

### Death of a Protist

I don't know you. I don't know how long you're supposed to live for. But... for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I don't know if this is my fault or not. We were told you probably wouldn't make it to the weekend, and it's Saturday now, so... it might have been inevitable. But it could be on me— could be the light from the microscope making it so hot you can't stand it anymore. Either way, I'm sorry. Even more so if it's my fault. It doesn't make it easier if it isn't.

You didn't ask for this. You didn't ask for anything; you don't have a brain. But here we are. I can't imagine how it feels for you to be... you know, just you. Again, you don't have a brain, so it probably doesn't feel at all. Again, not that it makes it any easier.

I bet there's a billion of you. Definitely there are at least that many. Probably hundreds of billions. Some of them are literally exactly like you— you might have made them yourself.

You know, the first time I saw something die, I was more amazed than anything else. It was an amoeba, but that doesn't change the fact that I went, "Woah! Professor, come look at this! I think it's dying!" Not, "Oh my god, I'm watching something's life end." And then when my lab teacher came over and said yes, it was in fact dying, I went, "Woah. That's... woah." And I wasn't bothered. I just kind of sat there and watched as the cell wall broke open and the cytoplasm leaked out into the ether and pooled around the dead amoeba's body and the class kept moving around me as if a life hadn't just ended. The world spun on and not one tear was shed.

Halfway through watching the lifeblood spill from the empty vessel that had been its body, I thought, "Wow. That's... that's really screwed up. I just watched something die." I was more amazed at how it happened than the fact that it had. It was so fast and slow at the same

time— in a split second the barrier between the cell and the outside had a hole in it, and I knew instantly the cell was dying, but the actual act took so long. I'd say it was like a balloon deflating if the balloon had been filled with molasses. And then once the air finally left the balloon there was nothing. No last words, no scream of pain, no anything. Just silence from me and the sounds of a science lab from all around.

And now I'm here with you.

Fifteen, twenty, maybe thirty minutes ago, there were seven of you in the drop of water I loaded onto the slide. Maybe some of those were your relatives, your parents or children or siblings— I don't know how protists trace their family trees. Maybe they weren't. I don't know. I watched one of them die, too. Slowing down, just like you are now. At first, I thought he'd hit the drop of stuff we put in to make you guys slow down since you're so fast. And then I thought maybe he was going to start mitosis. And then I thought maybe he didn't know where he wanted to go and so he wasn't moving very fast. And then I thought maybe he was tired and wanting to take a break. And then he started going so slow that I knew he was about to not go any more at all. Just like you're starting to go slow right now.

I know you definitely can't hear me. You're here in the first place so I can learn about cellular anatomy, so I know you don't have any sort of ears to hear me with. And even if you did, I don't know if you'd understand me. But I realize how messed up it'd be if someone let me die alone. And so regardless of whether or not you can hear me or whether it's my fault you're dying. I'm here.

I can't hold your hand, 'cause you don't have any. You just have a body and some cilia to move you around. Anyway you're so small even if you did have hands, I'd crush them trying to hold them. And also, I'd crush you.

I'm sorry. Again, I don't know if this is my fault, or if this is just old age, I don't know. But I'm sorry.

I'm crying over a protist. Imagine this question on the quiz: *What is a paramecium?* Well, it's a single celled protist with a nucleus, cytoplasm, food vacuoles, contractile vacuoles, a mouth opening, and cilia. It uses the cilia to move around and swims in a spiral motion. Oh, yeah, and I spent fifteen minutes on a Saturday afternoon crying over one. I watched two of them die before my very eyes. Give me my ten points please.

I don't know why I'm crying. Is it this... this human part of me that knows somehow, some way, I'll come to the same end as you and everything else in the universe? If I'm lucky, it'll be like this. Quiet. Peaceful. Someone there who cares for one reason or another. I'm old and reaching the end of my time. And maybe I'll be asleep, and my heart will just slow down and go slower and slower until it can't go any slower and so it just stops. And then I stop.

Maybe it's emotion. Maybe I'm just emotional. But I don't think anyone should have to die alone.

Maybe part of me thinks it's my fault; I am the one taking this class, the reason you're here on my slide in the first place. But then again, maybe I'm the reason you were alive in the first place. Not me, exactly, but people like me. And again, it is my slide you ended up on. And you were supposed to die anyway. So maybe it's not my fault. Could be the lamp on the

microscope, but it could just be... could just be time. Time's what gets all of us anyway. One way or another, we run out of it. Maybe we get to the point where our body can't handle any more time or maybe we're in the wrong place at the wrong time or maybe we never had enough time in the first place, but it gets us all the same.

Again, I'm sorry. I know I've said it already. I know it doesn't help. I know none of this helps. And that you're not hearing any of it. Even if you were at first, I know you can't now, wherever you are. I don't know.

I guess now I'm supposed to just take this slide and wash it off and then you'll go down the drain, and no one else will ever think of you, the individual you, ever again. Probably I'm the only one that ever thought of the individual you in the first place. That's what happens to us all, no matter how great you are. We live and we make impressions on the people around us and then we run out of time and so do the people around us and then our memories fade like our pictures on the wall, sitting in the sun for so long that not even the paper remembers what's supposed to be on it. And even if we've done something great enough or terrible enough to end us up in a book, the people reading the books don't really know us, don't know the sound of our voice and the smell of our hair and the way our eyes scrunch up when we're laughing really hard. They don't know the way we talk fast and loud when we get excited, or the way we drop everything to pet a dog, or the way we pick at our fingernails when we're nervous. They don't know our memories or our feelings; won't know about the time we cut our foot on a rock and the scar we still have, won't know about the way we loved to lay out and watch the stars, won't know the way the scent of woodsmoke from a campfire cleared our minds and made our hearts sing like nobody was listening. The stories won't know us, they'll only know about us; about the things we did or didn't do and the people we associated with and maybe they'll know how people who

knew us described us, but that's not the same. And even if it was, one day the books will all fall apart, and the internet will crash and then we'll be alive only in the stories important enough to be told by words whispered to children at night to fill them with awe. And even then, even when the thinnest sliver of what was once our memory is alive only in stories, stories don't exist when there's no one to tell them, and eventually the sun will explode or the oceans will rise so high we can't do anything but tread water until we drown or the Earth will get so hot we just can't stand it any longer. Just like maybe you couldn't stand the heat any longer. Or maybe it was old age. And then the universe will rinse clean the slide that was our memory, and the cosmos will spin on as the particles that used to be our bodies return once more to stardust and then nobody will need to remember anything again.

But that's another time, another place, another people. Right now, it's just me and your memory and the hum of the lights and the vague sound of rain falling outside the window. The world spins on and the universe watches indifferent to the lives of microscopic beings such as yourself and of larger ones like myself, and all around me in other rooms people go about their business like usual. And here I am, sitting by myself in a room full of corpses, talking to a ghost.

I guess it's nice to know that even if for only 15 minutes you, you tiny little paramecium, so small I can't see you without a microscope, you mattered. Even if it's just to me. Maybe, when eventually happens and we all return to stardust, our ghosts will dance together under the light of the stars and the universe's memory of us will return once more, even for just a fleeting second, and nobody will have to wipe anything clean. Just maybe.