoughts as he moved on to bigger questions. "Why are we here?"

"Love," I stated without hesitation.

I didn't doubt the veracity of this. I felt it deep in my being, supported by lifetimes of experience. However, he had no idea what I really meant, so I continued explaining.

"As souls move on, new souls need to be made. The creation of a soul is such a beautiful thing. Too beautiful to stare at. The light we often say is at the end of the tunnel is also at the beginning of it. Much brighter, like a million diamonds dancing, turning into a sort of sun right before your eyes. When it's time for the soul to start its journey, it slowly separates into two parts. Each half of the soul is placed into two separate beings, and they are sent down to learn, to grow, to experience, to mature.

These two souls are magnetized, always pulling toward each other. They will always find each other."

"Ew, that's so gross," he wrinkled his lip in disgust and then laughed.

I laughed as well. It did seem a little ridiculous to me at first, that love was the big question mark at the end of existence. But what could be better than love? In my lifetimes I had seen war and pain, strife and evil — so much evil. When it was all said and done, the only thing that really made sense was love.

"Love is all that really matters," I reiterated. "You'll see."

That's when I realized, I didn't know what would happen to him. Whether he'd do it all again or just move on. I didn't want to think about it too much, about being left alone, so I just kept talking.

"The problem, though, is that my soulmate hates me. I don't know why, or if I did something, but at some point she stopped reaching for me; every time we met, it became a confluence of mixed emotions. I'm selfishly glad she's never moved on, and to be honest, I'm not sure if she even can without me. But I still don't know what to do to get her back, because I don't know how I lost her in the first place."

I realized I was rambling, delving more into my personal feelings than the facts in front of us. I hadn't even properly introduced myself. I stepped closer to him.

"My name is Michael. That's not the name I was called before I died, but it is my soul's name. When you're born the name can change. I've figured out over the years that it always starts with the same letter. So I've been Matt, Mark, Mickey, Magnus, Martin, Maxwell. Different names, same results. I die. Oddly enough, usually younger than I should. Then I come back to do it all over again. To be fair, it seems to be my own actions that end up killing me. For some reason I keep on trying to be a hero, keep trying to save the day. It doesn't always end well for me, but it's what I do."

I was rambling again. He paused for a second to think, and then said, "Aidan."

"It's nice to meet you, Aidan."

"I know I don't have a say, but I don't know what I'd prefer," he took a breath. "I don't know if I want to do this all again or just find out what's next."

His words made me think about those I'd be leaving behind. The little niche of a life I had made for myself, and all that I had achieved. Small as it may have been, I was content. Now, it's definitely harder on those that we leave behind. To them it feels so final, because they don't know that it's not, not yet. But still, it hurts me to leave it all behind. Again.

Trying to distract myself from my thoughts, I kept talking to Aidan.

"Your soul has a memory, and everything you experience in your lives will define your soul. These soul memories are not remembered by your earthly body, but they are those nagging feelings you get when you feel something's off, your reflexes and proclivities. They define the kind of things you hate and what you love. If you're afraid of something, there's a good chance it's because of something that happened to you before.

"You may not remember falling out of a hot air balloon a few lives ago, but your soul does, and that's why you're afraid of heights. I couldn't swim in the ocean for 200 years, and no, I still don't want to talk about it. Your soul remembers your deaths, remembers your births, remembers your experiences, and remembers how much you loved and how much you hated. Every single thing you go through is stored in the very fabric of your soul.

"Your soul's memories change you. Life after life, in different ages and times you are

gradually transformed into the best version of yourself. Good, kind, full of the light of those thousand fireflies.

“People that commit atrocities are usually new souls. They’ve never experienced what it’s like to be the victim, to see the aftermath of such violence and have it stain your soul for an entire lifetime. And the universe doesn’t forget. Any of those that took their own life never do it again. It’s quite a horrific experience and it rattles your soul to its core. Can you imagine staring at yourself after doing something like that? Or watching your family as they find you?”

He seemed disturbed. I tried to reassure him.

"Most souls don't linger around as long as I have. After all these years, most souls have learned and experienced all they needed. They have also found their soulmates, and are ready to be rejoined. They are off spending eternity together in the great beyond... and

I'm stuck here trying to figure out what went wrong. We had so many good lifetimes together, what could I have done? "

I realized I had started rambling again. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to listen to my life’s story.”

“No, it’s ok.” He smiled at me. “It’s not like I have anything better to do. Tell me more.”

I took a deep breath. “Ok, here goes...

“All my lives I have searched for my soulmate, and in every life she eludes me. I need to find out why.”