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Why God Died

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Why God Died

James Murphy

As much as he had tried to hide it, Jacob was beyond nervous. He'd sat through his wife's labor for nearly ten hours at this point, and it had started to bother him how calm she was. As an engineer for NASA, Jacob hated sitting still; the six coffees didn't help and his chronic leg bouncing was starting to annoy both the doctor and his wife, Laura.

Eventually, he cracked. "Just get out of there already!" he said, spilling the coffee on himself as he stood up.

The doctor looked up at him confused, but Laura looked at him as one would to a puppy begging for food.

She reached out and gently touched his arm. "Honey, please."

"Sorry." He scratched his head nervously. "Yeah, I'll go clean up."

He picked up the coffee cup and nearly tripped on his feet on the way out the door. Laura giggled as he left. That was his charm—one of the smartest people in the world but with the emotional intelligence of a ten-year-old—and she loved every bit of it.

Jacob splashed his face with water. *Alright, I'm not doing a very good job hiding it*, he admitted to himself. He took a paper towel from the dispenser and dabbed at his shirt. Even after nearly eight years with Laura, he still bumbled and fumbled around in her presence. Just the thought of her transformed his usual over-intelligent jargon to something that closely resembled the sounds a newborn makes.

They were high school sweethearts. She was a volleyball player and he got straight A's. She was a year younger than him; he'd noticed her in one of his electives and was consumed by her since. She was lean and blonde; to him, she was the personification of perfection. It took two years for him to finally ask her out and when he did, he was shaking and sweating so much that he contemplated apologizing and running away. He'd paused halfway through to formulate his words and catch his breath and he thought she'd laugh and walk away, but she didn't. Instead, she smiled. "Go on," she'd said to him gently. "Spit it out!"

She'd seen something in him that her friends couldn't. A sort of genuine loyalty and care that she'd struggled to find thus far. She loved his nerdy obsessions and awkward mannerisms. So she decided to give him a chance. And never let go since.

After high school Jacob went to MIT for engineering, and the following year Laura got a scholarship from Fordham for volleyball. Laura had an unparalleled ability to remain calm and collected in any situation, and put it to good use helping Jacob get through the stresses of an MIT degree and the post-graduation PE exam—all to achieve Jacob’s dream of working for NASA. Even after he got the job, he remained grounded, knowing full well he never would have made it through MIT without Laura. He still referred to her as the best thing that ever happened to him.

Two years after Laura graduated from Fordham, Jacob presented a ring. She’d patiently waited through his nervous stuttering, and when he’d finished, her face looked like it was going to split. She jumped in his arms, screaming, “It’s about damn time!”

The bathroom door opened and slammed into the wall. A nurse poked her head inside. “Mr. Clarke? It’s time.”

Jacob dropped the paper towel—the coffee stain wasn’t coming out. “Oh my God!” he said and ran out, pushing past the nurse. On the way to the room he passed an older lady rubbing the creases out of a banner. It read: “John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” *Stupid*, he thought. *Why would he die for people he’s never met?*

Thirty minutes (and two more coffees) later, Jacob held his little girl in his hands. They’d agreed upon Grace as the name, and although Jacob, as a man of science, hadn’t been too fond of a religious name, he looked at her and couldn’t think of a single word in all the English language that better described her presence. A few tears escaped his eyes. They cascaded down and landed on Grace’s forehead. *This*, he thought, *is the best thing that ever happened to me.*

Grace let out a watery gargling noise. Laura giggled. “Hey honey,” she said, “she sounds like you!”

Jacob—now awake—wipes away the tears brought out from the ancient memory. His emotionless face is a bad indicator of the despair he feels realizing his reality isn’t just a bad dream. He is still in a one-man space shuttle traveling nearly 20,000 miles per hour out of Earth’s atmosphere, and it is still a one-way trip.

He looks at the clock mounted up above and exhales in relief. 8:43 pm—he still has time. In a perfect world he would have slept longer, but this is not a perfect world. Quite far from it. It’s because of this imperfect world that he finds himself so far from his usual life. From Laura and from Grace.

Jacob throws his fist to the steel wall. “Goddammit, they fucked up!” he yells.

Without gravity, his hand touches the wall as a feather would hit the ground. He tries a few more times, each punch weaker than the last. Eventually, he gives up, weakened from the exertion.

“Why...?” he whimpers, letting his head fall into his hands.

Jacob unfastens himself from his chair and begins to float upward. Grabbing a handle on the wall, Jacob pushes himself towards the medicine cabinet near the back of the ship and takes out a bottle of sleeping pills. He already took one earlier but his nerves wouldn't allow for a long sleep. Jacob takes another and returns to his chair. Strapped back in, he lies back and closes his eyes.

“Please, just let me dream,” he says, wondering who he's talking to.

“Planetary Mining,” the teacher said, obviously infatuated with the subject.

The class of fifth graders remained apathetic in their desks. Such an incredible breakthrough in science and resource accumulation clearly meant nothing to them.

The teacher continued, “A recent and controversial development—relatively speaking—is the process of literally cracking open a planet and removing the ruptured piece to extract minerals and other natural resources for our use.”

He turned around and drew a crude portrayal of the process on the board. “The creation of the A74 spaceship, also known as ‘Fissure’, made what was once thought as science fiction a reality.” He paused, disappointed in his student's reactions. “Can anyone tell me which planets we have mined so far?”

In the crowd of bored students, one hand shot up. The same hand that always did.

The teacher sighed. “Does anyone besides Jacob know?” Nobody spoke up. “Okay then, yes, Jacob,” he said.

Jacob perked up in his seat. “Mars, Ceres, Pluto, Mercury, and I believe Venus is next on the list.”

Unsurprised, the teacher nodded. “That's correct. Project Apology, the first crack, sent Fissure to Mars almost one hundred years ago. The resources acquired provided Earth with energy for nearly sixty years. With a surplus of resources, world governments decided there was no need to conserve. So global energy consumption skyrocketed and rapidly accelerated. We began to deplete our resources faster than ever, and as we started running low, we set out for more planets. Dwarf planets Ceres and Pluto came next, followed by a Mercury. And, as Jacob said, Venus is in the works now. Given the size of Venus compared to the two dwarf planets before,” he smiled, “she should last us awhile.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “our planet-cracking technology is far more advanced than our space travel technology, so Pluto is the furthest we can take Fissure into the void.”

Jacob raised his hand.

The teacher pointed. “Yes?”

Jacob cleared his throat. “What happens when we run out of planets to mine?”

“Well,” the teacher cracked another smile, “I suppose we’ll take a whack at Earth.”

At 10:00 pm, Jacob’s alarm goes off. He jolts awake, drowsy from the second sleeping pill and disappointed his dream was not of Grace or Laura. Jacob looks at the clock, and a pit forms in his stomach. Ten o’clock—he’s almost there. Jacob slaps himself lucid and takes out his wallet to pull out a photo of his family. A professionally done failure of a family portrait that became an inside joke between them all. As he stares at the photograph, he can’t help but smile. Grace was missing her two front teeth and decided to stick her tongue out between the space, he had blinked at the wrong time, and Laura was trying to push Grace’s tongue back in her mouth. The photographer nearly deleted the picture, but they wouldn’t let him. They loved it.

Jacob begins to laugh and a single tear drips down his face. As he laughs harder he begins to taste the saltiness of the tear. Jacob looks out the small circular window to his right and sees a shooting star. *If only*, he thinks. He slouches back in the chair and shuts his eyes, drifting into a memory.

“Look, Daddy, a shooting star!” Grace hopped up and down. “Make a wish! Make a wish!”

Jacob smiled. “Hmmm...I wish for—”

“No! You can’t tell me!” Grace said, her ears plugged with her fingers. “Then it won’t come twoo!” The missing two front teeth made it hard for her to say some words.

“Twoo,” she repeated, trying to say the word right. “Twoo, twoo, twoo!” Grace crossed her arms and pouted. “I wish I wouldn’t sound like this.”

“Oh no!” Jacob ran up to her and threw her over his shoulders. “You can’t say your wish! Now you’re gonna have a lisp for the rest of your life!”

“No!” she yelled, hitting Jacob’s shoulders.

He ran around laughing as he joked with her. “How are you ever gonna get a boyfriend with a lisp like that?”

“Ew!” she said. “Boys are icky!”

Jacob lifted her off his shoulders and held her in front of him. He smiled. “Good answer. Boys are bad, stay away from them.”

The screen door opened and Laura walked out holding a tray of marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate. “No fighting you two! This is a celebration!”

Jacob put Grace down in a chair in front of the fire and grabbed the tray from Laura. They kissed.

“Yuck!” Grace cried.

“Oh hush, you,” she said to Grace. “I haven’t seen him all week, give me a break.”

Grace covered her eyes.

“What are we celebrating?” Grace asked when her parents sat down.

“Well,” Laura looked impressively at Jacob, “your father’s invention got approved by NASA today.”

“What did you invent?” Grace said with a mouth full of marshmallow.

Jacob was slightly embarrassed and played it down. “I didn’t really invent it, I just altered it a bit so we could use it.”

Grace was getting impatient. “What is it?”

“Basically, it’s a sort-of miniature black hole that we can use to clean up the debris left from the planetary mining operations. We’ve been getting into a bit of pollution trouble for leaving the leftover planet materials floating around.” Jacob sat up more confidently in his chair, obviously very proud. “All we have to do is use the energy expended from...say a particle accelerator—or even a space shuttle exiting the thermosphere—to self-destruct an artificial ‘star’ we’ve created. It’s safe, too! The mini black hole collapses on itself within seconds due to Hawking radiation.”

He paused, waiting for a reaction from his family.

Grace squinted her eyes. “...What?”

Laura, however, was used to this. “In English please, honey.”

“Right.” He skewered a marshmallow and stuck it in the fire. “So we would send an unmanned space shuttle up to a debris field, self-destruct the star, the black hole would suck everything into it, and, in about three seconds, it’d be gone.”

He pulled the marshmallow out and stuck it between two graham crackers. “Well, that’s the theory, anyway; we’re still a few years from actually completing it. As of right now we can only destroy the star manually—so if we were to do that now it’d mean someone would be sucked in with it, which isn’t worth it.”

Grace stayed silent, so Laura spoke up. “I’m so glad you’re finally

getting recognition for your work.” She nudged Grace.

“Yeah that’s cool.” Grace said. “I still don’t really get it, though.” She perked up. “But, Daddy, when are we gonna finish the tree house?”

Jacob laughed. “Soon, sweetie, I promise.”

The tears dry up and Jacob opens his eyes. After wiping the crust off he peers out the window and sees what he’s been traveling towards: the remains of the sixth planetary mining operation. He leans forward and taps a few buttons on the controls. Outside, the ship slows down to a stop and latches onto the falling rock. A few seconds go by and the ship is yanked around, pulled down with the falling rock.

Jacob unfastens himself from the chair, floats over towards the metallic locker, and puts on the spacesuit inside. He looks out the window. This time he has a full view of Earth and the nearly seven thousand-mile hole in the side of her.

“Son of a bitch,” he mutters monotonically. “They’re so stupid.

The control room was in absolute silence.

“Holy shit,” someone said.

Planetary mining operation 6 was the controversial decision to crack open Earth for its resources. The deserted Africa and war-torn parts of the Middle East were routinely removed and taken to space to begin mining. Everything was in order up until a few moments ago, when the control room got word that Fissure had lost hold of the piece of earth, sending an estimated two-hundred and fifty trillion metric tons of rock hurling toward Earth, accelerating with every second.

It was too big to nuke, too heavy for a kinetic interceptor, and there wasn’t enough time to melt it. Jacob knew there was only one option, and so did everyone else. The entire room stared at him.

“Jacob...” the director said, unable to get the words out.

“I know...” he managed to mutter back.

Reality hadn’t quite set in; he was still in a state of shock. Even on the phone with Laura and Grace before he left, he was hardly able to get out what he wanted to say. He barely comprehended what he’d agreed to do.

“Help me,” he kept repeating to Laura, whispering and wheezing the words so painfully she’d have nightmares about it forever. Mortified and speechless, one thing stuck in her mind like a throbbing headache. “John 3:16,” she murmured incessantly. It was the gospel reading she had heard a week earlier with Grace. Jacob was an atheist and knew nothing of the verse, but even with everything going on, it sounded somewhat familiar to him.

Grace grabbed the phone from her mom. Laura was too weak to fight back and collapsed to the ground in tears.

“What do you mean you’re not coming back? Daddy, you have to come back! Work gets out at six, I order you to be home by six-thirty.”

“Grace, I—” he began to say, but she cut him off.

“You’re always talking about how much work you have! What about that black hole thing? You still have to finish it!”

Jacob’s knees wobbled; he reached out and grabbed the wall to keep himself from collapsing.

“And we still have to finish our tree house! You promised we’d finish it—you promised!” She was crying now. “You can’t die yet, I’m too young to not have a daddy. We don’t have to finish the tree house, just please come home, Mommy’s crying on the floor.”

Jacob wanted to appear as strong as possible to Grace, but knew he didn’t have it in him. He took a deep breath and told Grace that he loved her and Mommy. As soon as he hung up, he burst into tears.

Luckily, there was already a one-man ship prepared to travel to Fisure for general maintenance purposes. With a slight tweak of the coordinates, Jacob was gone within the hour. Right before he took off, he searched the Bible verse Laura had given him before: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” Still in disbelief, he thought nothing of it.

After initial launch Jacob left the chair and grabbed a sleeping pill—he was going to need it. He popped one into his mouth and strapped himself back down to the chair, desperately trying to dream of a better day than this.

The time has come, and all Jacob has to do is exit the spaceship and detonate the star. Within a second, he, along with the spaceship and the entire chunk of Earth, would be sucked into the black hole. A second after that, the black hole would be gone. Earth would live to see another day, as would its billions of habitants.

Jacob looks at the picture of Grace and Laura again and smiles. “Love,” he says.

He opens a communications link between him and NASA and begins to type.

‘I’ve arrived at the destination and will be removing it in a few minutes.’

He pauses. That isn’t what he wants to say.

‘I’ve never been very good at expressing my feelings and I don’t have much time, but there’s something I need to say. Laura and Grace, I love you more than you could possibly know. Everything I do, I do for

you two. But that's not all. As I sat in this spaceship traveling thousands of miles to my death, I cursed humans. The thought of never seeing my family again, of never seeing my daughter graduate college, get married, or even have children of her own made me sick. But it made me think that I wouldn't be the only one. We're an imperfect people—we make mistakes—but we learn from them.'

Jacob, not knowing what else to say, takes a deep breath and finishes.

'And as I sit here now, seconds away from dying, I've come to an understanding.'

Closing his eyes, Jacob thinks about what his wife told him over the phone.

'I think I now understand why God died. It was Love.'

Satisfied, Jacob sends the message. Seemingly at peace, he floats over to the hatch. After taking one last look at Earth he shuts his eyes and opens the hatch.