

## **An Inanis Vita**

I awoke and was instantly met with nothing. I felt the muscles in my body tense and push, attempting to perform the familiar motion of sitting myself upright in bed, that much I was sure of, but I was given no feedback. There was no rush of blood to my head, No feeling of wind brushing against my face, nor was there the slight headache that I always felt while waking up and preparing to start the day. Instead, I felt nothing. Confused and slightly scared, I attempted to open my eyes to see whatever might be binding me. Frustratingly, however, while my flesh moved as my brain commanded it, I saw nothing. It was not long before I realized almost all of my senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, were absent, the only exception being touch, which too was extremely limited, as I felt the same sensation of restriction across my entire body, not a single solitary piece of me was free to move even a quarter of an inch. I attempted to speak to myself, only to realize my lips were sealed shut. It took no more than five seconds for me to realize I was incapable of breathing, whether it be through my mouth, which was trapped motionless, or my nose, which felt as if it was completely plugged. Upon this realization, I felt an immense sense of panic wash over me. However, there was no outward way for me to express said panic. So, unable to move, I expressed my panic in silent interior suffering. I wanted to scream, I wanted to thrash, I wanted to turn myself inside out until I was able to take a long, deep breath, but that breath never came. I felt as if my head would explode right then and there. I wanted to cry, and I did, but the tears only welled up inside my eyelids before quickly disappearing back into my eyes. It wasn't more than five minutes before I came back to my

senses. Upon my return to logical thinking, a singular thought crossed my mind: this has to be a nightmare.

I have to be rational. It is the only option I have in a situation such as this. Though I may be scared beyond compare, this is not real, it can't be. I will wait until I wake up in bed with my senses returned to me. I will wait for however long it takes. Much time passed while I waited, so much time that it easily could've been an hour or four. Yet, no matter how much I waited, I still couldn't move. I became accustomed to many things while waiting, yet most important of which was the fact that I didn't need to breathe. It was the strangest sensation, perfect stillness. I felt like a consciousness trapped in a corpse, yet I knew I was alive. My heart still beat, though I couldn't hear nor feel it, and I knew that my thoughts still coursed through my brain like sap dripping down a tree. I knew these things as fact, yet I had no way of proving them. I also considered the possibility that this was not a dream and I was, in fact, dead. I had died and gone to hell without knowing. That was the thought that struck me as the most terrifying of all. However, I try to forget terrifying things, so I continue waiting instead of ruminating on it. I couldn't wait as long as last time, however, because I quickly grew bored, a boredom which was physically impossible for me to alleviate. I could do nothing. I could say nothing. All I had was my thoughts. I figured I would wake up soon and would quickly be relieved from whatever punishment I was currently experiencing. However, this thought was a prelude to despair, as I took the thought to its natural conclusion and considered the fact that this may not be a dream. I tried to shudder at the thought, but again, I couldn't move, so I simply felt the recoil of fear

travel from my stomach to my head, then back down to my toes before disappearing. What if I would never leave here? What if I would never wake up? They were not productive thoughts to have, but they staved off my boredom, even if only for a brief moment. I was taken aback by how quickly the familiar feeling returned, however, and I was left bored again before I could appreciate its absence.

The minutes amalgamated themselves into hours, and my perception of time dimmed as my thoughts grew sparse between each other. I would quickly go insane if I allowed myself to idle for much longer. I resolved to recount important information in my head, over and over, until this dream ended. I would replace my boredom with repetition, thus saving my mind, which currently felt as if it was rotting away. My name is Avinash Shilla, and I am twenty-three years old. I live alone in a cramped studio apartment with no windows, I work an accounting job in a tiny cubicle, and I am on track for a promotion that will grant me more work and no feasible benefits. I am supposed to see a therapist every Thursday, though I regularly skip the appointment. I repeated it to myself once; the words felt right, so I did so again, and again, and again, and again, and possibly ten, possibly one hundred more times. Somewhere along the way, I had lost count or, more likely, had never been keeping track in the first place. I continued to repeat my self-defining mantra to myself, and while the words nearly blurred together in my head, it kept me occupied, and I couldn't possibly think of something more important.

After a while of unmeasurable time, I felt quite tired and, soon after, fell asleep. I did not, however, fall into a peaceful, restful sleep. It was one disfigured beyond repair by nightmares. I

found the irony almost laughable, for I had left one nightmare and entered another. I found myself walking down a path in the woods. I was in that passive, passing state that one finds oneself in during a dream; all logic had emptied itself from my head, and I carried no thoughts of my previous predicament. I, instead, walked down the trail ahead of me. What else could I possibly do? The trees, the grass, and the dirt were all stained with a hue of dark burgundy, as if every drop of water in the world had turned into blood as a result of some fantastical work of alchemy. I walked and walked and walked until, eventually, I tripped and fell into a pit. Everything went black, and for a minute, I didn't realize the dream I was in had ended. It took me a minute to acclimate to my surroundings, the familiar nothing I had stared into before I drifted into my sleep. I motioned to stretch, but such a thing was impossible, for I couldn't move. It wasn't long before the logical side of my brain awoke, and I realized that if I had just fallen asleep, had a dream, and woken up, then my current situation couldn't possibly be a dream. I was actually stuck here, unable to see, hear, or smell, and as I realized it, I couldn't feel anymore. The mold of darkness that engulfed me had ceased to feel like anything, and in its place, I felt nothing.

The primordial fear of my situation finally reached me, auspiciously, like a king draped in silver and gold ascending to his throne. It was not long before the fear latched onto my brain like a parasite, a parasite that was impossible to remove. First, I was shocked, and I felt as if my jaw had dropped to the floor. However, my jaw didn't drop because it couldn't move. I couldn't shift my lips a single inch from their closed, stoic position. So I was still, still like I had been for what

feels like days at this point. It couldn't have been more than a minute before the sheer weight of my situation fell upon me. I was in a predicament, no, a nightmare, which defied all logic, and I can firmly rule out the possibility of this being some sort of dream or hallucination, and there was no logic for me to grasp onto and explain my stress away with. There was only one possible conclusion that I could reach: I was in hell. I sat with this idea for a long while, a period which no doubt lasted twice or even three times as long as the time that I had spent entertaining myself. I wondered if this really was reality and if I really was trapped here. How was I breathing? How had I not suffocated long ago? And why wasn't I hungry? The answer to all these questions was the same. For some reason, for some illogical, absurd reason, I had no bodily needs anymore. This realization naturally led me to the apotheosis of the line of reasoning I was following: could I still die? It only took a brief moment of thinking for me to realize the horror of my situation. If I couldn't suffocate, didn't need food, and was unable to move, then I would be trapped here for eternity. My thoughts reached a standstill as I tried to flush the terror from my mind. The icy tendrils of fear wrapped around my frontal lobe and threatened to engulf my mind in its entirety. With each passing moment, I further convinced myself of the statement I had made to myself earlier: This was hell. I was in hell. It took a long while for me to recover from the truth which I had uncovered about my situation, although it wasn't like there was anything else for me to do.

I knew there would come a time when I would mourn the boredom I had felt what I presumed to be a day ago. I knew that it could only get worse, yet meditating on such a fact would do me no good, and so I saw no choice but to recover. Time passed, no, passing was no

longer an accurate description of what time was doing. Time crawled, time crawled with the pace of a coast being reshaped by the tide. Time crawled with the pace of a snail crossing the continent, unstopping yet so unbearably monumentally slow. I had thought about every thought I could conceive of more than ten times, and I believed that at least a week had passed, yet I had no possible way to tell how much time it really had been. The only feeling I was acquainted with in my impenetrable prison of darkness was exhaustion, yet I could not be exhausted, for I was doing nothing and exerting no energy. It was then that I came upon a thought that I should have come across much, much sooner, and it was my lateness to realize it that amplified my terror. What exactly was happening to my body within this prison? I didn't feel hungry, but the thought of atrophy was one that I had not explored, and so I did so leisurely as if strolling through a beautiful park, a feeling that I was slowly growing less acquainted with. I slowly made my way from one point to another before eventually reaching the terminus of my exploration and the first optimistic thought that I had had in quite a long time: if my body did atrophy, I might eventually be able to move around in here, even just a little bit. My mind raced with possibilities. If I were to lose some weight, I would be able to beat my arms gently against the walls of my enclosure and maybe produce some kind of acoustic music with my endless time. Yet it had been at least a week since my condemnation, and, as far as I could tell, nothing had changed, and my hopes were very quickly dashed.

I began to mourn my previous life, which I had previously neglected to reflect on until now. I tried to remember the mantra I had invented to stave off my boredom; it felt like a distant

past, yet I knew it couldn't have possibly been more than a week and some change. I sent the electrical signal to my brain to recall the mantra and to repeat it in my head, using the voice that I used so thoroughly to give my thoughts character. It was less than half of a quarter of a second before my brain received my signal and responded to the best of its ability. My name is Avinash Shilla, and I am around twenty years old. I live alone in an apartment, I work an office job in a tiny cubicle, and I am supposed to see a therapist once a week. That apartment still sits comfortably in my memories. If there were one word I could use to describe it, it would be drab. I hated that apartment. I hated the single window in my bedroom, which ironically faced a concrete wall; I hated the consistent flaxen shade of yellow that purveyed every inch of it, and I hated the uncomfortable, itchy lining of my bed. The aesthetic of the apartment could only be described as that of a funeral home; it was a place in which nearly people finished with their lives go to await death, yet I was far from done with my life, and so it only inspired misery. If I could live anywhere else, I would, but I hardly care enough to justify moving, nor do I have the wealth to do such a thing. It's not like it matters now, though. I have replaced my drab, boring apartment with something far worse, a prison unfitting for the worst of criminals, a hell fit for Judas himself. Yet I was not Judas nor a criminal, and, to my knowledge, the only sins I have ever committed were sloth and perhaps envy. Yet still, nothing befitting of a hell of this caliber. The next rational thing to think about at this point is, of course, my job. I could picture it in my head clearly: the light gray color of my cubicle, the fluorescent hum buzz of the light above me, the constant droning sound of workplace conversation and keyboards clacking away. I had no friends within that office, and I didn't desire any. I was there to work, and work was all I did. It is

clear to me now how warped my mindset was, how flawed my perception of what qualified as a “life.” I would walk to the office, still half asleep, still half dead, and I would sit myself down at my chair, which poked and prodded at my spine, slowly torturing my nerves as I clicked and clacked away at a keyboard for hours, hours which I entertained by not entertaining, by allowing my mind to grow stagnant and lose the capability to think about the misery I felt. I hated every second of my job. I knew I did, even if I never thought about it or did anything to change it. The numbers, the endless marching of tasks; it was grating, and for a long while, I thought it the worst fate that one could meet, to be stuck in a cubicle all day.

Recent events have obviously caused me to reconsider such a thing. My memories of work have long since blended and fused irrevocably in their monotony. As a matter of fact, the only thing about my job that I remember is the fluorescent hum buzz of the lighting above me in the nearly endless office space limbo, which I occupied eight hours a day, five days a week. Those lights drove me mad beyond compare, a madness which was only amplified as my unchanging work day marched on, indifferent to my suffering. I wished to rip them out of the ceiling and burn the entire building to the ground. Such a thing seems so trivial to me now, so impossibly trite. I long for that office building. I was always able to take solace in the fact that others suffered the same fate as me, But now, I was utterly convinced that I was the only one who could be experiencing this. I was alone, alone in hell. I thought about the inferno and how, even in the worst of punishments, people were still together, whether being burnt alive or fighting in a river of boiling blood. The punishments faced by those in hell were never



individual. It almost goes to show that nobody, no matter how great a sinner they may be, deserves the punishment that is loneliness. Even Judas himself was accompanied by the Devil. I, however, am alone, and I am being punished, and I have no one whom I can possibly share it with. I have never felt a greater pity for myself in my life, I feel as if I am the most unfortunate man ever to walk the earth, a feeling which is in no way productive.

Time passed, but I did not sleep. My mind was far too restless, and my disposition far too bleak. The boredom which I had originally felt was nothing in comparison to the boredom I felt now. Previously, it was simply a nagging feeling in my gut, a feeling akin to hunger or thirst. Now, however, it felt as if it were a physical, tangible thing. It felt like a railroad spike lodged in my brain, an ever-throbbing pain that only intensified with time, and as a result, for the briefest of moments, I dropped my guard. Insanity began to creep into my brain ever so slowly. I began to count, not with any goal in mind but simply for the sake of it, one hundred, nothing had changed, one thousand, my mind feels numb, ten thousand, my brain trembles, one hundred thousand, the voice counting in my head completely faded. I continued to count for what felt like forever, but I had no way of telling what number I reached, for the voice of my thoughts grew too hoarse to hear anymore.

I don't know how much time has passed since I arrived here, but what I do know is that things can only become worse from here. I do not know why, but I know deep in my heart things will get worse. But then again, how could things possibly become worse than they are now? My morale has been erased from existence, and I felt as if even acknowledging my dwindling sanity

may cause it to crumble into ash. I began to think about what would become of me, of my mind, yet before I could finish the thought, I found myself standing in a picturesque bathroom. It was spotless, with stone tile floors and a large claw-footed bathtub by a window, and to its left was a sink with an oval-shaped mirror resting on a swivel above it. The walls were faux wood paneling that gave way to a tan wallpaper speckled with light brown shapes halfway up the wall. Both the window and the mirror were covered with steam. I haven't had a dream so vivid in what felt like, and may as well have been, forever.

In my solitude, I devised many methods to prolong my dreams and prevent an electrical signal from traveling up my brainstem and waking me from my slumber, and the most prominent of those methods was to remain where I began. I would not attempt to clear the steam on the window, as such a thing may disturb the established dream and cause me to awake. I would move slowly and deliberately, not touching anything that I did not need to touch, as disturbing my environment may cause change and wake me. I stood in that room for a little while, observing its every detail and committing them to memory, I would count the shapes on the wallpaper later once I felt particularly bored. Eventually, I resolved to test my limits and explore my environment beyond the original bathroom. I reached out and tried to wipe the steam from the window, yet the steam remained there. It seemed to be on the other side of the glass. Next, I tried the door, which was locked. That left only the mirror on the wall. I felt dread crawl up my back as I approached it, and it was then that I realized something was wrong. Despite this being just a simple mirror, something within my body told me to run, to run and thrash and throw

myself around until I awoke and escaped the mirror. I ignored my instincts. After all, what did I have to lose? I reached out towards the mirror. Every hair on my body stood on end, and every single muscle in my body tightened as if attempting to cramp and prevent me from moving a single solitary inch. Yet despite my body's valiant fight, it was in vain, and my hand met the mirror and wiped it clean. What I saw next could only be described as soul-crushing, the kind of vision that breaks the mind of men, the kind of thought that causes one to go home and tie a noose without a second thought. I gazed into that mirror, that mirror that my body had screamed at me to steer clear of, that mirror which likely inspired the saying that "curiosity killed the cat," that mirror which caused me suffering equal to that of the greatest torture methods ever devised by the cruelest students of humanity. I looked into that mirror, and where my face should've been was nothing. Where my distinctive, recognizable face should've been, I only saw a desolate, endless void of emptiness, a void which may as well have ripped the heart from my chest. It was then that I realized the fact of the matter: I had forgotten what I looked like.

It was not long before my terror shook me from sleep, and I was instantly made aware of the implications of my dream. What did I look like? I knew my name, I knew my prior identity, but my face, my face was gone, and no matter how hard I thought, I couldn't for the life of me return it to my memory. I felt the frustration rip through the logic in my brain at once, and, in an instant, the purest of distilled emotion gripped me. I wanted to rip my skin from my flesh, I wanted to reach inside my jaw and tear it open, I wanted to grasp my head tighter and tighter until it popped like a grape, I wanted to unleash the maelstrom of emotions I felt upon the world,

and be recognized for my suffering. But I would do none of these things, for I had been imprisoned and forgotten in this indescribable hell. A familiar phrase gripped my mind and infested me quickly as if it were a swarm of bugs. *Damnatio memoriae*, a Latin phrase that translates to condemnation of memory, was a punishment employed by the Romans in which a criminal's identity would be erased from history. I learned about it in school when I was younger, and it has always stuck in my mind. What a terrible fate, I would think to myself, to be forgotten, not just by people but by the world as well. Now, I had been met with my hell, a hell that would consume and digest me entirely. I had nothing left to believe in at this point, so, like it felt I always have, I waited.

I do not dream since the incident with the mirror, I would rather be consumed by nothing than see what I had seen of myself again. My mind has fragmented. That much I know to be true. I do not know when it happened, perhaps shortly after the mirror dream, but I know myself to be insane. However, I have not lost myself, my rationality, my thought, I am strangely lucid in spite of my lack of sanity. I am the most sane yet insane man you could ever meet. A lot of nothing has happened, a lot of nothing. My life before darkness is simply a small footnote in what has felt like an eternity of darkness. I allow the darkness to seep in through my ears and infest my brain.

The word time is now just a word, nothing else. I experience an abundance of nothing, yet being nothing, it never becomes anything besides nothing. After an immense amount of nothing, an immense amount that couldn't be described with any combination of words, I began

to fly. I began to soar through an endless sky; the sun was setting, and the world was painted orange. I felt the wind grace my face and the sun warm my body. I flew for so long, so long, that I, for a short while, forgot about everything. The sun grew dim and disappeared, and the moon rose in its place, only for the sun to rise again. It melted my wings, and, like Icarus, I fell to my death. I was not dead. However, I was encased in a familiar prison. My freedom was stripped. The sun and the moon were gone, and in their place, darkness and silence. I was returned to this state only shortly, and before I realized it, I was crying in the arms of a woman and leaning over her shoulder, a man with a face lacking in any features. That was not to say he had none, but I was simply unable to perceive them. I soon found out that I was their son. I grew up happily in a small suburban neighborhood. I had many friends at school and would graduate as valedictorian of my class. The day after getting accepted into college, I crossed the street and was hit by a car. It killed me instantly. I returned to the prison of darkness, still somehow fresh in my mind. What had just happened to me? I lived a life, I had a family and friends, I had things to live for, and I had passion. What happened? The life, while clearly a figment of my tortured and tired imagination, felt real, it felt lucid. Why was this happening? I was not given time to find an answer. I was born again, and I grew up again. My father had a perceptible face this time, and he looked to be a kind man. I would later, would encounter a boy with a missing face very similar to the father of my previous "life." He was mean and cruel and regularly beat me for no reason at all. I eventually graduated, however, and moved on. I lived my life, went to and graduated college, and got a well-paying job doing what I loved. On my way home from work, I encountered a similarly faceless man on the street. He looked to be homeless and not of a right

mind, he shouted to me. “You! You! Don’t you ignore me, I know you!” He stumbled towards me, and while the conversation we had was imperceptible, I knew it not to be a friendly one. Before I realized it, a knife was painfully buried in my chest, and I fell back and died again. I returned to darkness. I returned to a darkness that I know myself to have never left. I thought back to my father and the homeless man who had turned out to be my old bully from school. Why were their faces obscured? Yet once again, before I was given a chance to process it, I was thrust into yet another life. I didn’t encounter anyone with a missing face until I was middle-aged, and while I couldn’t see her face, I knew it to be beautiful. She was amazing, the most brilliant person I had ever met, the most fantastic person I could have ever been graced to speak to. The love I felt with her almost made the time I had spent alone worth it. I married her, and we had three children: a boy and two girls. I felt so much love, and so much joy, and one day, when I was very old, I went to sleep, and I returned to nothingness once more. If I could’ve chosen to move an inch, just a single inch, I would’ve used it to smile, just to smile. I was happy, yet for the fourth time, I was not given time to process what just occurred, for I was thrust into another life with another person with a missing face, and so it happened again and again and again and again. I lived through what felt like thousands of lives, and in each one, a person with a missing face served a pivotal role. I was Aryaveer Sharanya, a police officer with unshakable morals who died in the line of duty. I was Aniket Shresth, a homeless man who grew famous for his style of living before dying peacefully of old age. I was Amogh Satyadev, a lawyer who defended his clients faultlessly until eventually being killed by one of them. After a long while, an eternity even, I was born into a life in which my parents named me Avinash, and my last name

was Shilla. In this life, I felt everything rush past me as if I were skipping through pages in a book. There was no continuity to this life, there was no significance in a thing. The only things of note in my life were my plain and boring apartment, my mindless and soul-crushing job, and my therapist, who I always neglected to see. I did not die in this life. It just stopped; it ceased for no particular reason, and for a moment, I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry because I was crushed by the fact that, through all the lives I had just lived, the one which I should've been most happy to return to was the worst of all. I had nothing before. I was at a loss for words for just how much nothing had consumed me before a physical, tangible nothing took its place. I did not return to darkness after I was done this time. Instead, I woke into a dream, the first of its kind since I had cleaned that mirror of steam, a travesty that now feels as if it never happened to me and instead to another person, a person who must've suffered more than any living being on the planet, a person whom I feel nothing but pity towards.

I found myself walking down a path in the woods. It was dark, extremely dark, yet I walked down the path regardless. It didn't take long for me to recall my previous experience with this very same forest. Things were different this time; the burgundy was gone, and the light was not present like last time. After a short while, I came to the pit, the same abyss that had plunged me into nothingness before. I looked down into the pit, and I saw the life of one Avinash Shilla. I saw his office space, his colorless apartment, and his therapist tapping their foot, awaiting his arrival, an arrival that would never occur. I saw the search parties looking for him after his disappearance and how it took less than a week for them to give up and less than a month for his

cubicle at work to be filled by another tired-looking worker. After I saw all of this, I was compelled only to step to my left and to go around the pit. I saw my fate, or more accurately, the fate of Avinash Shilla, and I felt nothing but apathy towards it.

Before I took another step, I found myself standing in the bathroom, the spotless bathroom, with stone tile floors and a large claw-footed bathtub, and to its left was a sink with an oval-shaped steam-covered mirror resting on a swivel above it. Not everything was the same, however. The window was no longer covered with steam. Instead, I could clearly see flashing images of the lives I lived prior to arriving here. All of them, every important moment, everything I cling to, all of it was reflected in the light of the window.

My attention quickly shifted from the window to the mirror. I stepped to approach it, yet I felt no fear, none at all. I felt welcomed by it. I felt at peace. I reached my hand out to wipe the familiar mirror, an act I was sure I wouldn't regret. I had made my peace. I was ready to see it again, to have my mind torn asunder and destroyed. I wiped my hand across the mirror, and as the steam dissipated, I felt only happiness. I did not see an empty void in the place of the face of Avinash Shilla. Instead, a bright light emanated from the place where the dark void had once been. The essence of the experience itself oozed out of the light, now illuminating the room. I knew what it was the second I saw it, and it affected me. It was warm and happy and imbued with the joy of a million lived lives and a thousand pivotal experiences, I knew it to contain joy so profound it could erase suffering to the highest degree.



I could not possibly divert my eyes. I could not possibly look away, for I was filled with so much joy, so much happiness, I could do nothing but bask in it. I looked into the face, and I saw something that brought me joy that couldn't possibly be quantified. I looked at the face, and I saw the face of everyone who I had seen throughout my life. I saw the face of my murderer, I saw the face of my wife, I saw the face of my father, I saw the face of everyone who I loved. I saw a joy that would never end, and in an instant, I was back. I was back to my familial darkness, a prison that had once consumed me whole. I would remain here for a short while for a while, yet not too long. I stayed until I was ready to move on and live one more life before the machinations of my mind ceased, and I was rendered mentally inert.

In an instant I was born to a loving mother and father, a mother and father who I stayed in touch with and loved until their last moments. I paid attention in school and followed my passion until the end. I met the love of my life, and I devoted every free second I could to her. I became a painter who was famous for his depictions of landscapes, particularly mountains. I lived a full life, a life completely defined by peace, happiness, and, above all else, freedom. I, then, like all living creatures, died, and many attended my funeral. Many sobbed at my grave, which was almost always covered with flowers and gifts, and on that grave was inscribed a name. That name was mine. It was the only name I ever truly possessed, Avinash Shilla. And then it all stopped, all reached its terminus, and again, I found myself in darkness, yet it felt warm; it felt purposeful, and I knew that such a feeling could only grow. I know instantly that it all must be coming to a close. The tales I have weaved myself are ending. Yet I also know that it will not be

the end for me, for I will live eternally within myself whether I realize it or not, a fact which comforts me more than anything, for no matter what happens, I know myself to have been something important, even if only to myself, even if only in my head, I have become so much more than a twenty-three-year-old man in a cramped apartment, working a boring job, so much more, and truthfully, that is all I need in, proof that I have been something, proof that I have lived.