

## **A Conversation of Inconclusive Results**

*A Short Story by Brad OH Inc.*

The events of that Saturday night were ultimately a complete waste. Ethan had gone out with the sole intention of finding some means of distraction from the stress of his impending graduation, and failing that, had chosen to get exceptionally drunk. Sadly, his fixation on the future had accompanied him into his intoxicated state, rather than being alleviated by it.

With these distractions playing through his head, Ethan had chosen a bar far off campus, one seldom frequented by his academic peers.

So now he sat, absentmindedly spinning his beer around in the golden puddle spreading slowly out from beneath it as the small speakers mounted in each corner churned out muffled approximations of songs he'd never heard. It was an hour from closing time, but only minutes before everything really began going to hell.

"Everything's fucked," Ethan groaned.

Ethan was unhappy.

"Pretty much," replied Desmond, seated comfortably to Ethan's right.

"It's not that bad," Andrew chimed in to his left.

The room was mostly vacant- the dim light cast by the two battered old chandeliers barely reaching its furthest edges. Ethan's table sat, somewhat lopsided, at the far right corner beyond the thick metal door leading outside. With his back to an old grey wall decorated with a strange variety of oddities and memorabilia, Ethan faced the bar at the other end of the room.

Made of polished redwood, the bar stretched from just beyond the entrance all the way to the far wall. A lone man walked back and forth behind it, alternatingly polishing glasses and running a sloppy grey dishrag over his workspace.

The tables were low and heavy- big wooden structures whose shine had worn off long ago. Each was lined with long scars and crags from years of drunken abuse, with small illegible etchings carved into many of them- forgotten declarations of eternal love, announcements of specific patronage, and assorted obscenities.

Few of these were populated, though one lone man sat near the entryway at a single table wedged awkwardly between a worn pool table and the hallway leading to the dilapidated restrooms.

An old disco ball sent a shower of light twirling around the empty space opposite the stranger- likely the only activity the dance floor had seen in a good while. The entire room reeked of stale beer and old eggs, though the source of only one was immediately identifiable.

"What's left now?" asked Ethan, sprawling across the table as his brown and green striped polo shirt drank deeply of the beer still remaining from a spill hours prior.

"Nothing," Desmond flipped a toothpick into his mouth with a grin.

"Everything!" insisted Andrew, casting an irritated glance across the table. Desmond took no notice.

Ethan peeled himself up slowly from the mess of cloth and booze, a long wet slurp accompanying his efforts. He glanced over briefly as a small group entered the bar and took one of the many empty tables near the dance floor. To Ethan's chagrin, they seemed in fine spirits. "I don't even know what I'm meant to be doing."

"Isn't that up to you?" Andrew leaned over the table, unconcerned about his elbow, which drifted precariously close Ethan's little lake of wasted but unforsaken beer.

"Isn't that the essence of his problem?" Desmond's expression of innocent intrigue fit him as naturally as empathy on an alligator.

"It really is!" Ethan nodded his head enthusiastically, then let it roll in a long looping circle before finally bringing it to rest facing no one in particular as he resumed his woeful diatribe. "What do I have to look forward to? Now I'll just get some job I'll hate, raise kids who won't appreciate me, and finally I'll accept the cold embrace of death."

"Well at least there's that death part then," quipped Desmond, leaning back in his chair and interlacing his hands behind his head. Desmond was tall and lean, and wore his shock of dark hair mussed up with intricate apathy.

"Don't be morbid," Andrew said with a sigh. He shifted in his seat, rotating to better face Ethan, or perhaps to better avoid facing Desmond. Andrew wore a vibrant t-shirt depicting a wizard riding a wild boar. No one really understood his affection for such irreverence, nor did it ever seem to fit his stoic demeanour. The shirt did fit his strong arms particularly well however, and was therefore seldom the cause of significant chastising. "I'm sure when you sober up you'll look back and realise how rewarding your life has been so far."

"I thought looking back at your life was exactly what death was for," mused Desmond before taking a long swallow of his thick red ale.

Ethan laughed despite himself- a sloppy, frantic sound that sent a pale trickle of beer running down his lightly stubbled chin. "That's just what I'd need- to endure a rerun of my sorry fucking life before I died. Do you think there's any option to skip that whole to-do?"

Andrew pushed his chair against the wall with a long screech, leaning his large frame back and crossing his legs. On his face was fixed a baleful, disappointed expression. "Are you really going to sit here and lament everything you've ever accomplished Ethan? You're being ridiculous. You're a great guy, and have plenty to be thrilled about going forward. Can't you think of anything you're proud of?"

"Do keg-stands and courtesans count?" Desmond asked, but went ignored.

"I'm not trying to be an asshole here." Ethan answered the first question put to him. Perhaps trying to mimic Andrews's adjustment, he slid back in his seat, and then downward, slouching like a wax sculpture left in the sun. "I know I'm lucky. I have a lot to be thankful for, I'm not arguing that. But right now, all that only makes it tougher. I know who I am, what I was given, and what I'm capable of. I know all the expectations on me, all the different opinions of what I might be. It's just that I have no clue what I really want.

"It's a lot to handle- I don't know how you guys are so calm about it," he finished.

"Well that's what good company is for, isn't it?" Andrew reassured, swallowing back the last of his beer.

"No, that's what beer is for. Happily, good company serves good beer. Isn't it your round Andy?" Desmond asked with a smirk.

"I told you not to call me that. And no- in fact it's your round Desmond, if you'd be so kind." Andrew slid his empty cup across the table.

"Damn." Desmond rolled his eyes back and placed the back of his hand to his forehead in a faux expression of grief. Standing, he spat his gnawed toothpick into an empty glass and turned to make his way to the bar with a merry declaration- "Be right back Drew!"

With a chuckle, Ethan stared down into his empty cup, sighed, and began to drag his finger back and forth through the spilled beer in front of him, leaving little yellow lightning bolts zagging towards him and dripping down onto his legs. "I know what you're gonna to say Andrew. 'This is only the beginning- an exciting new chapter in my life.' You're right too. But all that talk about having your life flash before your eyes- that ending point really gets to me. It's been pretty great, I've had a lot of laughs and experienced nothing but success. But I'm not sure how much of that was me and how much was predetermined. I've been on a direct path for so long- now I have to begin making my own decisions. Now it's all up to me to fuck up. "

"Well maybe you need to consider this flashback differently. You're not dying tonight to the best of my knowledge. You'll die a long time from now, and this choice will just be another one of the many events you look back on then. The question is, how will you feel when you look back on it?"

"Hopefully better than he did when we reminded him what he did last time he got this drunk... What are we talking about?" Desmond interrupted, speaking primarily for his own amusement, as usual. Sitting back at the table, he divided out the drinks. A short, stout glass filled with thick red ale for himself. For Ethan there was a tall glass of pale beer, and for Andrew, a thin, colorful drink with a melon wedge sticking out of it like the mast of a sunken galleon.

"You're such a fucking dick Desmond." Andrew complained, dredging out the melon and tossing it at Desmond, just missing his shining white grin.

"That's a pretty mean thing to say to your friend Andrew." Desmond stared across at the bigger man, holding his gaze until he saw the expected blush creeping up his neck and reddening his cheeks. Andrew could never hold his ground if he felt someone else may have been hurt by his actions. "... Christ you're a pussy."

"I guess that's one way to look at it." Ethan refocused the conversation, taking a small sip of his new beer. "It certainly doesn't take the pressure off it though- if I fuck up this decision, not only will it ruin the rest of my life, but I'll have to reflect on how it all went wrong before I kick it. Jesus, would time ever drag looking back on that!"

"You're focussing on the negatives again Ethan. Maybe we should switch drinks- this one seems a bit more... fun?" Ethan laughed again, while Desmond cast a cautionary glance to ward against any unforeseen drink switching. "Take your time with this decision, do what's right for you, and time will fly by. Think of how amazing it would feel to look back at that, and all the other times where you just kicked ass in life. It sounds like a pretty good way to go!"

The smile that spread across Desmond's face now was not one of mocking insincerity. His lips curled into a self-satisfied sickle as he leaned over the table, examining each of his companions in turn. "Happy memories or not Ethan, time is hardly going to fly. It's your fucking deathbed we're talking about here. Death! The one, absolute thing humans are evolved to avoid. That's the pinnacle of unpleasant right there."

"He's right." Ethan slouched back down in his chair and took a long pull from his cup. "Shit... if time slows down when we're having a bad time, and death is the worst thing that can happen- wouldn't time stand still when we die? I mean, think of it graphically- wouldn't death form an asymptote where the experience of time is infinite in that one single instant?"

"You know why you're always so down Ethan?" asked Andrew.

"Because he's the kind of asshole who goes to a bar with his friends and uses words like 'asymptote'?" Desmond smirked momentarily, but caught himself at the severity of the topic, and bit his lip to fight off the temptation of further heckling.

"No!" Andrew was getting frustrated. "Because when he looks back on his life, he only looks for negatives and regrets. It's no use living with your mind fixed on what's already done. You need to look ahead."

"At the very least, it's a helpful perspective on life." Ethan mused absently.

"What?" Andrew asked.

Desmond smiled in silence.

"Think about what we have here," Ethan's voice rose in excitement, his hand grasping tightly about the stem of his half empty glass. "Here we are, imagining me at the second of my untimely demise. In that moment I'm granted, mercifully no doubt, an opportunity to look back on my life- all my successes and regrets."

"So what will you see?" Andrew asked, sipping slowly from his long black straw and leaning forward in his seat.

"A close-up of the floor, smeared in your own vomit?" offered Desmond, leaving his sense of propriety where he'd found it.

"Shut up you idiots. Not only that, but we've agreed that time slows down when you're having a bad experience, and that death is the worst possible experience. That means this event would theoretically- and certainly in the graphical sense- last forever.

"So, I lie dying- my experience of which is eternal- and look back at my life, reflecting on my decisions."

"Heaven," promised Andrew.

"Hell," Desmond chided simultaneously.

"Jesus..." Ethan lamented, sliding further down in his chair as his eyes grew distant and glassy.

"Well does that help you make your decision?" Andrew swallowed the last of his drink, wiped his mouth with a napkin he'd had folded in his pocket, and leaned his weight onto his elbow.

"Or just further terrify you as to its magnitude?" Desmond asked, smiling as he held his glass up, tipped it skyward, and held it until the deep amber liquid disappeared down his throat. He belched loudly.

"What decision? Let's get more beer." A thin trace of saliva dropped from Ethan's chin, down onto his polo.

"Last call is done buddy, but you can owe me for next time." Desmond mumbled, stretching as he rose from the table.

"Oh leave him alone, he's had a long night," cautioned Andrew, rising and circling around the table. Evening off with Desmond, he stood patiently. Ethan leaned to one side, and then the other as his legs began to straighten in turns under the old wooden table. Leaning forward, he placed one hand heavily onto its surface for support, and slowly worked to elevate his midsection as he wavered back and forth under the effort.

Just as his ascension was all but achieved, Ethan's hand slipped in the puddle of beer on the table, sending his mass careening forward onto its surface, taking it off balance and sending him pouring over its far end. He was left buried beneath the tables upturned frame.

"Holy shit! Are you ok Ethan?" Andrew shot around to one side, hooking his arm under Ethan's as he heaved the table off of him.

Laughing hysterically, and entirely unable to catch his breath, Desmond did the same on the other side.

"Get out, you damned idiots!" bellowed the bartender.

Working together, Andrew and Desmond managed to hoist Ethan up, and began their way across the bar on the long trek for home. "What were we talking about just now?" Ethan's voice was slurred, and came in fits and halts.

"You were doing some real soul searching Ethan, I'll tell you about it in the morning," Andrew assured him as he held the door open with one large hand.

Helping guide the human tangle over the threshold, Desmond could feel the cool night air against his face. "Now won't that be a treat. Don't worry Ethan, I'll be there too. Wouldn't want it to take too long, would we?" he asked, rolling his eyes.

Together the three friends made their way down the quiet streets. Ethan sagged heavily between them, but supported at each shoulder he continued to trudge along. A dying streetlight flickered above them, its efforts supported only by the dim light of the moon, hidden between buildings.

Ethan's feet caught and dragged on the broken cement of the roadway, finally ceasing to move at all, causing the procession to halt long enough for him to empty the contents of his stomach down onto his shoes. Then, after a short bout of weary laughter, they continued on.

"Oh Ethan my wayward friend, why do we always need to carry you?" asked Desmond.