

And So It Goes

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The boy awoke on the edge of a pond. It stood silent, still, placid, and vast. He looked both left and right; only a grey mist stretched across the horizon for as far as he could see. He looked down at his hands, they were just as he had remembered. Behind him was an endless forest of towering pines, spread amongst a seemingly infinite grassy plane. The world was desaturated; not a single bird chirped, not a single breeze blew. It was uncanny.

“Hello?” the boy called. No one answered. “Hello? Where am I? Who’s there?” Not a voice, nor the wind answered. The forest stood deathly silent.

From behind, a hand gently grasped the boy’s shoulder. He pushed it away—startled—and fell to the ground. Instead of running, as he was accustomed to, he remained sitting, staring at whatever it was that touched him. Standing above the boy was a man of modest height. His hair was thin and grey; it was apparent he was getting on in age.

“Who are you and where am I? I think I may be lost; I don’t remember how I got here,” the boy said. He remained on the ground, unable to move.

“Oh me? I’m no one of importance,” the old man replied. “And as to where you are, it’s of little consequence. May I sit?”

“Oh, well yes, I suppose.”

“What is your name young man?”

“I’m not sure, I can’t quite remember,” the boy replied.

“I don’t believe that, we both know that your name is Kai.”

“No wait, Kai is my little brother, I’m Cian,” he contested. This sudden recollection somewhat startled the boy.

“Ah, so you do remember.” The old man smiled as he stood up. “It’s unwise to sit in moments like these, a lethargic body is hardly suitable for our purposes, let us take a walk.”

The two strolled down the shore, Cian keeping his distance. For a few minutes they did this in silence, the environment around them echoing their hush. The trees were uninterested as well.

After some time had passed, the old man finally spoke. “Tell me Cian, what did you think?”

“Think about what?” The boy lessened his distance from the stranger.

“Oh I don’t know. What did you think about life, or whatever it was that you experienced?”

“I’m not really sure,” Cian replied. His stride lost its rhythm and certainty. “It was rather painful actually. I didn’t really see any point to it. People were not kind; they were only selfish. I felt no love, no happiness, no purpose. And what would you know of life anyway? From the looks of it you just sit here awaiting the dead just to take them on a lakeside stroll. It seems like your existence is just as meaningless as mine was.”

“Well, I am sorry you felt that way. I’m assuming that is why you gave up so early, is it not?”

Cian looked up at the old man’s face, it was neither sympathetic nor judgmental—placid as the lake. The boy felt rather dejected by this lack of empathy; it was a feeling all too familiar and real. His feet dragged across the rocky shore, creating a rhythmic scraping.

“And as to our existence, my boy, you’re right; our ‘lives’ are very similar. But as to the purpose of them, perhaps your youth deprived you of time to search. It’s much more trivial than you think.”

This upset the boy greatly. “Oh, don’t lecture me about age and wisdom; you don’t know the pain others have caused me. I’ve had enough of those callous lectures from my father; in fact, you sound just like him. And just who are you anyway? Some cruel god here to torment me eternally for the sin of ending my life? If this is Purgatory, I’d rather be in Hell. ”

The old man did not respond. He kept walking at a constant, calming gait, his eyes fixed to an undefined point on the bleak horizon. Cian followed with his head lowered, eyes set upon the gravel beach. He retrieved his composure, thinking only about his steps; one foot after another, until the old man stopped.

"We'll rest here," the old man said. And so, the two sat. "While you are young and do not yet understand who I am, I can tell you that your experiences are not foreign to me. I was once in your position, many times in fact."

"What do you mean?" Cian asked. "I thought you were some sort of god. Gods aren't supposed to deal with human emotions. Even if you were all-powerful and forced yourself to feel sadness, it would not be nearly as real as what we feel."

"That would be true, but I am neither a god nor human. And you are neither just the same. Look at the water dear boy; do you see any ripples?"

"No, it looks completely smooth, like glass even. It looks unreal," Cian replied.

"That lake is the reality you come from. All of time, matter, the universe, all of 'human' experience is compressed into that water. It is still because nothing has created a ripple in it yet. This means reality is very young, as you were." The old man paused for a second, staring at the grey horizon. "You see my boy, all of reality and life is within this lake, and there is no rhyme or reason to it, only the interruptions which cause the water to move. I do not control whether it ripples or not, only you do."

"What do you mean?" the boy asked.

"All of this was created for you, and you alone. Your existence extends beyond this very short life which you have lived. Not only are you Cian, you are everyone in this pond. You have lived the lives of everyone whom have come into existence yet. You were both peasants and emperors; you were both the victims and the abusers. By my count, we have had this very same conversation a few billion times."

The boy sat paralyzed, his eyes wide open. Tears began to well and he did nothing to stop them. "So, I am everyone? I was both my father, my mother; even Jesus and Hitler?"

"Yes you were, and after each life of yours we have met on the same shore, walked to this same place, and talked about the same things—with slight differences of course. Then, at the end of our conversation, your memory is wiped, and I send you on your way to be reborn. You will not remember this nor will you remember your past lives, but a small part will still remain deep down inside your conscience. And so it goes."

"But, what's the point? How am I supposed to relive life over and over again if I cannot remember this?" Cian asked. "What's the point of learning a lesson if I'm unable to take it with me? And, is there an end? This just sounds like torture." He slumped down further and pulled his knees to his head.

"The point? There really isn't one. I do this because I was put through the same ordeal, and he who came before me was just the same. The point is to exist, as it has always been; it's up to you to decide what that means. After billions of lives lived, I have found my peace, and at the end of everything you will find yours. Then you will take my place and become the next architect of reality. You will not become a god nor wield divine power, but you'll do your part in continuing the cycle. Simply put, at the end of everything, you will have accomplished everything that is possible from within the reality I have created. Your lives representing all of humanity will create ripples in this pond, and you will eventually mature to the point in which you may father a universe of your own."

"Wait, so where am I now? If the pond is the reality that you yourself made for me, then where is the rest of your world? What's beyond that horizon or on the other side of the forest?"

"That I do not know; I created this as a space to watch my own universe. Outside is the reality which my creator made for me." The old man paused for a moment; Cian lowered his head. "My dear boy, I'm sure you've realized this from our conversation, but there will come a day when we must meet for a final time. As I send you to live the last of your lives, you will finally reach the singularity, where you will have discovered all that there is to discover and built all that there is to build. It will be at that

point, during your last life, where you will become all powerful from within that placid lake of reality, and you will create a universe to your liking. And with that, my job will be complete.”

Cian slowly raised his head as he attempted to comprehend the thought. “So, you’re telling me I can make the next universe however I like? I could make a perfect world, one without suffering, rudeness or homework? I could make a universe where both sides of double doors are always unlocked? Or even a world with endless drinks and talking animals?” He looked excited at this concept and his mind began churning, thinking of all the possibilities.

“Yes you could,” the old man said, “but by then your wisdom, built over the course of billions of lives, will tell you otherwise. Every so often, someone will create what they see as a party universe, one without pain and infinite pleasure; but they then come to realize that their creation is too easy. The inhabitants of their reality get bored; they stop progressing. They become stagnate because life is too easy, because there’s no point. A world without suffering cannot have happiness either, it’s all relative you see. You’ll create a world which you will see fit, based upon your own experiences; and that will be enough.”

“Oh, I see.” Cian looked saddened but more or less accepted this fact. He slightly rose his head as a spark of curiosity came to him. “So, what kind of world did you create? Why just a lake, why not something more interesting?”

The old man moved his gaze from the boy, and set it upon the water, still as tranquil and silent as before. “I came from a much more chaotic world. The lives I lived were almost too hard. My creator made the universe too difficult to decipher, they made finding happiness in life a hopeless pursuit, and they made nature too bizarre to understand. Thus, it was nearly impossible for me to enjoy living, every bit of it seemed unknown. When I finally reached the end, I wanted to chew them out; but I didn’t. Instead, I made this: a universe created out of beauty. I made the laws of reality complex, but not too complex. I put happiness in a place where it would take some time to grasp, but not so high on the shelf that you could not reach it. I made nature interesting enough to keep you curious, but not so odd that you couldn’t figure it out. I learned much from my predecessor, as you will from your lives and from me. I trust that when your time comes

you will create your own beautiful vision of reality. And I trust that you will view an old man's missteps and mistakes with indulgence, I'm sure you will make your world better than I ever could. And, I guess that's the true answer to your question; that is the point of everything."

"Oh, I see. I guess I'll somehow know what to do when the time comes then. How much longer do I have, or how many more lives do I have to live?"

The old man smiled. "So far, we've had this same conversation billions of times before. Your questions varied slightly from life to life, but ultimately, they were the same curiosities. And to answer your question I do not know. Even though I engineered your world, I am not in control of how you progress; that is up to you and you alone. But if I had to guess, you're a little over halfway there."

"Well what happens if I fail to become this great architect of reality like yourself? What if my universe—or myself I suppose—do not make it to the end of time, or to that singularity you spoke of?" Cian looked slightly shaken, but the old man laid a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"My son, do not worry about such a thing. If that were a possibility, do you really think the cycle will have lasted this long? It is infinite; and you are a fundamental piece of that infinity. Take solace in knowing that you will succeed, and that one day, you'll be able to look upon your creation and think, 'all is very good.' It won't be without suffering or hardship, but without such matters there would be no motivation to do great things. I have full trust in you." The old man slowly stood up and—for the first time—looked the boy in the eyes. "Cian, I believe it is time for our talk to conclude. I know this life was difficult for you, and I realize you won't remember this for some time, but deep down know that you are all of humanity. Meaning can only be created by you, and the universe was created for you, so take comfort in that."

Cian unfurled his legs and hesitantly stood up. "I'm scared," he said.

"I know," replied the old man, "but it is time for you to leave once more. Until we meet again, Cian." And with that, the boy closed his eyes and the old man sent him on his way, toward his next life.

The old man stood alone then, on the empty shore. In this moment of silence, and from within the stillness of the water, a ripple appeared. Its small waves traveled evenly in all directions, gently shaping the cosmic fabric. The old man smiled and soon began his walk, back to where he had first found Cian.

Upon returning to that spot on the shore, he came across an old woman. She laid on the beach, in the very same place Cian did, dressed in a flowing white gown, with the waves gently lapping at her feet. She slowly sat up, not questioning her form or her existence at this moment in time, simply admiring the stillness and the beauty of the water. The old man kneeled beside her, laying a careful hand upon her shoulder. The woman turned to meet his gaze, placing her hand on his in reassurance. With not a word spoken, the old man helped her to her feet, and they walked, side by side, down the gravel shore, her gown swaying in the calm breeze.

And so it goes.