

**What's
the
Deal,
Hummingbird?**

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On or around May 5th of 2020, he just stopped. He stopped exercising, stopped walking, stopped reading, stopped planning. He ate, drank, washed, and paid the bills, but that was it. He was seventy-three. He'd spent more than 38,368,800 minutes on earth, only a precious few of which he remembered. That's what hit him one evening, after the cheering and clanking of pots and pans had died down: a vast chunk of his life—the greater part of his life—might as well never have occurred. Not just the time spent sleeping but those millions of minutes spanning lunches, dinners, meetings, concerts, marriage, work, books, movies, conversations—all gone. What remained? A bird's breath of his existence. Sitting with his mother in Prospect Park when an actual bird had shat on her dress and he, eight years old, thought the world had swerved off course. Wounding a squirrel with a BB gun when he was ten and crying over the small quivering body. Losing a footrace when he was twelve because he was so far ahead he thought he could slow down. Sparring at seventeen with a handsome Black kid who fought as an amateur under the name of Voodoo DaLeeba. Smoking a joint in Sheridan Square Park when an old man in tattered clothes approached and said, "If you tell me you love me, I'll tell you how to make a lot of money." Watching "2001: A Space Odyssey" in a movie theatre on Fifty-first Street and softly whistling when the dark bone flung into the air descends and suddenly there's a white satellite sailing through space. Running headlong down a steep hill in a Kentucky hollow, exhilarated by the danger of falling and breaking his legs. Bumping into a friend, who told him that she had slept with two men that day, and it so aroused him that he asked if he could be the third. Inhaling an intensely aromatic 1990 La Tâche at a Sotheby's pre-auction tasting. Listening as Seiji Ozawa conducted "The Rite of Spring" at Tanglewood when the skies darkened and thunder rumbled and a hard slanting rain sheeted into the tent, spraying the audience and the musicians onstage. Ozawa didn't seem to notice, but *he* noticed that the musicians were smiling, almost grimacing. The strings cried with the wind and thumped with the drums, and the horns played searing notes in various keys and it was so fuck-

ing wonderful that he never even thought to look over at his girlfriend.

For a time, he wanted to live for art, a fatuous notion since he couldn't write, paint, or sculpt, and played the piano with a vague melancholic air that impressed no one. A small trust allowed him some leeway during the seventies, but once he had his fill of moving around he took a job in a large advertising agency where he made nice with people he often liked but never admired. When he was thirty, he met a woman whose skin and smell were so intoxicating that he foolishly spent every dollar he earned trying to hold on to her, even though he knew it was hopeless. She was twenty-four and thought cocaine, vodka gimlets, and going to CBGB part of the natural life cycle. Five months after she totalled her dark-blue MG, killing herself and a grad student, he married someone who knew more about books than he did. She didn't want children and, after a while, he didn't, either. His wife was a writer and a lecturer at various colleges, mostly in the East, so he met a lot of people in the arts, all but one of whom disappeared from his life after the divorce. How many times had he slept with his wife in nineteen years of marriage and the four months before that? Nineteen hundred times? Three thousand times? Five thousand four hundred and twenty-two? Shouldn't he remember how it felt at least some of those days and nights? It's so damned intimate being inside another person. Isn't it?

In the morning, he occasionally listened to Ben Webster.

By August, 2020, his sense of time had gone kablooe. Events thirty years in the distance now knocked at the door, while things he'd done five weeks earlier seemed impossibly remote. He remembered watching war movies made in 1945 and thinking they were ancient because it was 1960. Now he thought "The Graduate" and "Jaws" were contemporary films. How do you know what you've forgotten? He knew only that he was a case of nerves between two eternities. His first day of college—that he remembered. He'd stood in line to register behind a tall, light-haired, long-legged girl who ended up in two of his classes. It was 1965 and she

came to class barefoot, wearing skimpy white shorts. He remembered one of their professors saying, "As long as you're alive, you're immortal." He believed that for about five minutes and then he wondered how many other professors got things wrong. He remembered getting drunk and wanting to fight a cop during a protest against Dow Chemical, and being pulled away by his roommate. He remembered a long purple-and-white scarf he wore in college that no one else remembered. He remembered sitting in the Jardin des Tuileries next to a handsome middle-aged woman and her daughter, who looked like Catherine Deneuve. They struck up a conversation and the woman invited him to lunch, but he declined. Why? He remembered going into a pâtisserie after having rehearsed saying "*Je voudrais acheter une boîte de chocolats*" and being mistaken for a Parisian. He remembered a sunset in Provence, a hostel in Montpellier where he played Ping-Pong, a dog he almost hit when he was driving from Nice to Antibes. He remembered his wife pressing him to read "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." He read it and was bored. He remembered dropping acid on Martha's Vineyard and asking everyone who Martha was. No one knew. He remembered the last woman he had slept with. She had been sixty-two. How strange was that? He remembered the first time he removed a girl's bra, only to think about a character in "Catch-22" who claimed that life is all downhill after that. He remembered meeting Joseph Heller at the office of the Brooklyn parks commissioner back in 1998 or '99. He remembered being face to bosom with Jackie Onassis as he was going up the stairs at the Metropolitan Opera and she was coming down. He remembered sitting on the Sixty-fifth Street crosstown bus opposite Paul Newman, who was wearing a beautiful tan shearling coat and orange-tinted sunglasses. He remembered Lauren Bacall, leaning on a walker, asking him to reach for something on a shelf at Zabar's. He remembered sitting in a Thai restaurant at a table next to Mick Jagger, Jerry Hall, and two bodyguards. Jagger caught him sneaking a glance and said, "It makes the food taste better, don't it?" He remembered sitting across from John Updike on a 1 train heading downtown from 155th Street. He remembered getting into an argument

with Christopher Hitchens over who disliked Henry Kissinger more. He remembered shaking the hand of Willie Pep in a high-school gym in West Orange, New Jersey. Pep was old by then and his small hand was soft and felt padded.

In the morning, he sometimes listened to the “Pastoral” Symphony.

Even before the pandemic, he barely heard from anyone. His old college friends were more absorbed than ever in the lives of their children and grandchildren, and he had neither one nor the other. “Social media” were words he heard a lot but they meant nothing to him. He didn’t have many close friends. One had died of a stroke; another had killed himself by jumping from a ferry in the English Channel, his body never recovered. When he looked at people he knew, he considered their absence. He himself was more or less in good health: no blood-pressure pills, no blood thinners, no prostate issues. But he had no energy. Without anyone cooking for him or watching what he ate, he subsisted on sandwiches, take-out, and Entenmann’s. With nothing to do, he began thinking about suicide. But suicide required planning and he wasn’t up to it. He owned a gun, but he wasn’t about to shoot himself or leap to his death or jump in front of a train, and pills were not foolproof. Then the pandemic hit and he stopped thinking about dying.

The pandemic perked him up. He didn’t tell people that, but, come on, it was the most interesting thing to happen to the world since 9/11. He didn’t downplay the misery and suffering it caused, but that was the point: it killed people. Every day there was a body count, every day there were stories of loss, separation, and grief. Every day he read about or heard accounts of the heroic behavior of essential workers, frontline workers, and first responders, of spouses and children keeping vigil outside hospitals that shut them out. Life had become a constant threat to life. It was a goddam ticking time bomb is what it was. Sure, it could feel good when you were young and fit, but



what had he done with his youth? He had never kept a diary and regretted, even resented, not knowing where he’d been or what he’d felt at 12:48 P.M. on November 2, 1978. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. He’d retired when he was sixty-nine, but he’d still gone through the motions. He went out, attended openings and the opera, dined in good restaurants, borrowed books from the Society Library, and visited New Orleans and San Francisco. He even tried snorkeling in the Keys. But COVID put a stop to that, and then he stopped.

Obviously, he was afraid of catching the virus, but he rather liked the masks, the forced anonymity, the social distancing, the sense of fear on the streets. He didn’t mind lining up to get into a CVS and he got used to ordering his groceries over the phone, though the stores always got something wrong. And though he no longer walked regularly, he’d go out after it rained, when there were fewer people around. He now had an excuse for doing what he always wanted to do: live in the world without anyone noticing. Instead of feeling housebound, he felt content to be at home. And now when he had nothing to do he felt justified in doing nothing. As for boredom, well, sure, but when had he ever not been bored?

“You need to get Netflix,” his ex-wife told him. She had called him about two weeks after New York went into lockdown, partly out of guilt and partly because she was just a nice person. “Watch ‘Call My Agent,’” she said. “It’ll cheer you up.” He promised her he would, without intending to follow through, but she knew him, so she put him on her account and e-mailed him her password, which obligated him to watch it. She was right: it cheered him up. He asked her what else he should

watch and quickly marshalled against the plague—as though they were chess pieces in his match with boredom—“Longmire,” “Get Shorty,” “Sneaky Pete,” “Justified,” “Line of Duty,” “The Kominsky Method,” “Peaky Blinders,” “Ozark,” “Bosch,” “The Americans,” “A French Village,” “The Queen’s Gambit,” and the always soothing “The Durrells in Corfu.” Damn it if he didn’t begin to live with these imaginary people, and he hated it when a se-

ries ended. It was like the death of a friend, several friends. What he needed, he told his ex, was a series that would run for as long as he did.

“Give ‘Cobra Kai’ a try,” she e-mailed one night.

“No, there are limits,” he wrote back.

“Do it,” she said.

One night, six months into the pandemic, when no one knew how bad it would get, he watched “The Third Man,” which he hadn’t seen in thirty years, and partway through, as he lay on his couch, he began to feel something he had trouble identifying. It took a few seconds to understand that he felt happy. The writing, the direction, the acting, the lighting, the set design, the music, the cinematography—everything worked so well that he wanted to call up Graham Greene and ask him, What’s the deal with the stupid, annoying landlady? Why couldn’t he have left her out?

Sometimes in the afternoon he listened to Al Green or Sam Cooke or the Staple Singers.

Music had always been there. He had grown up listening to the radio, to Cousin Brucie, Murray the K, and, later, switching over to FM, Jonathan Schwartz and Allison Steele. Although he didn’t remember the first time he heard the Shirelles singing “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?,” it was the first popular song that had stuck with him. He remembered the first time he heard “Satisfaction,” the first time he heard a recording of Bill Evans playing “Some Other Time,” the first time he heard the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor on WQXR, the station of the New York Times. He remembered George Jelinek, but not the other hosts. He remembered Lenny Bernstein saying, in some interview or other, that he found it hard to breathe when conducting the “Missa Solemnis.” If he had to guess, it would be during the Sanctus, about fifty-three minutes into the piece and lasting a little under thirteen minutes. Pensive strings with light support from flutes usher in a radiant violin solo right before the Benedictus. Only Beethoven could have written this, and hearing it made the world bearable for a while.

Music cut out the noise. Rock, country, folk, jazz, or classical, it didn't matter; it cut out the noise. And, Lord knows, there was plenty of noise now. The nation seemed to be imploding. Watching the news, switching between Fox and CNN, he remembered a movie he'd seen some years back; it could have been five, it could have been ten. The movie was available on demand, so he watched it again and liked it, but thought it sometimes talked because it could. Brad Pitt played a hit man who shows up at a bar to get paid off. But the man who hired him now feels he deserves a discount. They discuss it while a small TV overlooking the bar plays a live feed of a youngish Barack Obama delivering his election victory speech. When he gets to the part about America being one country, one community—out of many, one—Pitt's character scoffs, "It's a myth created by Thomas Jefferson . . . a rich wine snob who was sick of paying taxes to the Brits." Pitt's hard-bitten cynicism caps the film. "Don't make me laugh," he says. "I'm living in America, and, in America, you're on your own. America's not a country. It's just a business. Now fucking pay me."

He had never given much thought to what America was about. It was above his pay grade. Once, it had been about the old versus the young, about supporting the war in Vietnam or opposing it, but, with the televised killing of George Floyd, America had become a misfire, a moral mare's nest. We'd found the secret portrait recording our sins: slavery, Jim Crow, our treatment of Chinese workers, Native Americans, unions, women. But it was still America, right? Give me liberty or give me death. Four score and seven years ago. Ask not what your country can do for you. "When the values go up up up / And the prices go down down down / Robert Hall this season / Will show you the reason / Low overheads." Compared to murdering fucking Nazis and crazed, robotic Japanese soldiers, we were goddam saints. Anyway, what was he supposed to do about it? His skin puckered on the inside of his elbows, hair grew in his ears, dark spots mottled the backs of his hands—what do you call them? Liver spots, sun spots, age spots? Too many to know which were recent and which had been around a while. He should have taken pictures of them and dated each photo, so he could track their number

and location, a chronological map that led to oblivion. In the meantime, noise. People wanting to wrap the country in a shroud and bury it—tearing down statues, renaming buildings and holidays, cancelling this person and that one, stopping the publication of a book because its author was accused of rape. Where was Kate Smith when you needed her? And what happens? Thousands of malevolent idiots storm the Capitol because a reckless lowlife narcissist pays them a little attention, making them feel they're still protagonists in the nation's history. Is this what America is about? A reign of error countered by a reign of terror? And everything playing out against a plague killing millions around the world. What did it all amount to? Maybe just numbers. Generations come and generations go, but space and dark matter abideth forever. He remembered a student paper his wife had shown him. She had assigned her class a short story that ended with the words "My God, only a moment of bliss. Why, isn't that enough for a whole lifetime?" The student had somehow missed the comma in the last line, which only made his paper more heart-felt. His wife had given him an A.

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In the evening, because he was essentially a simple man, he occasionally listened to Puccini.

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When he was young, he liked to travel. He'd done the Grand Tour thing several times and fallen in love with Italy. He remembered visiting the Uffizi for the first time and thinking, This is what a museum should feel like. He remembered buying a print of Botticelli's "Primavera," a detail, actually, that he'd hung in his first apartment, in Chicago. He remembered Shirley Hazzard, who'd been a friend of his wife's, saying to him, "It's *Cap-ri*, not *Cup-ri*." He remembered riding a motor scooter in Ibiza in '71 or '72. He'd gone to a beach and had sunburned like crazy. That night, he picked up a short, pretty American girl, taken her back to his room, and had painful, slapstick sex. He remembered a lion in a cage in the Bronx Zoo. The cage was small and filthy and sat on wheels. He remembered the first time he had crunched into butterfly shrimp in a Chinese restaurant. He remembered that

he had remembered and then forgotten the name of the duck dish that he used to order in a restaurant that had long since closed. He remembered frankfurters sizzling on a grill at a deli called Schweller's. He remembered a game of touch football in Brookline, or was it Boston? He remembered a pipe he had smoked for a year after quitting cigarettes. He remembered a pair of Frye boots that he had worn to the ground. He remembered jogging around the Central Park Reservoir a few yards behind Willie Nelson. He remembered a lyric about listening to Chet Baker on the beach, in the sand, with the leaves falling down. He remembered a hysterical woman in a bloody nightgown stopping him on West End Avenue brandishing a carving knife. It was late, the street was deserted, and the woman was screaming in Spanish. He calmed her down and cautiously pried the knife from her fingers, which is how the police, guns in hand, found them: a twentysomething man holding a large knife, and a woman in a nightgown covered in blood. He remembered a piece of pineapple upside-down cake a girlfriend's mother had given him. He remembered hitching from Paris to Calais one summer and getting picked up in a cream-colored Rolls-Royce by a London publisher, who took him home and played him recordings of Schubert's lieder. He remembered being driven off the highway outside Covington, Kentucky, by a man who wanted to have sex with him. He remembered the Lionel electric train set that his father had bought him after his mother died. He remembered the afternoon that his mother, wearing a green velour hat, had picked him up at day care. Upon seeing her, he had exclaimed, "What's the deal, hummingbird?," and she had given him a brilliant smile and replied, "Hey, what's the word, banana peel?" For the whole ride back to the house, she had chuckled and tousled his hair, and when they got home she picked up the phone and called his father. She then motioned him over so he could speak into the receiver. He repeated what he'd said and his father slowly let out his deep-chested laugh. "So what's the word, banana peel?" he roared.

Why, isn't that enough for a whole lifetime? ♦

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Arthur Krystal on why writers lie.