

Sample Writing - Humor

Excerpt from *The Lucky Ones: A Beginner's Guide to Mortality*

It didn't bother me, knowing I was walking toward a 70-foot drop-off. When I was 11, I stood at the lip of the Grand Canyon and *leaned*. Of course I thought I was immortal then – an illusion kids probably hold on to for most of the 43 seconds it takes to reach the canyon floor.

But approaching this particular drop-off at an age well past 11, that illusion was long gone. I knew that a plunge of even 50 feet would result in an empty bed at the next B&B that night. And since I was hiking alone, against all advice, and hadn't seen a soul all day, there'd have been no witnesses if I did go into the breach, no one to hear me scream, no one to call ahead and cancel my reservation, meaning £27.50 down the crapper. And there'd been a handrail at the Grand Canyon. No handrail here, half a mile above the black water of Thirlmere in the Cumbrian Mountains of England.

Still, the lack of a rail didn't bother me much. Not really.

A little more bothersome was the dense white fog. I had a clear take on everything within arm's length; beyond that was mystery. Which counts as a bit of a problem since I was not exactly sure how far ahead that drop-off was. Heh.

Even less reassuring than the fog and the uncertain distance was the screaming gale-force wind at my back, a steady 50 mph gusting to 70 and blowing straight toward that 80-foot cliff.

For some sense of how irresistible that wind speed is, stick your arm out of a car window on the freeway. For a better sense, stick your whole body out.

The fog was just a cloud rollercoasting fast and tight against the landscape from the southeast. A pretty neat effect, actually, standing in the middle of such a thing. But the act of standing had itself been made difficult – especially standing while wearing a pack with most of the relevant properties of a sail.

As it happens, the difficulty of standing had just recently become irrelevant. At the suggestion of one violent burst of wind, I'd recently given up standing entirely. I was airborne, moving in the direction of the aforementioned 90-foot chasm, arms spread, legs pedaling the air like a long jumper. And I'd have been concerned if not for two things I knew:

1. This hike was part of my carefully-planned “midlife crisis,” not my “end-of-life” crisis.
2. The date was September 16, 2004 – and I wasn't scheduled to die until December 9, 2036.

The Internet knows when you will die. Go to deathclock.com, enter your date of birth, height, weight and Body Mass Index, and the Death Clock calculates the day and date on which you'll hear the galloping hooves of the pale horse. Mine is December 9, 2036. A Tuesday.

Until that day, I can step whistling into the paths of vehicles. I can season my steak with asbestos and press my vital organs against the microwave as it cooks. I can airpedal toward sheer cliffs in pea-soup fog.

Or I can absorb the other, far more important, more honest and less entertaining message of the Death Clock. *You're probably not going to Die today*, goes that message – *but you are, on some actual date in the easily-conceivable future, going to Die.*

Picture your life as a timeline moving left to right, an arrow inching eastward. If you're lucky, you'll be eastbound for a good long time before the arrow stops dead, as it were. I'm hoping for 139 years myself, though the Death Clock says 73. Eighty is a nice compromise. But let's say 84, since that put me at midlife in 2004, the year I was hurled toward the edge of a cliff.

For years I'd been heading east at the posted speed of one day per day when I collided with that second message: I'm going to Die. I hadn't heard about that yet in my 20s, finishing college, marrying, starting work. All that striving pushes death out of focus. My 30s were devoted to more clichés: family, career, house-buying, watching *The Simpsons*.

Then came 40. The family was potty trained, mostly; unrealistic career goals had been quietly abandoned, mostly; the mortgage was seconded; *The Simpsons* were in reruns.

And so, in the absence of much else to strive toward, Death snapped back into focus as the actual, ultimate goal.

That's when you begin to notice your heartbeat as you lie in bed and wonder how it just keeps, you know, *doing* that, and how long it will keep doing that, and whether thinking about it for hours at a time could make it stop doing that. It is gently suggested that you increase your visits to the doctor from almost never to pretty much always, and to start inviting gloved fingers to go adventuring through some of your least-often-fingered regions – in search, of course, of Death.