



## The End of Time

Prem Kumar Vijayan

When I came to, it was as if I was under water. There were muffled, indistinct sounds around me, and a diffuse greyish-pink light in my eyes. It took me a moment to realise that my eyes were closed, and the colour of the light was because it was coming through my eyelids. And then I realised that I couldn't open my eyes.

I have never woken up with my eyes closed: never, ever before.

I knew something was wrong right then, when I knew I was awake, but couldn't open my eyes. I tried to reach up to rub

my eyes – and found I couldn't move my hands. For a fleeting moment I wondered if my hands had fallen asleep, turned numb. But no, that wasn't the case: I could feel the weight of my hands on my chest, and my chest itself through my hands. But there was something amiss in that feeling, something besides the inability to move.

A couple of seconds later it hit me: I could feel no heartbeat in my chest.

And I wasn't breathing. My chest lay still and unmoving under my hands. I willed myself to breathe, focusing intently – with a growing fear intensifying my will – on drawing breath through my nostrils – only to find that my nose seemed blocked, stuffed with something.

That's when I realised that my hands were bound together over my chest, at the wrists. So were my legs, from the knees down, and the binding was so tight it was cutting into my ankles.

I tried to move my arms and legs, willed them to move with intense concentration, to shake them free of whatever was binding them. Nothing.

Instant, overwhelming panic.

I tried to call out, to scream. Not a moan escaped my lifeless throat, not a whisper from my closed, dead mouth.

Dead.

I was dead. And my dead body was lying, bound hand and foot, somewhere. And there was nothing I could do about it.

I surrendered to pure, mind-melting, terror.

I don't know for how long I was in that state – may have been seconds, may have been hours – but at some point it struck me that I was awake, clearly aware and thinking, and feeling, and hearing, and seeing.

If my senses were alive, how could I be dead then?

My still, dead body mocked my question silently.

It gradually became clear to me that I was apparently physically dead, but somehow still alive. At least, some part of me, that could think, and feel, and hear, and see, was still alive. I couldn't move any part of my body, but the fact that I was aware of that was itself something I could work with.

Cogito, ergo sum, of course!

Perhaps all was not lost then? Maybe I could figure out what to do, if I could process the information coming through my still-alive senses?

I forced my panic and terror down, focusing on my senses intently.

I couldn't see anything through my closed eyelids, of course, but I began to make out moving patches of darkness in the grey-pink light filtering through them. The muffled sounds I had noted corresponded vaguely with these moving patches, and it didn't take me long to realise that these were people around me, conversing in low tones as they moved around. But why were these voices so muffled, why couldn't I hear them clearly?

As I focused intently on the sounds around me, I realised that something was pressed up against my ears. And inside my nose too – I didn't need to try and pull air through them, and fail, to note that my nostrils felt distended and stuffed. Visions of corpses in coffins and on pyres came to mind immediately, bodies with their ears and nostrils stuffed with cotton. Was that how I was, were these sounds indistinct because my ears were stopped up? If I was physically dead, then that would make sense: my body would be treated like any other corpse, my ears and nostrils would be stuffed with cotton, a cloth or bandage would be tied around my head to prevent my mouth

from falling open – and even as I thought this I felt the cloth on my cheeks, and realised my jaw had been bound too.

Something like a memory stirred in me about why this was done – apparently for a whole variety of reasons (which usually means that nobody really knows the real reason – but anyway...): it was apparently done to prevent insects from invading the body, to prevent unseemly bodily fluids from running out of the orifices, to slow down the process of decomposition – and apparently also to prevent the soul from re-entering the body that it had left.

But what if my soul – I, me – had never left my body after I died?

What if I was trapped inside my own dead body?

Another wave of terror struck me, even more intense than the previous one, shattering all thought, all desperate attempts at sanity. Except for that one insane thought that resonated like a demonic, never-ending bell, echoing in the thick dark well of terror that I had fallen into: I was dead, and I was trapped inside my own dead body.

At some point – again, I don't know after how long – the spell of terror receded suddenly, as I became aware of hands on me, caressing my cheeks. I heard the muffled sounds of sobs, indistinct cries of anguish. Was someone mourning me? Suddenly the mourner's head was pressed against my hands, into my chest, sending tremors through my body with the desperate shudders of sorrow and grief that he or she was experiencing. Who was this? I could not tell anything beyond the fact that someone was grieving me.

Me.

I.

Who was I?

A vast blank silence was all I had in answer.

Strangely – or perhaps not so strangely – there was no wave of terror, no fresh attack of panic at this realisation. Maybe I was getting inured to these waves of fear, or maybe I had given up feeling fear anymore, I can't say which it was for sure. Either way, I was grateful that I was not hit by fear again. That I could still think clearly was a relief, even if I wasn't entirely sure to what extent there was clarity of any kind, or even to what extent I could think at all.

With this realisation, a swirl of thoughts came to me: for one, none of this made any sense. How could I feel, think, *be*, if I was dead? That meant either that I was not dead, or – what? That death was not the end? That I, a 'soul' (for want of a better word) of some kind, continued to 'live on' (again for want of a better word) in some way? And that it was this soul – *my* soul – that was experiencing what I was experiencing? And who *was* I anyway?

I could remember nothing at all.

Whatever it was, one thing I was sure about (with an increasing sense of urgency that was nevertheless somehow unclear – I couldn't quite put my finger on what was causing the urgency): but I knew I had to try and reach out to my mourners, to tell them that I was still here, alive in this body. That there was maybe some mistake, some wrong diagnosis of death, and that they needed to revive me – or rather, my body, and make it habitable for me again. And perhaps they could tell me who I was....

But how was I going to tell them anything? I couldn't move any part of my body, not even my little finger, let alone my lips and tongue and vocal chords.

An idea, vague, snatched out of memory-like thoughts – something about willing one's thoughts, telepathically, into another's mind – came to me. A moment's derision at my own fancies was followed by the hard realisation that I had nothing

else: there was literally nothing I could do besides thinking. I literally had to think my way out of this situation.

So, what did I have to do now? Project my thoughts to my mourners in some way, yes – but how? And to whom?

I realised then that I didn't know who my mourners were, either. How could I project my thoughts into the heads of people whom I didn't even know, whom I wouldn't even be able to recognise, even if I could see them?

It was increasingly clear now that there was very little I knew of anything – not my name, my age, my occupation, family, friends, where I was, when this was happening – nothing was coming to mind. But I think I was getting used to this now, this complete absence of anything to work with in my thoughts, beyond the fact that I was thinking. Perhaps this is what happens with death – everything gets wiped out, except the fact of thought.

In any event, I did not want to waste time on this. That sense of urgency, barely simmering all this time in the substratum of my thoughts, was pushing hard now. I needed to let people know soon that I was still here, before....

I suddenly felt hands pushing roughly under me, lifting my body briefly from wherever I had been lying, and carrying me a short distance, before lying me down again. It was a hard, somewhat uneven surface, with little knobs and ridges pushing sharply into my back. I realised for the first time that, although it felt vaguely uncomfortable, nothing that was happening to my body was actually painful – which it should have been. Maybe my pain sensors had died with my body, maybe all my sensory perceptions had got dialled down, so to speak. In any event, I was more interested in urgently understanding what was happening to me, because the simmering sense of urgency was now flowering again into full-fledged panic. Something felt deeply wrong, deeply dangerous,

a feeling that intensified when the muffled wailing around me intensified.

Then I sensed something being placed over me, and everything went dark and ominously silent. I felt a rumbling beneath me, as if whatever it was that I was placed on was being moved, rolled along somewhere. A few moments later, this too stopped, and it was followed by a fairly loud clang, but without echoes or reverberations that I could sense – like something heavy falling into place, finally and perfectly....

I understood now where I was. In a coffin. Which had just been wheeled into the giant oven of a crematorium. And the heavy sound I had heard had been that of the furnace door falling into place.

This was what I had been dreading, what had been driving my sense of urgency. I was being cremated. I was going to be burnt to ashes – or rather, my body was. What would happen to me? I had no idea. But I did have an overpowering, vivid vision of sheets of flames exploding into life around me, licking and eating into my body, bursting open my bones and skull while I screamed in inconceivable agony – and what if I would not die, even with all that?

Then it all came back, in a massive, overwhelming flood of images and sensations, emotions and feelings, memories and hopes – who I was, the people who mourned me, the life I had lived.... It was as if they had been released by the surfacing of this final realisation of where I was.

I screamed – or tried to. And at the very moment, a thousand flames screamed into life around me, destroying the coffin in seconds, washing over me – another massive, overwhelming flood, but this time of pure, inexorably insatiable, intense heat. The pure agony of fire eating me was instantaneous and instantaneously finished too. I felt my skin evaporate in seconds, and with that went whatever sensations I had had, as well as all memories of who I was. I felt my muscles boil and

fall away from me, and with them went all the feelings and emotions that had just surfaced. Then I felt my bones burst open, and my brains turn to mush and then to cinder before my skull exploded, and with that the memories and hopes that had defined my life melted into the flames that had released them.

Actually, I cannot say how long all this took, even though I speak of moments and seconds. Time loses all meaning inside that box, especially once one's organs and cells and molecules begin their dance with the flames. It may have taken hours, days even – I don't know – for my body to be fully consumed by the furnace.

But what of me, this I that speaks these words?

I don't know. Perhaps I am no more than vestiges of thought trapped inside the molecules of gas inside my body that were released by the flames – after all, they say all dead bodies get bloated as they ferment inside. Perhaps those thoughts bear the vestiges of me, perhaps the flames sear them into my effervescing molecules as they eat up my body. Perhaps those molecules have circulated and found their way into you, dear reader, and have implanted these vestiges of my story in your own body – in your eyes and nerves and brain-tissue – and become your thoughts. I have become a part of you, become you even, in my death – just as you too, will become a part of someone else when you die.

Or perhaps I am just a story, just another story, a bunch of words cobbled together to describe a death – a story that I had made up in my time, about the end of time. About the end of I. About the ends of all Is.... And about the ends of words.

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