



This is me with my grandmother, Mimi, looking out at Lake Ontario when I was three. Behind us, my parents and grandfather were building our house.

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I.

After the mugging, there was the hospital. After the hospital was the funeral, but you were already here, and didn't see that part.

You'd had an inkling of what would happen—this conversation, and that you'll go back as someone else, I mean, not the mugging. That's why we have this moment to talk. A little mindfulness goes a long way. Most people just enter right into the next life, seamlessly. Not that it matters—you won't remember this. When you are reborn, you'll be an infant again. Still, the memories are stored somewhere, outside your lives, and so sometimes you recognize a life you've already lived, or a person you've already met. More often, you just miss a place you don't remember. It feels like homesickness, but it's not for home. That place is infinity, the same infinity that requires all this living and dying and living. All these shadow memories, which compound as you go through lives—you might say they're your subconscious—they suggest another memory, one of a place you feel you came from, a place you've never been, a place you want nothing more than to go back to. Maybe you did. Maybe you will. But first, you have a trillion lives to live.

II.

When you were walking home from the bus station and a man stepped out from behind you, when you hesitated and he grabbed your purse

and threw you to the ground, your name was Lynn.

So what? It's not your name anymore, and soon you'll have nothing in common with that person. But that's our starting point, however arbitrary, so that's what we'll use.

III.

Lynn was a junior sales representative at a property insurance firm in Cleveland, and her sister had just given birth to a little boy. Her own birthday had just passed; she'd turned twenty-six, and for the first time in this life, she'd felt old. She had never planned on being a sales representative, and now she felt her options were narrowing. But lately, with the baby being born, things had seemed fresher, more inspiring. Feeling renewed, as an aunt, she had begun thinking of ways to become something other than a sales representative. She was planning on going to see the baby again tomorrow—in fact, she'd considered staying the night, but for her sister's sake, decided to go home.

She was also feeling good because earlier that week, she'd run into an old friend at a bar, a guy she'd sort of dated when they were both at the University of Cincinnati. He'd studied sound design and now lived in L.A.; he was back for a couple weeks visiting family, in between projects, and Lynn was remembering what it felt like to imagine a future with someone. A lot else was happening in her life, too. But then, one night in late October, in a part of town she'd been warned against, it was over.

IV.

If you haven't figured it out already, this is what's going on: every consciousness needs to enter into infinity in order for it to be whole. But in order to enter into infinity, each consciousness, beginning with its first birth, must live every life that's ever lived. Only when that monstrous task is complete will it be completely itself. By the time it (you) reaches that point, it won't be able to distinguish one life from another, let alone one century, one day, one moment—for instance, the moment you were left to die, just a few minutes ago—from another.

V

As lives go, it was not an exceptional one, your life in Cleveland, and you knew it. You'd been depressed for a long time, and you took some time off school to try to figure it all out. You were a ballerina in high school, and sometimes you danced to forget yourself, but you hadn't for a while. You had a lot of ideas but not a lot of initiative. Sometimes you started to feel something outside yourself, this essence, this, this overarching life force that's been shattered into the number of people currently walking around—but aside from that, your days were mostly the same. Your parents and sister loved you, and you were never alone on holidays if you didn't want to be, and you always had enough pocket change for a coffee or a slushie or something. You were happy when you lived in Athens your junior year of college, but couldn't find a way to hold on to that, and there were times when you felt even the air around you was a burden. Still, you graduated, worked part-time for a while, then got a real job, and were starting to make more money. That's when you started smoking pot every day, again.

Then, your sister told you she was pregnant, and now there was a little baby in your life. You'd never loved a baby as much as you loved this one. You hadn't smoked at all since he was born, last week. That same weekend, the baby's birthday, in fact, was when you'd met up with your old college flame, and for the first time in a long time, you actually enjoyed getting drunk. When you woke up at his place the next morning, you felt giddy; you caught yourself daydreaming about moving in with him in Hollywood, and your sister and nephew coming to live near you. Then you took a bus home a little later than you intended, and you hit your head after your attacker threw you down, and just like that, you became a freakish statistic.

Next, you'll live a very different life. You will be born in northern Ghana, in a rural mountain town outside of Tamale, to an exceedingly poor family, by Cleveland standards, anyway. When you're ten, you'll be sent to Accra to live with distant relatives and be their servant in exchange for their paying your way to school. They speak Twi and English, though you'll never stop dreaming in Dagbani. They call you Ama and you answer to it. Malaria comes as no surprise. As a teenager

you'll want to travel, but when you grow up you won't get any farther than Kumasi, where you'll take some classes in computer science, but never graduate. You'll go back to your old talent of making clothes after you marry and have five kids, three of whom will go to Europe as you get old, and not come back. You'll outlive your husband by ten years and die at home during the commercial break of a Spanish soap opera, a half-hemmed pant leg spilling into a puddle of cloth in your lap from the sewing machine in front of you.

VI.

Then what? To be frank, it doesn't matter which life I describe next. Like I said, it all runs together eventually. Of course, it's almost insulting to try to distill each life in a few sentences, but we don't have a lot of time before you go back. Before you're Gloria.

VII.

After Ghana, you become a businessman living in San Francisco. When your wife gives birth to a baby, for the seventh time in three lives, you experience the joy of a child being born.

When she is three and a half, you decide you're done. Maybe you sense the futility of trying to survive so many lives. You believe that you will never get to that place you are so incredibly homesick for. Maybe you don't think it exists. Or maybe you sense that you are on this near-eternal journey, through which you are propelled at the almost unendurable speed of time, but the knowledge that you have to experience every second of it is unbearable. Maybe you think you found a loophole: by making this life shorter, you will be that much closer to reaching your goal. Or maybe you can't even conceptualize that far outside yourself. Maybe your consciousness is poisoned, through no fault of your own. (Although you can't have known this, you aren't alone in thinking that: everyone who passes through this life, Nicholas Giatti's life, 1963–1999 A.D., which is everyone, feels exactly the same.)

One morning you kiss your wife goodbye and get in the car. The bridge is beautiful on a sunny day. You feel numb about your decision.

You can even almost appreciate the glint of the sun on the bridge. You park and find no joy in not putting coins in the meter. You briefly wonder how long it will sit there until it is towed, and when your wife will find out.

There is a glimmer of emotion in your dead mind when you think of your wife, who is at home now, getting the baby ready to go to her grandparents'. The baby is beautiful. Teresa. You call her Tess. She is named after your grandmother. She will be beautiful, just like her mother, just like yours and hers, and they will all be better off, of that you are certain, without her humiliating father.

The bridge is sufficiently large that you can spend a moment on the outside without anyone bothering you. People keep to themselves anyway. It is so very hard to bridge the separateness.

The last thing you see as Nick Giatti is your hands, the band on your ring finger shining like the bridge itself, letting go.

VIII.

Where are you in all this? *Who* are you? At first you were Lynn, but that was over a hundred years ago now, if you want to think of it that way, and you've been Gloria and Nick since then, and you were a million other people before that, and in a minute you'll be a person who will never have a name, because you'll die as an infant with your mother barely knowing you. You were already that mother once, many lives ago; you already experienced that loss. For each moment in each of those lives, you *were* that person. You saw what they saw, you made their decisions. And yet they died, and here you are now. It is almost as if they were shells you inhabited—which other people are now inhabiting, and everyone who hasn't, will—yet their characteristics are all we have to define you. And even though you were signing Nicholas V. Giatti on all your checks, and typing Lynnette Townsend at the top of your term papers, and learning to write Ama Gloria Appiah during your first week of school as a ten-year-old, you knew there was something temporary, something arbitrary about those names. You were right. They were your names. But they were not you.

IX.

Does hearing this change anything? How can it, when there's no way to hold on to it?

X.

Once, when you grew up in Barcelona, you lived in Montreal for a year in high school. You fell in love with a boy named Jacob, but when your father's career required your family to move again, you returned to Spain with a broken heart. For years, you pined after him, even as you dated other men and earned a medical degree in Granada. You thought you saw him at Heathrow Airport when you were on your way to a wedding in Los Angeles, but you lost him. You always thought of your destiny as being intertwined with his, like two lost lovers, two Platonic halves, forever in search of the other. Sometimes you imagined your husband was him when you made love, and you imagined Jacob doing the same thing with his Canadian wife. You wrote him a couple letters, and looked for him online during your residency in Florida, but you never heard from him.

You gave birth to twins, whom you loved passionately, and lived out your life on the same block where you grew up, surrounded by family, writing prescriptions for patients in your own hometown, having dinner with your parents every week until they died. You weren't unhappy.

XI.

Some lives barely started, they ended so early. Sometimes you were rich and tortured by dreams; sometimes you made all the decisions; sometimes you succeeded easily. Sometimes you failed and someone else's life passed you by. Sometimes you were cold every single goddamned day and then you passed yourself on the street, full of contempt or pity or not even noticing. Sometimes you voted for one thing and other times you were martyred for the other. You invented seat belts and helmets, and you died in slews of car crashes. You discovered fission. Et cetera, ad infinitum, almost.

You'd think that lives would start to pass by more quickly after a

while, the way days get shorter as you get older. But you know, having gone through so many, that long lives never feel any shorter.

XII.

Once, when you were born in Detroit in the 1950s, your name was Chase Grafton, Jr. Your mother died or left you as a toddler, you never found out which, but that wasn't even the most fucked up thing about this particular go-round. Since birth, a hole in the wall of your ear canal left you dizzy and surrounded by the deafening roar of the blood in your veins. Growing up, you never knew balance or silence, the way a blind person doesn't know sight. And so chaos was inextricable with your awareness, your identity.

You barely finished middle school, after being labeled various kinds of mentally retarded and getting expelled for a string of violent outlashes. You had a dog for a while, whose companionship might have helped, but its barking made lights flash in your head and it ran away before you could finish beating it to death. Interestingly, much of Chase's life from late teens to early thirties, before he was arrested for manslaughter and given a state DIN, is unaccounted for. He/you hardly noticed it as it was happening, and after, it was a gaping hole in his memory—and there was no continuous person in his life to vouch for his existence. I don't know, either.

If a tree falls...

XIII.

You were a poet living in Taxco, where your family had been making jewelry for generations. You were born without a left hand. You perfected your English by working the cash registers. Girls and tourists were nice to you because of your arm. You lived in fear of losing your other arm, wondering how you would write if you did. You practiced memory exercises in case you ever needed them.

After high school you felt so restless you thought you might burst, and you went to Spain, where your favorite poets had written. You sold some writing and made your living that way. You met some friends who were not unlike you. After a few years, you were consid-

ering going back to Taxco when you met a girl from Barcelona. She had long dark hair and the most transcendent laugh you'd ever heard. Something about her made you stay. Something about her reminded you of...something.

XIV

You were a sound designer in Hollywood, successful and rich and predictably unfulfilled. One September evening you were walking down the pier at Newport Beach, near where your cousin—who was your dealer and in some ways your only friend—lived, when you noticed a wedding reception taking place on a restaurant's patio, several hundred yards away. A beautiful Latina woman crossed your path as she walked toward the water, alone and barefoot, coming from the party. She wore a sarong and a flower in her long dark braid. For a moment you felt like a teenager again, entranced; you'd never seen her before, yet you felt this woman had been your entire existence, once.

Seeing her made you so lonely that you did something you hadn't done in years: booked a trip back to Cleveland. When you ended up sleeping with an old friend from college, you pictured the woman from the beach, the sunset glowing behind her, and your heart might have ached, if you weren't almost blacked out from tequila shots.

XV

I am saying "you" as if you are a discrete person, a soul, maybe. But it occurs to me that a person is usually defined by the sum of their experiences, their thoughts, feelings, memories, habits, tics, mannerisms, tendencies. Or, you might say it is a person's experiences, thoughts, memories, etc., that make them who they are. X is X because it has X's particular life. But ultimately, every soul will have had that of every person. When it's all over, we'll all have had the exact same experiences, thoughts, feelings, memories, tics, habits, tendencies, personalities, etc.—just in a different order. So how can we claim to be distinct, at all?

Are we still separate, if there is nothing more to separate us?

XVI.

So who am I? Just some “other” talking to you between lives? You’re dying to know now, but as soon as you go back to the world as so-and-so, it won’t matter. You’ll be a clean slate. In some lives, you’ll have a faint glimmer of what it’s like not to be confined to one. In some lives, you’ll consider the possibilities of who you really are. *What* you really are.

Or maybe this in-between is just an idea within one of your lives.

Or maybe by *you* I mean *I*.

XVII.

In his fifties, Chase Grafton, Jr., finally went deaf. The silence was resounding. That, and the routine of prison life, allowed him to settle in and learn what it felt like to have an uninterrupted thought, a night’s sleep. He took some classes, learned to read, and was learning ASL from another inmate when he fell sick. His death went undiagnosed, and no one would ever know that it was on the same day that Lynn’s nephew graduated from college, with a degree in criminal justice.

XVIII.

You were Jacob. You loved Isabel, and when she left, you wanted to rip your heart out. You started to, but the redness of the blood oozing out of your wrists scared you. You found other ways to let it out. You met other kids who wore safety pins in their ears and spiked their hair. You bought a guitar and played it every day for years. You had no idea whether you were terrible or great at it.

In college, you majored in Spanish and spent a year abroad in Valencia, but you were dating someone else by then, so you didn’t have the nerve to look up Isabel. You skipped most of your classes and palled around with a one-armed Mexican poet, with whom you wrote some songs and played together in plazas and on street corners. He left without saying goodbye, and you went back to Montreal a few weeks later. For decades you worked as a translator at various embassies, never marrying, going home to your guitars and your records every night.

In your sixties, a skiing accident left you paralyzed and comatose. As

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you lay in the hospital, in an unconscious haze, your vision was filled with colors and places you'd never been. You saw life in the mountains, you saw green Beetle taxis and silver rings with English price tags, and you saw the silver bars and green jumpsuits of a state prison. You saw a golden glint on a sunny day and the sun setting over the ocean; you heard people laughing, and you felt sand between your toes, and the unspeakable joy of a child being born. You saw all these memories swirling together, and there was peace; you heard a soft Spanish voice whispering to you as the sun came up, and you felt a deep longing for someone, a child maybe, maybe your child, but it faded before you could snatch it.

