

Twenty MINUTES DEAD

The hidden pattern inside thousands of near-death experiences,
and what it tells us about what comes next.



FREE
PREVIEW

DEJAN MAJKIC



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The Prologue and the first four chapters of the full book.

A Note Before You Begin

This is a book about a pattern. The same handful of things, reported in the same order, by people who have nothing else in common. Different countries. Different centuries. Different ideas about God, or none at all. All of them crossed some line between living and not, and all of them came back describing the same shape of journey.

It is built from decades of documented cases, gathered by physicians and researchers who did not set out looking for this and often spent years trying to explain it away before they gave up trying. And it is built from a loss of my own, the one that sent me looking in the first place.

What follows is the Prologue and the first four chapters, exactly as they appear in the finished book. They set down the fear most of us carry, hand you the picture the whole book is built on, and then walk you through the very first step of the journey itself, the moment a person lets go of the body and finds, to their surprise, that they are still there.

Where this preview ends, the traveler is already mid-flight toward the second step. The rest of the crossing continues in the full book.

Prologue: The Man Who Saw Too Much

I didn't go looking for this.

For most of my life I thought death was simple. You're here, and then you're not. The lights go out, and that's the end of the sentence. I wasn't angry about it. I figured that was the deal, and the only grown-up thing to do was not stare at it too long.

Then I started reading. I read because I'd lost someone, and some part of me wanted to know where he went, even though I was fairly sure the real answer was nowhere. I expected to find wishful thinking. Comfort for people who couldn't face the plain truth.

That isn't what I found.

I found ordinary people, from every country and every kind of belief, telling almost the same story. They had nothing in common. Different lives, different languages, different ideas about God or no God at all. Except for one thing. For a few minutes, by every measure we know how to take, they had died. And then they came back, and they described what happened in between. The descriptions matched. Not loosely. They matched in small, specific detail, over and over, in a way I could not explain away no matter how much I wanted to.

One case stopped me cold. I keep going back to it. I want to start there, because if it happened the way the people in the room swear it did, then nearly everything I believed about dying is wrong.

There was an operating room. A surgeon. A patient with no pulse. And twenty minutes that were not supposed to be possible.

Let me tell you about them.

The surgeon's name was Lloyd Rudy. He was one of the best heart surgeons in the country, a man who had done thousands of these operations and seen almost everything a body can do. Near the end of his own life he sat down in front of a camera and told this story. He'd had a partner in the room that day, a second surgeon, who later confirmed every word of it.

The patient was a man with a failing heart. An infection had started somewhere small, in his mouth, and traveled through him until it settled in one of his heart valves and began eating it away. Rudy opened his chest to replace the valve and repair the damage. The operation itself went fine. The trouble came at the end.

For surgery like this, they stop your heart and let a machine breathe for you and pump your blood. When the work is done, they ease you back onto your own heart slowly, turning the machine down bit by bit. This man's heart would not take over. Every time they backed the machine off, his blood pressure dropped through the floor. They tried again. Same thing. They tried for hours.

At some point there is nothing left to try. Rudy made the call. They turned the machine off. Someone wrote a time of death on a certificate. Someone walked out to the waiting room and told the man's wife that her husband was gone.

Then the room did what rooms do after a death. It began to empty.

The anesthesiologist shut down his equipment and went to the lounge to eat. He hadn't had anything all day. The assistant surgeon loosely closed the man's chest, the way you do before a body goes for examination. Staff started clearing the instruments away. Rudy and his partner pulled off their gowns and gloves and masks and stood together in the doorway, arms folded, talking low about what else they might have done. A different drug. A different move. The conversation you have when you've lost one.

One thing got missed. In all the shutting down, nobody switched off the monitors. So the screens kept running over an empty body. Flat line. No heartbeat. No pressure. No breath. There was even a small microphone that had been placed inside him earlier to listen to his heart, and it kept listening, and it heard nothing at all.

Twenty minutes passed.

I want you to sit with that for a second. Not twenty seconds. Twenty minutes with no heartbeat, no pressure, no breath, in a room where two surgeons had already given up and a wife had already been told she was a widow.

Then a screen flickered.

A little electrical activity, faint. They figured it was nothing. Dead hearts twitch sometimes. But it didn't stop. It grew. The twitch became a beat. Slow at first, thirty or forty a minute, then steadier. He started making his own blood pressure. Nobody had touched him. Nobody had restarted a thing. He was coming back on his own.

Rudy started shouting for the anesthesiologist to get back in. They put the man under again, gave him oxygen, gave him medicine. His numbers climbed. His heart held. It took him a day or two to wake up, and when he did, he was whole. No brain damage. Nothing missing. A man who had been dead for twenty minutes, awake and talking.

And then he told them what he had seen.

He said he'd been up near the ceiling, looking down on all of it. He described the two surgeons standing in the doorway with their arms crossed. He described the anesthesiologist coming back into the room. He talked about a light, and a feeling, the things you'll hear people in this book describe again and again. But that wasn't the part that got to Rudy.

The part that got to Rudy was the notes.

While the operation was going on, a nurse had been taking phone messages for him. Calls he would need to return later. She wrote each one down and stuck it on the monitor, one on top of the next, in a little stack. The patient described that stack. Where it sat. How the notes were layered up.

Here is the thing. Those notes were not there when the surgery began. There were no messages yet. They were written and stuck up one by one while the man lay opened on the table with his eyes taped shut and no pulse. He could not have seen them on the way under. He could not have seen them days later, waking up in another room. The only stretch of time when those notes existed, in that order, on that screen, was the stretch of time he was dead.

When Rudy told this on camera, an old man by then, he got emotional. He didn't dress it up or reach for a theory. He just looked at the man across from him and asked the only question that was left.

Was that his soul up there?¹

I can't prove the answer. Neither could he. But this is the part I could never get past, and it's the reason for this whole book. Rudy's case isn't remarkable because it's a strange one-off. It's remarkable because it isn't alone. There are thousands like it. Different hospitals, different decades, different people who never met and never could have. And when you lay their accounts down side by side, the same thing keeps happening, in the same order, almost every single time.

That pattern is what we're going to walk through together. Five steps that show up over and over in the testimony of people who went out past the edge of their own life and came back to tell us what was there.

And if you've come to this book because someone you love is gone, I want to say one thing before we begin. You did not lose them into nothing. The people who have been to that edge are nearly unanimous about it. Stay with me, and I'll show you why.

Chapter 1: The Fear We Carry

It usually shows up at three in the morning.

You didn't ask for it. You went to bed at a normal hour, fell asleep the way you always do, and then at some point in the night you were awake, staring at the dark ceiling. The thought was already there. It came in without knocking.

One day this ends.

That's the whole thought. Sometimes it comes dressed up in details. Sometimes it comes naked, just like that. One day this ends. One day the bed will still be here and I won't. The room will still have the same walls, the same picture, the same window, and I will not be anywhere in it.

You try the normal things. You count your breath. You tell yourself, sensibly, that everyone dies and there is no reason to be awake about it at 3 a.m. Sometimes that works. A lot of the time it doesn't. Sometimes you just lie there until the sky starts to change color outside the window, and then the thought quiets down and goes back to wherever it goes during the day, and you get up and make coffee and start your morning.

If it doesn't visit you at three in the morning, it visits you somewhere else.

Maybe it is in the car, on a road you have driven a thousand times, and for one second the whole thing seems too thin, like a picture painted on paper, and you can almost see through it. Maybe it is at a family lunch when you look across the table at your parents and notice how much they have aged, and something cold sits down in your stomach for a second, and you push it away and reach for the bread. Maybe it is a headline. The sound of an ambulance passing your window. A bad piece of news about someone your age. It shows up in different clothes. It is the same thing.

If you have ever felt it, in any of its clothes, I want you to know two things right at the start of this book. You are not alone. And I have felt it too.

THE ONE WE DON'T TALK ABOUT

Before I say another word, I want to look at this fear with you honestly. Not around it. Straight at it. I want to do that before I offer you a single line of comfort, because I have read enough books that hurry to make you feel better, and you can tell when a book is hurrying. You feel a little talked down to. You feel like the author is embarrassed by your fear and wants to hustle you past it so we can all get to the good part.

I don't want to do that to you. I want to sit down in this room with you first, and look at what you are afraid of.

Here is the thing almost nobody has ever said out loud to you.

When we say we are afraid of death, most of us are actually afraid of two very different things at the same time, and we have never noticed they are different. We carry them tangled together in one big knot, and we call the whole knot "fear of death." But they are not the same, and pulling them apart is the first useful thing this book can do for you.

Let me pull them apart now.

The first is the fear of dying.

That is the fear of the last stretch of the road. The pain that might come. The hospital room. Machines beeping. Tubes. Losing control of a body that has been yours for your whole life. Being weak in front of people who used to see you strong. Being alone at the end, if you are alone. Or being surrounded by people you love and knowing you are about to leave them, which somehow feels even worse than being alone.

This fear has a shape. You can see it. You can describe it out loud. It is real, and this book is not going to pretend it isn't. Every one of us is going to walk the last stretch of that road, and we have every right to be afraid of parts of it.

But here is the point worth sitting with. This fear, however big and dark, is fear of a process. Processes have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Processes can be prepared for. Medicine, at its best, can be very kind to a person walking that last stretch. There are things you can do, and things the people who love you can do, that make the walk gentler. Whole professions exist to help with it. This fear is real. It is also, in a way, workable.

The second fear is different. This one is much harder to talk about, because it has no shape at all.

It is not fear of the road. It is fear of what is at the end of the road. The end of you. Not the tired you. Not the sick you. Not the you with the tubes and the machines. Just you. The one reading this sentence right now. The idea, hard to hold in your head for more than a second before it slides away, that at some point that one is gone.

If you sit with that for a moment, you will notice something strange. It is very hard to picture. Every time you try, you sneak yourself into the picture. You imagine your own funeral, but you are watching it. You imagine an empty world with no you in it, but you are the one imagining it. You cannot actually get to the picture, because the thing you

would need in order to have the picture, you, is exactly the thing that is supposed to be missing from it.

That is the second fear. That is the one that wakes you at three in the morning.

THE WHOLE MONSTER IS SMALLER THAN IT LOOKS

So now we have two fears where before we had one. Fear of dying, which is fear of the road. And fear of death, which is fear of the end of you.

What good does that do us?

More than you would think.

Because when you pull them apart, the first one, the fear of dying, gets smaller. Not because it stops being scary. It stays scary. It gets smaller because you can look at it. You can plan for it. You can talk about it with your doctor, with your family, with a priest or a friend or a book. A fear that has a shape can be worked with. A fear that has a shape can be walked toward, slowly, in daylight, and most of what looked terrible about it from far away turns out to be either less terrible up close, or manageable, or bearable in the company of people who love you.

I am not telling you the fear of dying goes away. I am telling you that once you name it as its own thing, you can begin to reduce it. This is not a promise from a self-help book. This is just what happens when you look at something straight.

Now we are left with the other one. The shapeless one. The fear of death itself.

I want to stay with that for a moment, because most books rush past it, and I promised you I wouldn't.

Here is the middle-of-the-night version of it, said plainly. What if there is nothing. What if the lights go off, and there is no one there to notice that the lights went off. What if everyone you love, every song you know, every meal, every stupid argument in a car about which way to go, all of it, ends when your body ends. And you are, in whatever sense the word "gone" means anything, gone.

I have lain awake with that one. I would guess you have too.

I am not going to try to talk you out of it today. That is what the rest of this book is for, and I do not want to do it in a paragraph. But I want to do one smaller thing before we move on. I want to loosen it a little.

A FIRST LOOSENING

When you lie there at three in the morning, and the fear is naming all the things it is about to take from you, look carefully at the "you" it is talking about.

It is a very specific you.

It is the you with your name. Your face in the mirror this morning. Your job, and the title on your email signature, and the amount of money in your bank account. Your address. The people you count as yours. The story you have been telling yourself, for as long as you can remember, about who you are and how you got here.

That version of you is real. Nobody is trying to argue you out of it.

I just want you to notice something about it. It is not the whole of you. And it never has been.

Get a picture in your head. If you can, actually pull out an old photo of yourself. From twenty years ago. Or thirty. Or a picture of you as a child. Look at the face.

That face is not the face you have now. Not the same weight. Not the same lines. Not the same haircut. If the photo is old enough, not even the same eyes, not in any way you can put your finger on. The clothes are wrong. The pose is a pose you would never do now. The smile is a smile you have not made in years.

That person was you. That person was completely, without any doubt, you. If you saw the photo without knowing, you would say, that is a stranger. But it is not a stranger. It is you.

Now think about the job. What did you do for a living at seventeen? At twenty five? At thirty? Almost certainly not what you do now. The address is different. The friends are different, or if some of them are the same, the friendship is different. The story you tell about your own life has been rewritten, quietly, without you noticing, more times than you can count. What you thought was the point of your life at twenty is not what you think is the point of your life now. What broke your heart at nineteen you can barely remember. What you were sure would define you forever, at thirty, has been folded into a two sentence version you tell at dinner.

You are holding all of this together right now and calling it "me." You do it out of habit. Everybody does. But every layer of that "me" has been moving your entire life. The face, the job, the address, the story, all of it. Nothing about the "me" you are afraid of losing has been sitting still, ever.

And still, under all of it, something has been sitting there watching the whole show.

Something has been calling itself "I" the whole time. Something was in the room when you were six years old and afraid of the dark. Something was in the room the first day of school. Something was there the first time somebody broke your heart. Something is here now, reading this sentence, in whatever room you happen to be in tonight. That something is not the face. It is not the job. It is not the story. All of those have changed. It is still here.

Whatever that something is, it has already outlived a dozen versions of you. Maybe more. The five year old who cried on the first day of school is gone. That person's face is gone. That person's fears are gone. That person's ideas about the world are gone. But you did not die when he did. Something carried on. Something kept using the word "I."

I am not asking you to believe anything about that something yet. I am not going to tell you what it is. I do not fully know. The rest of this book is a slow attempt to find out.

I am just asking you to notice that it is there.

To notice that what comes and goes, the face and the job and the story, was never the whole of you. It was the outside layer. There has been something underneath, the whole time, that has watched the outside layer change.

That is the first loosening.

It does not lift the fear off you. I am not going to lie and say it does. The fear will still visit you at three in the morning. But maybe, once you have noticed the something underneath, the fear will not be sitting on your chest all by itself. Maybe there is a hand under it now. Small. Quiet. Just a hand.

That is all I want from this chapter.

A HINT OF THE NEXT ONE

There is a picture I am going to open in the next chapter. I will not open it here, because the whole next chapter is built on it, and I do not want to spend it now. But I want to hand it to you as a hint, so you carry it with you when you turn the page.

When you look at the sea from a boat, you see the surface.

You see the waves. The light on the water. The white on top when the wind picks up. Those are all real. They are also not the sea. The sea is under them. Quiet, enormous, older than any of the waves on top of it. When one of those waves rises, it looks for a moment like a separate thing. It has a shape. You could give it a name if you wanted. And when the wave

falls back down into the water, it does not really end. It goes back into what it was already part of.

That may mean nothing to you right now. It may mean everything by the end of the next chapter. Just hold the picture in your mind. That is where we are going.

THE ONE WRITING TO YOU, AND THE ONE READING

If you opened this book not because you are afraid of your own ending, but because someone you loved is already gone, I am writing to you too. I want you to know that.

What you are carrying is not smaller than the fear I just named. In some ways it is worse, because it has already happened, and no words on any page can undo it. You are not waiting for the thing you were afraid of. You are already living inside of it.

I am not going to hurry you. I am not going to hand you a slogan and pretend it evens the scales. Stay with me anyway. This whole book is for you as much as anyone. There is a chapter later on that I wrote with you especially in mind, and there is more than one line, in more than one chapter after this one, that will speak straight to what you are carrying.

And a word about the one writing to you.

I am not on the far side of my own fear. I did not come to this subject as an expert who had it all figured out and wanted to explain it to you from a safe distance. I came to it afraid. I have carried a small cold version of this fear for as long as I can remember, and it still knows my name at three in the morning sometimes.

There is a version of the fear that is about my own ending. And there is a version that is about the people who have been in the room of my life since I was a boy, and how the room gets quieter one name at a time. I do not know which one is worse.

There is also a strand in it, and I have only lately started to notice it, that has less to do with dying and more to do with living. It whispers about calls I keep meaning to make. About years I was not really inside of while I was living them. About things I have not said to people who are still, this evening, close enough to hear them. I am not going to open that strand up here. It gets its own chapter, near the end of this book. I mention it now only because it is honest to. Some of what tightens your chest at three in the morning is not really about the ending. It is about the middle. You already know that. I just wanted to say it out loud.

TURN THE PAGE WHEN YOU ARE READY

You were afraid when you opened this book.

Some of you were afraid of your own ending. Some of you were afraid of an ending that has already happened to someone you love. Some of you did not know you were afraid until the fear had a name.

That is fine. All of it is fine.

This book is not going to ask you to stop being afraid. It is only going to ask you to walk one step further into what the fear is about, and to walk it with company. Slowly. Honestly. Without any hurrying.

The next chapter is the picture the whole book is built on. It is old, and simple, and I did not invent it. It is about a drop of water, and the sea it came from, and where each of them go, and where they never really were apart.

Turn the page when you are ready.

I will be right here.

Chapter 2: The Drop and the Ocean

I was seventeen the day it happened.

I came home from school the way I did every day that year, not thinking about anything in particular, my head full of whatever a seventeen year old's head is full of. A test I had not studied enough for. Something a friend had said at lunch. Nothing that mattered. I remember the walk home more clearly than I remember most of that whole year, and I remember it for no reason at all, because nothing about it was different. That is the strange thing about the last ordinary hour before your life changes. It never announces itself. It just walks beside you like any other hour, and you do not know to hold onto it.

My father was a man who read the newspaper every single day, cover to cover, wherever in the house he could get comfortable enough to spread it out properly. Most afternoons that was the sofa in our living room, one leg up, the pages folded back on themselves the way people do when they have read a thousand newspapers and know exactly how to hold one. I must have walked past him doing that a thousand times in my life. I never once thought to look at him twice while he was doing it. Why would I. It was just my father, reading, the most unremarkable sight in the world.

That afternoon it stopped being unremarkable.

He had a stroke while he was lying there. I do not know the exact minute it happened, because I was not in the room for it. I only know that by the time I walked in from school, he had fallen from the sofa, and the room was not the room I had left that morning. I could describe the rest of that afternoon to you in pieces, the phone, the ambulance, the particular quality of light coming through the window while everything moved too fast and also somehow too slow. I am not going to lay all of that out here. Some of it is still mine to keep. What I will tell you is the part that matters for this book.

There was no goodbye. There was no sentence of his that I got to hear the end of. One ordinary afternoon he was reading the news the way he read it every day of my life, and then, without any warning that either of us could have caught in time, he was not. Nothing anyone did in the hours after that changed how it ended.

I have carried that afternoon for a long time now. Long enough that it has stopped being a fresh wound and become something closer to a room in the house of me, a room I do not visit every day but never sold and never boarded up. I am going to ask you to step into that room with me for a moment, because it is the reason the picture I am about to give you means anything to me at all. I did not go looking for a comforting idea and then decorate it with my father to make it land better. It went the other way. I went looking

because of him. The picture is what I found, years later, after a great deal of reading I never expected to do.

THE PICTURE FROM THE BOAT

Here it is, the one I promised you at the end of the last chapter and asked you to carry with you, unopened, until now.

Picture yourself on a boat, out on open water, on a clear day with no particular hurry to be anywhere. Look down at the surface of the sea.

You will see waves. Some small, barely a ripple. Some big enough to lift the boat under you and set it back down. Where the wind picks up, you will see white on top of them, foam thrown into the air for a second before gravity claims it back. Every one of those waves looks, for the length of time it exists, like its own separate thing. It has an edge you could trace with your finger. It has a shape unlike the wave beside it. If you wanted to, you could point at any one of them and give it a name, the way sailors sometimes do for the ones that matter to them.

Now watch closely as one of them falls.

It does not go anywhere. Nothing about it travels off to some other place. It does not disappear, and nothing about it is lost or wasted. It simply goes back into the water it was already part of the entire time it was rising. For one moment it looked like a separate thing, standing apart from the sea around it. It never actually was. It was the sea itself, lifted for a moment into a particular shape, held there by wind and motion, and then let back down into what it had never really left.

Come in even closer now. Forget the whole wave. Watch one single drop, thrown up off the crest of it, caught in the sunlight for one bright second before gravity takes it back down.

That drop is us. That is the whole of what I want to hand you in this chapter, and I am not going to complicate it more than it needs to be.

WHAT THE PICTURE MEANS, SAID PLAINLY

I know a picture like that can slide right past you if I stop here and move on, so let me say plainly what I mean by it, the way I would say it to you across a kitchen table rather than from a stage.

Before you were born, on this picture, you were the ocean. Not separate from it. Not waiting somewhere off to the side for your turn to begin, the way we sometimes half imagine souls lined up in a waiting room before birth. Simply part of the water, the way every drop that will ever rise into a wave is already part of the sea long before any wind lifts it.

Birth, on this picture, is the wave lifting. One drop, out of an ocean of them, thrown up into the light and the air for a while. It gets a shape the moment it leaves the surface. It gets an edge, a name, a face, a family, a stretch of years to live inside. All of that is completely real while it lasts, exactly as real as a wave is a real wave while it stands up out of the water. I am not asking you to treat your life, or your father's life, or the life of anyone you love, as less real because of this picture. I am only asking you to notice that the drop was water before it was ever a drop, and will be water again after, and that neither of those facts makes the bright second in the sun mean any less.

And death, on this picture, is the drop falling back.

Not falling out of anything. Not falling into some other, stranger place that has nothing to do with where it started. Falling back into exactly what it always was, underneath the shape. The edge softens. The name and the face stop being separate from the water around them. But nothing about the water itself is lost in that fall, and nothing about the drop's short time in the air was ever wasted, because that one bright second in the sun is the only place any of us ever gets to stand up, take a shape, and be someone at all.

I want to be careful here, because I promised you at the start of this book that I would not rush you toward comfort before I had earned it. This picture is not a proof. It is not the kind of evidence the rest of this book is going to spend chapters building for you, carefully, case by case. It is older than proof, and it does not pretend to be anything else. People have reached for some version of this same picture in nearly every culture that has ever buried its dead, long before anyone had a word for consciousness or a monitor to measure a heartbeat. I will show you some of that, later in this book, in ways that go well past a nice image on a page. For now I only want you holding the picture itself, turning it over, seeing if it fits anywhere inside you.

BACK TO THE SOFA

Here is where I have landed, all these years after that afternoon.

My father did not go from being something to being nothing. On this picture, he went from being a wave, briefly standing up out of the water with his own shape, his own newspaper, his own particular way of folding a page, back to being the sea itself. He is not

cut off from where I am sitting right now, writing this. He was never as separate from me as it felt on the worst nights, and there were a great many worst nights, especially in the first years, when I would have given almost anything in the world to hear one more ordinary sentence out of him.

I do not know yet whether I can make you believe any of that. We are only two chapters into a book that has eleven more to go, and I promised you honesty over hurry. But I wanted you to have this picture early, and whole, so that everything else this book shows you has something solid to land on. Every account you are about to read, every researcher, every strange and careful case, is going to be tested against this same simple shape. A drop, lifted for a while. A drop, returning.

IF YOU HAVE LOST SOMEONE

If you are holding a loss of your own the way I am holding mine, look at it through this picture for a moment before you turn the page.

The person you lost did not fall out of the world into nothing. They fell back into it. Whatever held them before they ever had a name, holds them still. You are not separated from them by nothing at all, some cold and total absence with no shape to it. You are separated from them the way one wave is separated from the wave beside it, which is to say, not very much, and not for very long, and never all the way down to the water they both came from.

I wish someone had handed me this picture on the day I walked in from school. I did not get it until much later, and I got it the hard way, through years of reading I never expected to need. I am handing it to you now, early, on purpose, so that you do not have to wait as long as I did.

TURNING THE PAGE

The rest of this book is going to test this picture hard. I am not going to ask you to take it on faith and leave it sitting there, pretty and unexamined. In the next chapter you are going to meet a woman who was blind from the day she was born, and who saw, for a handful of minutes, a room she had never once seen in her whole life. You will meet others like her after that, people who share no language, no country, no century, and who somehow keep describing the same shape.

We are going to start asking, seriously and carefully, what it would take for a picture this old to also turn out to be true.

Hold the drop and the ocean loosely as you go. We will come back to it more than once before this book is done, and it will not look exactly the same each time.

Chapter 3: The Pattern That Won't Leave

She had never seen anything in her life.

Not once. Not the color of her mother's eyes. Not the shape of her own hand. Not light, not shadow. Vicki had been born blind, and the world she knew was the world you can hear and touch.

Then, one night in 1973, a car she was in went off the road. When they got her into a hospital, her heart had stopped. For about four minutes, by every measure the doctors around her knew how to take, she was dead.

And for those four minutes, she saw.

She rose out of the body on the table, and she looked back down at it. She saw the room. She saw the people moving around her. She saw them cut off her long hair. She noticed the light and the equipment in a way she could not have imagined an hour before, because she had never had anything to imagine with. Sighted people dream in pictures. Vicki never had. Her dreams were made of sound and touch.

Then, briefly, that changed.

When the psychologist Kenneth Ring and his colleague Sharon Cooper walked her through what she remembered, she came to a small detail. She had noticed her own hand. And on her hand, the wedding ring she had worn for years and knew perfectly well by touch. Every ridge. Every notch. She knew that ring the way you know a doorway you have walked through your whole life. She had never seen it.

For the length of that one crossing, she did. Then she came back into the body, and she never saw anything again for the rest of her life.

Cooper noticed one more thing. When Vicki tried to describe the colors around her, she could not. She had no word for red or blue. What she reached for instead was different brightnesses of light. She had seen a world with depths in it that she knew were different from each other, and she had no framework in her whole life to name them.

That is the case. That is the piece that stopped me cold.²

THE SAME SHAPE, AGAIN AND AGAIN

Vicki was not the first case I read. By the time I found her, I had already read the account from Dr. Rudy's operating room, the one I told you at the start of this book. I had read enough of them to notice the strange thing that pulled me the rest of the way in.

The stories kept sounding alike.

Not in every detail. The details were as different as the lives they came from. A grandmother in France. A soldier in the American South. A teenager in Japan. A retired teacher in Serbia. Different rooms, different ages, different reasons the body had failed. What matched was not the trim. It was the shape.

Whoever they were, they left the body first. Then they moved through something. Then they were met by someone. Then they saw their life. Then they came up against an edge, and turned back.

The Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel spent years tracking survivors of cardiac arrest, the kind where the heart has stopped and a team has to bring the person back with electricity and drugs. He published the results in a medical journal called *The Lancet* in 2001. He was not a mystic. He was a heart doctor with a checklist. And the checklist kept turning up the same handful of features in accounts from people who had no way to have coordinated them. Studies since have leaned the same way. Whatever this is, it is not a story a few people made up. It is a shape that keeps arriving.³

FIVE BEATS

Let me name them plainly, because we are going to walk through each of them in the chapters that follow.

The first beat is leaving the body. The pain and the noise fall away. Something in the person lifts, and they find themselves looking down at the room. Their own body is there, among the others. It takes a moment to click that the body is theirs, and another moment to notice that they are, somehow, calm about it.

The second beat is a passage. Movement. Sometimes described as a tunnel, sometimes as a corridor, sometimes as simply going. A darkness that feels full rather than empty. And ahead of them, growing, a light that turns out not to be a light in the ordinary sense. A presence. Something alive.

The third beat is a meeting. People who were gone are there. Whole. Well. Not the version of them who was sick at the end. There is no need to speak, because thought passes as clean as speech. The word people reach for is home.

The fourth beat is a review. The whole life shown back, not from where you sat inside it, but from every side. From the eyes of the people you touched. From the eyes of the people you hurt. No judge is present. There is only seeing. And the moments that turn out to matter most are, so often, the small ones.

The fifth beat is an edge. A line, or a wall, or a river, or nothing you can quite describe. It only means one thing. Cross it and you do not come back. Something happens there. And then, back into the body.

Those are the five. Every chapter after this one is one of them, in order, so that by the end you will not just have read about them. You will have walked them.

THE FAIR OBJECTION

Here is the honest question a careful reader is going to ask now.

Isn't this just what people have been told to expect?

If enough films and books and grandparents have taught you that dying comes with a tunnel and a light and long-gone relatives, then of course, when your brain is failing, it will reach for the story lying nearest to hand. You would not be inventing the pattern. You would be repeating it.

That is a fair objection. There is a chapter later in this book where we sit with it properly, and with several others like it. This chapter is not that chapter. I only want to point at what the objection cannot cover.

Some of the trim, at the edges of these accounts, probably is being borrowed from the culture around the person. The face of the light. The voice that speaks. That part of the objection is not silly. But it can only cover the trim. It cannot cover the shape. A woman raised on one story and a man raised on none of it will draw different lights and then draw exactly the same five beats in exactly the same order.

And the objection cannot cover Vicki.

Vicki could not have grown up with a picture book. She had never held a visual image of a room, or a face, or her own hand, or the ring on it. She had nothing to borrow from. And yet, for a stretch of minutes when her heart was not beating, she came back with a visual account of the room, checked against the room itself and found to fit, and with a description of a wedding ring she knew every micron of by touch but had never once seen.

There are others like her. Cases where a person met someone they later found out had died in another town while they lay on the table, when nobody in that room could have told them. Cases where a person came back and described, correctly, an object on a high shelf no one had ever seen from above. We will meet some of them in their proper places. For now, one is enough. Vicki is enough.

AND YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Two chapters ago I asked you to notice something. What comes and goes, the face and the job and the address, was never the whole of you. Underneath all of that there is something quieter that has been watching. That was the first loosening.

I want to add a second one now.

Whoever you are, you are not alone at this edge. Thousands of ordinary people have already crossed the same line. They lived and died in different centuries, in different languages, with different ideas about what any of it meant. And they came back with the same shape of story in their hands.

The last chapter asked you to picture the sea under the surface. The surface changes with every wave. But the sea beneath them is one thing. What you are looking at, in these thousands of accounts, is the same sea showing through.

If you have lost someone, listen closely to the third beat. The meeting. Again and again, without any coordination and without any script, the people who cross that line come back saying they were met. Not alone. Met. I am not going to hand you that as proof. I do not have proof. I am handing you the shape of what is said, so consistently, that you deserve to hear it named plainly before we walk any further.

WHAT I DID WITH IT

I did not want to believe it.

I came to this material expecting the trick. Expecting the exaggeration. Expecting the moment where the story leans on wishful thinking so hard that it tips over. I kept looking for the tip.

The tip did not come.

Instead the cases kept lining up. And slowly the harder position to hold was not belief. It was disbelief. Not because any single case makes the argument by itself. Vicki does not, on her own, prove what any of this means. But holding thousands of Vickis, in different rooms, in different countries, across most of a century of careful record, and telling yourself none of it means anything, is a lot of work. It became, for me, more work than the other option. That is not certainty. There is a chapter later in this book where I hand you every honest reason to hold the door open on doubt, and I mean every word of it. This is only where the weight fell.

The pattern is here. I did not invent it. I am only pointing at it.

The rest of this book is the walk into it.

There are five beats. The first one is the strangest, and the gentlest, at the same time. It is the moment the person stops belonging to the body underneath them and finds, to their surprise, that they are still there.

Turn the page when you are ready.

I will be right here.

Chapter 4: Leaving the Body

From here on, I'm going to stop telling you about other people and start telling you about you.

We've spent the first part of this book setting down some fear and looking at the pattern from the outside. Now we step inside it. For the next five chapters you're not the reader anymore. You're the traveler. I want you to walk these steps the way the people in the accounts walked them, in order, one at a time, so that by the end the whole journey is something you've felt and not just something you've been told.

It starts here. With the first step. The leaving.

And the first thing to know about it is the thing almost nobody expects.

IT DOESN'T BEGIN WITH FEAR

When you imagine the moment of death, you probably imagine the worst of it. The struggle. The pain. The panic of a body fighting to stay.

That part may be real. But the people who have been there say it ends. And it ends sooner than you'd think.

Listen to how they describe the turn. One moment there's pain, or pressure, or the noise of a room full of people working on you. Then it lifts. Not slowly. It lets go all at once, like a hand that had been gripping you finally opening. The pain doesn't fade so much as get left behind. The fear goes with it. What's left is a calm so deep that people reach for the same word again and again when they try to name it. Peace. A peace bigger than anything they knew while they were alive.

Sit with how strange that is for a second. The body is in the worst trouble it has ever been in. And the person inside it is not in trouble at all. They're calm. They're fine. Better than fine. Some of them say it was the most peaceful moment of their entire life, and they say it almost apologetically, because they know how it sounds. They were supposed to be dying. They felt like they were finally resting.

I think this is worth slowing down on, because it goes against everything we brace ourselves for. We spend our lives afraid of the end, picturing it as the tightest, most frightening squeeze a person can go through. The testimony says the opposite. The squeeze, if there is one, comes early and lets go fast. And what comes after the letting go is the furthest thing from fear.

That's the first clue that something here doesn't add up the way we were taught.

YOU NOTICE THE BODY BELOW YOU

The next thing usually catches people off guard.

They realize they're looking down.

There's a body underneath them. People around it, working. Machines. Light. And it takes a moment to land, because at first it doesn't seem to have anything to do with them. They look at it the way you'd glance at a stranger on a table. Then it clicks.

That's mine.

That's my body, down there.

And here's the part I keep turning over. The realization isn't *I'm dying*. It's gentler than that, and stranger. It's closer to *oh, I'm not in there anymore*. The body is one thing, over there, and the part of them that is awake and watching is somewhere else, up here, perfectly calm, taking it all in. The two have come apart. And the one that matters, the one saying *I*, is not the one on the table.

People describe this with a kind of plain surprise that I find more convincing than any dramatic version would be. They don't say it like a revelation set to music. They say it the way you'd report something odd that happened at work. I was up by the ceiling. I could see the top of the surgeon's head. I noticed my own shoes had been taken off. There's no fear in the telling, and very little drama. Just a person quietly stunned to find that they were still fully themselves, fully awake, fully *there*, while their body had become something they were looking at instead of something they were looking out of.

Think back to the drop and the ocean. This is the drop noticing, for the first time, that the shape it lived in was only ever a shape. It hasn't ended. It has loosened. The body is the part with edges. You, it turns out, might not be.

EVERYTHING GETS CLEARER, NOT DIMMER

You'd expect a mind at the edge of death to go foggy. To dim down like a room when the power fails. To flicker and blur and slip toward static.

People report the opposite.

They say their seeing gets sharper. Like they spent their whole life watching a blurry screen and somebody finally turned the picture to its full sharpness. Colors look deeper.

Edges look cleaner. And they're not looking through two eyes pointed one way anymore. They take in the whole room at once. Behind them, above them, all of it, no blind spots, as though seeing had become a thing the whole self does instead of a thing the face does.

Their thinking sharpens too. This is the part that should stop us. Many of them say they felt more awake, more clear-headed, more like themselves in those minutes than they ever did in ordinary waking life. Thoughts came fast and clean. Time stretched out so that a few seconds held room for a great deal. There was no grogginess, no confusion, none of the fog you'd expect from a brain running out of oxygen. The reverse. A mind that felt scrubbed clean and turned all the way up.

Hold onto how backwards that is. The brain, at that moment, is doing badly or doing nothing at all. The monitors say so. And the person inside reports the clearest, sharpest, most vivid stretch of awareness they have ever had. We'll come back to that puzzle in its own chapter later in the book, and I'll give the doubters a fair hearing when we do, because they deserve one. For now I only want you to notice it, and to notice how oddly consistent it is. People who never met, who had nothing in common, who came from different countries and different centuries, all reaching for the same surprised description. I expected to fade. Instead I woke up.

THE PART THAT'S HARD TO WAVE AWAY

Now I have to show you why this isn't just a feeling.

If leaving the body were only a sensation, a nice trick a dying brain plays on its owner, we could file it under comfort and move on. The trouble is that people don't only feel like they left. Sometimes, from up there, they see things. Real things. Things in the room they had no way to see, and things they later turn out to have gotten exactly right.

Here is one that has stayed with me, and I want to tell it slowly.

A man in the Netherlands was brought into a hospital in cardiac arrest. He'd been found in a field, cold and blue, his heart stopped, no telling for how long. He was deep in a coma while the team worked to bring him back. Before they got started, a nurse took the dentures out of his mouth so they could get a breathing tube down his throat, and she set the dentures on the crash cart, the little wheeled cart they roll up next to you, the one with bottles on top and a drawer that slides out underneath. Then they worked on him for a long time, and against the odds, they got his heart going again.

More than a week later, on the ward, that same nurse walked into his room. The man looked at her and recognized her. Not from his bed, you understand. He'd been in a coma

the whole time she was near him. He recognized her as the woman who had taken his teeth. He told her where she'd put them. The cart. The drawer underneath. He described the room and the people in it and what they had done, all of it from a viewpoint up near the ceiling, while his heart was stopped and his eyes were taped shut and by every measure we have, he was not there to see any of it.

He was so shaken that finding the nurse again gave him back a piece of solid ground. He'd been carrying this thing he couldn't explain. Here was proof, standing in the doorway, that it had been real.

This case wasn't passed around a campfire. It was written up by a Dutch cardiologist named Pim van Lommel, in a careful study published in one of the most respected medical journals in the world. It sits in the scientific record, where anyone can go and read it. A doctor watched it happen and could not explain it away, so he wrote it down honestly and let it stand.⁴

And it isn't alone. Not even close.

A woman named Pam Reynolds had an operation so extreme that it gives the whole question nowhere to hide. She had a dangerous swelling in a blood vessel deep in her brain, and the only way to reach it was to take her almost all the way to death on purpose. They chilled her body down cold. They stopped her heart. They drained the blood out of her head. Her brain went flat on every monitor in the room. They even put little speakers in her ears, clicking away, partly to confirm her brainstem had gone silent. By any line we know how to draw between alive and not, she was on the far side of it.

She came back describing the operation. She described the saw the surgeon used to open her skull, a thing she had never seen and had no way to picture, and she said it looked like an electric toothbrush, with little blades that came in a case. She described snatches of what the staff said while she was under. The surgeon checked her account against what actually happened in that room. She was right. The cardiologist who investigated her case, Michael Sabom, had started out as a skeptic, a doctor who assumed there was nothing here. He came out the other side unable to make the easy explanations fit.

And here is the detail from Sabom's work that I find quietly devastating. He didn't just collect the stories of people who'd left their bodies. He tested them. He took a group of heart patients who had *not* had one of these experiences, and he asked them to imagine their own resuscitation and describe it, the way a person would guess at it. They made mistakes. Ordinary, understandable mistakes, the kind you'd make describing a scene you'd never watched. The people who said they had floated above their own bodies did

not make those mistakes. They described it the way someone describes a thing they actually saw.⁵

There's a large, careful study called AWARE, run by a critical care doctor named Sam Parnia across many hospitals, built precisely to test this in the open, with verifiable checks in place. It found the same kind of thing. A subset of people, brought back from cardiac arrest, recalling real events from the resuscitation, watching from above, recognizing staff, getting the details right, during a window when they should not have had any awareness at all.⁶

I'm not asking you to leap to a giant conclusion from any of this yet. I only want it sitting in your mind as we keep walking. People who have left their bodies sometimes bring back the room. Accurately. From a vantage point the body could not have given them. That is not a feeling. A feeling can't tell you which drawer your dentures are in.

THE EASY ANSWER, AND WHY I'M NOT REACHING FOR IT YET

I can hear the obvious objection, because I made it myself for years. The brain is starved of oxygen. Starved brains do strange things. Of course a mind in that state cooks up vivid scenes and floating sensations. People hallucinate. That's all this is.

I want to be fair to that answer, and I will give it a whole chapter further on, because honest is the only way this book is worth anything to you. So let me just plant one small flag here and keep walking.

A hallucination is a private thing. It happens inside one person and stays there. It does not tell that person where a nurse, whom they never saw, set down their teeth. It does not let a woman with a flat brain scan describe a tool she'd never laid eyes on and get it right. The dying-brain answer explains the floating feeling reasonably well. It has a much harder time explaining the parts that turned out to be true. Hold that gap in your mind. We'll come back to it with the lights on.

IF YOU'VE LOST SOMEONE

I want to stop and speak to you directly now, the way I promised I would in every chapter.

If someone you love has died, there's a good chance you've been quietly haunted by their last minutes. Most of us are. We replay a version we never actually saw. We picture fear. We picture pain. We picture them alone in it, frightened, fighting, and we carry that picture around like a stone in the chest, sometimes for years.

I know that stone. I've carried my own.

So I want you to hold this chapter up against that picture, and see if it doesn't loosen the grip a little.

What the people who came back describe is not a person trapped in a failing body, terrified, struggling to the last. It's a person who slipped loose of all of that early, and watched the rest from a calm place, unhurt. The pain was on the table. They were not on the table. By the time the hard part looked hardest to everyone standing in the room, the one going through it may already have been somewhere quiet, looking down, more at peace than they had ever been.

I can't promise you the inside of another person's final moment. Nobody honest can. But this is what the testimony says, again and again, from people who got close enough to that door to look through it and then came back to tell us. The worst of it, the part you've been carrying on their behalf, may have been over for them long before it looked over to anyone watching.

You can set that stone down. Not because I told you to, but because the people who have actually been there keep saying it was lighter than we feared.

AND THEN A PULL

There's one more thing that happens at the end of this first step, and it's the thing that carries you into the next.

The room starts to thin out. The edges go soft and dark, not in a frightening way, more like a place quietly closing for the night. And people describe a pull. Gentle. An invitation more than a force. Something is drawing them away from the room and toward something else, and they don't resist it, because resisting is the last thing on their mind. They feel the way a held breath feels when you finally let it go.

The shape has been left behind. The watching, awake part of them is loose now, calm, clear, already turning toward whatever comes next.

The drop has lifted free of the air. Now it begins to fall back toward the water.

Where that pull leads is the second step of the journey. We'll go there together in the next chapter.

Notes

1. The Rudy account is drawn from Dr. Lloyd Rudy's 2011 video interview with Dr. Mike Milligan, and from the investigation and corroboration by his assistant surgeon, Dr. Roberto Amado-Cattaneo. The case is documented in Titus Rivas and Rudolf H. Smit, "A Near-Death Experience with Veridical Perception Described by a Famous Heart Surgeon and Confirmed by his Assistant Surgeon," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 31, no. 3 (2013). The exact year of the operation was never established.
2. Vicki Umipeg's case is documented by Kenneth Ring and Sharon Cooper in "Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind: A Study of Apparent Eyeless Vision," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1997), and expanded in their book *Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind* (William James Center for Consciousness Studies, 1999). The observation about "different brightnesses of light" is drawn from Cooper's remarks on the case.
3. Pim van Lommel, Ruud van Wees, Vincent Meyers, and Ingrid Elfferich, "Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands," *The Lancet* 358 (2001). Van Lommel's fuller treatment of the study appears in *Consciousness Beyond Life* (HarperOne, 2010).
4. The Dutch dentures case is documented in Pim van Lommel et al., "Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands," *The Lancet* 358 (2001), and discussed at greater length in van Lommel's *Consciousness Beyond Life* (HarperOne, 2010).
5. The Pam Reynolds case is documented by cardiologist Michael Sabom in *Light and Death* (Zondervan, 1998). Sabom's control-group study comparing accounts from patients who did and did not report leaving the body during resuscitation is drawn from his earlier *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* (Harper and Row, 1982).
6. Sam Parnia and colleagues, "AWARE: AWAREness during RESuscitation, A prospective study," *Resuscitation* 85, no. 12 (2014).



THE PULL

You already know where the drop is falling.

The traveler in this book just let go of the body and felt the pull begin. Here is what is still ahead of them, and of you, in the rest of Twenty Minutes Dead:

- 5. The Crossing.** The passage itself. Darkness that feels full rather than empty, and a light that turns out to be alive.
- 6. The Reunion.** The people you lost, whole again. The chapter written for the grieving.
- 7. Seeing It Whole.** A life replayed from every side, with no judge in the room.
- 8. The Edge.** The line everyone reaches and almost no one wants to turn back from.
- 9. Is the Brain the Whole Story?.** The honest skeptic's case, given its fullest possible hearing.
- 10. Echoes Across Time.** The same pattern in Egypt, Tibet, and Plato, long before anyone had a word for consciousness.
- 11. What the Returned Bring Back.** How survivors change, and what stays with them for good.
- 12. Living as if Love Is the Point.** What any of this means for the way you live, starting today.

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Thank you for reading this far. I will be right here.