

Amor Fati

Preface:

Amor fati is a Latin phrase that describes a philosophy of embracing all the experiences in one's life, both joyful and distressing.

The story below describes the experiences of a man with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a genetic disease that is currently incurable. Even if Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and other diseases remain incurable in the future, I hope that technological developments will allow patients to lead a fulfilling life in comfort despite their illness.

The students fade first.

Their limbs, clothes, and faces glow impossibly white. When the glimmer settles, the students start blurring into the background. Their clothes turn into see-through sheer silk, their skin into the pale layers of jellyfish. Soon, they are reduced to little more than a foggy silhouette. The surroundings follow suit - the smaller objects go first. Doors and desks, ceiling lights and chairs are traced by their outlines and vanish in a blink. The naked room is drained of every hue and shade, till all that remains is an expanse of the soothing, uncontaminated white of an artist's canvas.

I set the headset down and cross to the window, eager to give my eyes a rest after six hours of virtual reality classes. The windows of my room overlook Campus Boulevard, which connects a row of office buildings to the polytechnic where I teach.

The setting sun paints the sky with brushes of yellow and orange. Campus Boulevard swells with the boisterous laughter of students readying for a night of fun and the frenetic buzz of employees making their way home. All of them move hurriedly, eager to get out of the stripes of sunlight and into the cool refuge of the train station.

My gaze inevitably falls on their pumping legs, their rhythmic breaths. Some say that they grow accustomed to it, but I miss being able to walk and breathe on my own. I suppose I shouldn't complain too much, given that three decades ago I would be lucky to make it to thirty, and now I'm crossing the big five-zero, with the most loving partner a man with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy could hope for.

The dining table beckons me with incredible aroma, but I know my priorities. I glide to the bathroom in my personal carrier, the base of which snugly houses my petit portable ventilator.

David, my caretaker, is already there. He extends forward, offering his sturdy titanium arms to me. I cling to them for support as he lifts me from my personal carrier onto the toilet seat. As I shower, I glance at the bathroom mirror, where a holographic dashboard exhibits the smart toilet's analysis of my urine and stools. David remains outside the cubicle, ready to intervene if I fall.

When I am finished, Rachel is putting the final touches on our dinner. She works for a company that is engineering robo-chefs capable of peeling potatoes and slicing fruits with surgical precision. Even then, Rachel prefers to handle the bulk of the cooking herself, believing that it is important for a food technologist to maintain a “hands-on relationship” with food. Between slurps of her cell-cultured salmon pasta, Rachel regales me with stories from work – coworker drama, nightmare bosses, and the latest projects. Their work is a gift to mankind, I think, with each bite of my cheeseburger. My dietary demands would, in the past, probably have consigned me to a diet of beans and legumes. A decade ago, food scientists unearthed ways to add flavour and colour compounds and molecules of nutritional significance to fungal surfaces during their cultivation, while later harvesting them as whole cuts, patties, nuggets, and more. Many therapeutic diets have been consumed by fungi-derived meat that retains the flavour, taste, and texture of the original food, while also boasting controlled cholesterol and sodium levels and brimming with fibre and protein.

Even with the lengthened lifespan, I cherish each day and every second I spend with Rachel. Of course, I have pondered about when that moment will arrive. My most feral imaginations conjured scenarios where I was alone — a cardiac arrest in the bathroom, a bout of respiratory dysfunction in the laboratory after office hours. So it came as quite a surprise, truly, when I choked on the seventh bite of my cheeseburger.

My senses awake before I do.

The amber scent of her perfume.

The sensation of familiar bumps and scars.

The cool, measured tone.

I grow aware of being asked questions, though I cannot understand them. My eyes open just wide enough to register a nurse escorting Rachel out of the room so that I may rest. As she leaves, she sends a longing gaze my way and I do my best to return it before my eyelids close again.

During her visit, Rachel recounts the doctors’ plans to put me on a clinical trial. Sometimes my tired mind gets lost in her tales, and merely fixes on her eyes that are the colour of the sweetest coffee.

I remember the boys. I remember her in front of me. How she brazenly tackled bullies nearly twice her size. President of the Student Council, my secondary school sweetheart, Rachel had protected me then, and ever since. When she leaves the ward, I stare at the door as if it would open again.

These days, with self-adhesive patches that collect health information, most illnesses are timely

diagnosed and treated quickly with medicine delivered to the doorstep. Virtually all medical consultations and patient rehabilitation are performed at home, letting hospitals become highly specialised caregiving centres. There are not many patients in hospital wards, and if you're one of them, you've taken the first step into death's corridor.

Interactive panels coat the walls of the ward. With a few words, I arrange for drones to collect this week's groceries and pre-order a necklace for Rachel's birthday.

The panels' grayscale squares slide and shift in waves to reveal familiar faces. Most prominently, the squares project and protrude gracefully to assemble a three-dimensional visual of our teacher. A few classmates and I have gathered to celebrate his centenary, and they tease that he doesn't have as many wrinkles and age spots as other centenarians. Our teacher drones about how even though more people are living longer, without a healthy diet, sleep and regular exercise our final years will be some of our worst. He laments how his friends who were ousted from their jobs by digitisation are now old and homeless. He cries and tells us how lonely he is.

The neighbour in the adjacent ward is Shawn. Dealt a bad hand early in life, he couldn't afford the new-fangled nanotechnology and his pancreatic cancer was left undetected until recently. When Rachel is not around, he keeps me company in rounds of virtual Dungeons and Dragons campaigns.

The fifth floor of the hospital is an enchanted forest. Rachel pushes me along the central path, past harlequin blossoms and a raft of ducks. A sinister, murky cloud hangs overhead.

What do you think about Samuel?

What?

He's got a good sense of humour, he's loyal, not to mention his muscles!

Tell me you're not saying what I think you're saying.

I thought we talked about this. No.

You have to find someone else, you know.

Why are we having this conversation now?

Promise me that you will find somebody and be happy. I can't feel at ease until you do.

OK, I promise.

A sudden gale blows, stirring the blossoms and spooking the ducks into the air.

But it most certainly will not be Samuel!

Three-quarters through the campaign, Shawn is brought away for his surgery. Five hours later, the procedure ended, and so did his life.

I'm sleeping a lot these days. Friends and relatives begin visiting more often too. On the rare occasions when I'm awake and there are no visitors, I try to complete the campaign on my own. It's not easy, I feel tired all the time, and it's hard to breathe. The blanket weighs like a ton of bricks. On some days, Rachel pleads for me to eat, but I'm just not hungry. The last memory I have of Rachel is her calling for the doctor. She is sobbing, shaking and holding my hand in hers and I want to call along with her but the tube is caught in my mouth and I cannot speak.

Everything is black. I peer down and see my arms and legs. I feel weightless, as if I am floating in the ebony void of space. I thrust my arms, kick out my legs and suddenly I'm swimming. A bright light shines from behind me. I turn my head slowly in the direction of the dazzling gleam, shielding my eyes with a hand. I spread my fingers by the tiniest of margins and slices of aureate light stab through the gaps between my fingers.

A pink and familiar shape appears in the orb. I swim towards it. For a while it seems like I am getting no closer; I feel as though I am being pulled backwards, getting sucked deeper into the maw of the darkness.

I bulldoze forward, fiercely, desperately, mustering strength that I don't have. I claw away furiously towards the orb, which begins to grow bigger. I catch a whiff of amber.

I see two brilliant browns.