

# Being Dead

## **What is Life without a Heartbeat?**

The doctor did his damndest to retain his bedside manner, but utterly failed to hide his curiosity. He was compelled to poke and prod his patient and the investigation made it clear to Frank that something serious was wrong; though he already secretly knew it, or he wouldn't be there at all. The condition the doctor had discovered was absolutely unusual, if not miraculous! It wasn't even hard to detect, with the exception that he must be looking at the most obvious false positive in medical history. And the doctor's morbid sense of discovery—joy, even—at the revelation, was not something his face could cover. The good doctor was running out of options to use to assess his patient, this... man?... sitting in front of him.

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the

examination table, "the condition" had been obvious for a couple of weeks prior. Though he would never have thought to check his own pulse, everyone around him had already signaled the diagnosis. Frank was nowhere near as shocked as the doctor at the news. Because he was so cold, she would not sleep next to him; not cuddle him or cling to him the way she used to. She was much younger and in his heart, he knew, she would find a taste for younger men. He had always known that. But her distance of late did not feel like any kind of betrayal; it felt like fear. And she was not the only living person to ostracize him.

There was a way that everyone in a crowd stood apart from him. There was a way that people pardoned his existence. There was the way he felt—or rather, didn't feel—wanted no part in things like celebration or contentment. Truth be told, he never wanted a part in those things. Only a week ago, he withdrew money from an ATM just to burn it—a cash stack thick in cold hands—but it meant nothing to him, the way he was feeling. He had hoped that just squeezing the bills would have had a different effect. He was disappointed in even that. He didn't see the point in burning

it at all, once the stack of dollars was just paper in his hand—and flimsy. He left all the cash sitting on the counter of the ATM; right in the middle of the damn booth. Once, he wouldn't have leant another man a dollar. But now, let anyone have it but him; currency was a horrible reminder of exchange when there was no one left to bribe. No one wanted anything to do with him.

Dr. Bastide sat across from Frank on the doctor stool on wheels, on the cold tile floor, a thousand questions mounting. Frank sat on the cold bed in only his slacks and waited to hear about heart attacks and strokes and bad health and bad diet and a thousand bad decisions. "You're dead, Frank. I have tried and cannot think of another way to put it. You're dead." Ward stared at the man making his diagnosis and failed to wonder at all about his own condition. Wonderment was not prerequisite when being dead. Frank thought, so what, I'm dead.

"You're dead, Frank. I have  
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dead."

He  
wasn't going  
to spend  
money to eat

—he'd not eaten in days and felt no compulsion to. There was nothing to buy anymore. He was dead. Since he had begun to suspect his condition,

he'd withdrawn money, prepared to spend it on so much meaningless garbage—it made sense to spend it, even burn it. Burning all the money made the most sense. At first there was a fever; a frenzied sense that "everything must go!" But the reverie of his being dead decidedly rested on the stupid notion of a limited lifetime that was already expired. Done. Then, the tiredness came over him; a rolling mass down a hill, gathering weight too, traveling ever slower. Being dead just got worse and worse.

What he found he liked to do was lose himself in an alleyway with homeless men who were getting drunk on what liquor they could acquire. And this he could accomplish. He bought good liquor and went and sat with the homeless and got them good and drunk. They praised him as a good man. His corpse found company only among men who could not judge. And they were all cold together, with a liquid fire in their insides—except for Frank, who felt nothing—in dark alleyways that the city had forgotten.

And even though he had millions to give away, he would not offer it to these cold men; even while he was cold. He was cold because there was no circulation in his body. They had blood running through their veins and could do good things if given a chance. He did not think that they would accomplish anything with his money; he was sure that they would not.

That, and he was afraid of losing the only compatriots who did not care that he was dead.

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He no longer slept; just laid in bed staring,

thinking about rest. He no longer ate; just lingered on the taste of food while staring at it as well. Sometimes he would put some morsel, a bite of grilled steak or warm bread, in to his mouth, and horrified at the gray taste, spit it out. And power: he had position in name only after a time. The concept of power was gone: no one paid attention to him, especially when the bandages began to appear. His wounds would no longer heal, but just turned grey around the edges with a kind of black ooze in the middle where a scab might form.

His office was grim, surrounded with stacks of papers left there only when he wasn't present. He entered the building in the early morning hours before anyone else and sat in his glass-walled crypt with the blinds closed, taking the occasional phone call, being visited by no one. His power was now a terrifying one; whereas, his power before had been frightening, and the difference was palpable. He wanted people to be fearful of him because

of his power over their life, and now they were just terrified because of the wrongness he represented. He was the symbol of something gone wrong with the world. He was a cold, purple-veined, tired-looking corpse. He began to think that the fact was, he just did not know how to die.

He shot himself in the face and just managed to screw up his jaw and cheeks and his left eye socket. And after that, no one would come anywhere near him; his head a mass of bandages. Security would no longer let him pass for not recognizing him. The partners at the firm declared him dead, and his money and belongings were removed from him. His wife didn't leave so much as leave a note—she didn't have to divorce a dead man. Even the homeless men he'd once hidden himself away with would no longer accept his gifts. Being dead, there were no codes or identifications that mattered or functioned anymore. He wanders now. He sits for long whiles in shadows and thinks very little about anything. Now and then a good memory comes to him and he scribbles it down in a notebook that he carries. He knows that in the future he will have those memories, he will thumb through those pages over and over. He will wear those pages thin. He will forget all the rest.

