

OPEN QUESTIONS

SHOULD YOU BELIEVE IN FATE?

We'd be happier, perhaps, if we found meaning not through abstractions but through the physical things around us.

By Joshua Rothman

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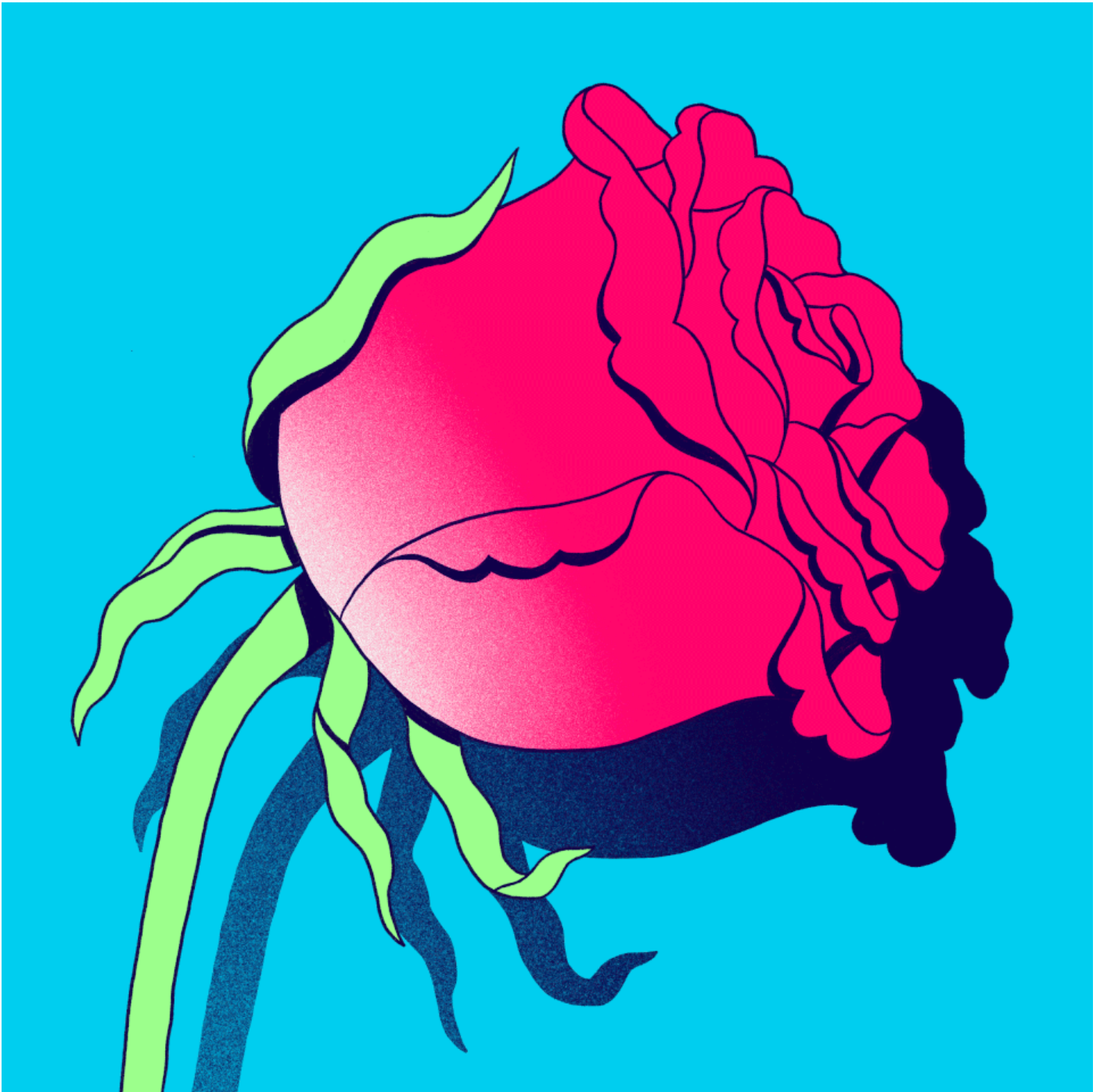


Illustration by Josie Norton



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In mid-June, I rode my electric scooter into a sinkhole, which had emerged, after some roadwork, on a residential street near my house. The hole was small enough to blend into the road's surface, but big enough to send me flying over the handlebars. My scooter, which also went airborne, weighs around fifty pounds; it landed on my ankle, breaking my fibula—the smaller of the two bones in the lower leg—and shifting my ankle joint decisively to one side. It all happened in a second: suddenly, I found myself sitting in the road, covered in cuts and thrumming with adrenaline. My first thoughts were questions: Where had that hole come from? And why was my leg so strangely zigzagged?

I loved my electric scooter. I'd bought it a few years earlier, to keep up with my then six-year-old son as he cruised on his bike, and quickly discovered the joy of effortless acceleration, actuated via a thumb lever. The scooter's agility brought me much happiness. And yet I was also a responsible rider, always helmet-clad, carefully tracing the same scribble of suburban streets each day. I knew every bump and pothole, and avoided even mildly precipitous curbs. If the sinkhole hadn't appeared—or if I'd steered a foot to the right or left—the accident wouldn't have happened. Of course, if I'd landed differently, its outcome could've been far worse. I thought of Clarissa Dalloway, who looks with trepidation on the sea of London taxis as they weave in and out of traffic. "She had the perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone," Virginia Woolf writes. "She always had the feeling that it was very, very, dangerous to live even one day." And Clarissa wasn't even riding an e-scooter!

Having never broken an ankle before, I wasn't sure what to expect. As it

turns out, my break was bad, and my life has been transformed. Before the accident, I was a romp-prone parent and an avid gymgoer. Active to the point of restlessness, I filled my days with physicality, often conjuring writerly momentum by means of pushups, swimming, or walks around the block. Now I'm recovering from ankle surgery. To control swelling, I have to spend hours each day with my ankle elevated above my chest. Practically, this has meant spending much of the day in bed, trying to write while my kids sprawl all over me, until I succumb to claustrophobia and wheel myself to my front porch. Even the smallest household and personal tasks have become arduous and time-consuming. I've become wholly dependent on help from my family.

At first, these inconveniences, along with various forms of physical discomfort, dominated my consciousness. But, with time, I came to notice other, subtler changes. I was used to a certain sensory world, which was now on pause. I missed the feelings of walking and standing, obviously. But I realized that I also missed the play of wind on my face (I now rarely go outside), and the pull of weight on my arms (to move anything heavy, I carry it in my wheelchair). I've been largely oblivious to the smells and sounds of summer—dewy grass, lemon ices, cicadas—and haven't felt the warmth of beach sand beneath my feet or the coolness of ocean water. The closest I've come to the woods has been in "Big Walk," a coöperative video game I play with my son. (We explore an island together, solving puzzles.) It's been months since I've stood at the stove, enjoying the heat, aromas, and physical fluidity of cooking.

Instead, I mainly experience the contents of the ground-floor room into which I've moved, and the nearby kitchen, to which I have easy access. The Danish novelist Solvej Balle, in her series "On the Calculation of Volume," imagines a woman who, like Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day," lives the same twenty-four hours over and over; Tara, the novels' protagonist, grows achingly familiar with the sounds of drawers opening and closing, and of water gushing through pipes. In a similar way, I've become sensitive to the

too smooth pliancy of my Costco bedsheets; to the inevitable foamy squish of my ergonomic wheelchair cushion; to the creaky, limited flex of my crutches; and to the hush of the house's central air. I loathe the endless torture of the Velcro straps on my orthopedic boot, which must be constantly done and undone.

Is this my world now? No—luckily, it's all temporary. I'll be back on my feet by October. But it's sobering to consider how much of one's life, from its broadest contours to its smallest details, can be changed by chance.

“**C**hance found me that day having worked for a living all morning, broken a shoelace, chatted with Tina, urinated successfully in a corporate setting, washed my face, eaten half of a bag of popcorn, bought a new set of shoelaces, eaten a hot dog and a cookie with some milk; and chance found me now sitting in the sun on a green bench, with a paperback on my lap.” This is how Howie, the narrator of Nicholson Baker's novel “The Mezzanine,” brings us into the flow of his life. The book unfolds over the course of a single escalator ride; we follow Howie's thoughts in slow motion as he ascends, and as they continue into various footnoted sub-thoughts. Sometimes Howie wonders about big questions, but often he dwells on the little things that make office life what it is. He considers how most of his co-workers “glide” as they walk, which is superior to the outmoded “pounding” style, and ruminates on the differences between paper and plastic straws, and the difficulty of getting them to stay put in your drink. He charts his typical thoughts, tracking how often each occurs to him. Family comes near the top, but “Panasonic three-wheeled vacuum cleaner, greatness of” has a place, too.

Similarly, in the new book “The Small Stuff: How to Live a More Gratisfying Life,” the writer Ian Bogost explores the many tiny sources of “sensory enchantment” that we all encounter almost by accident. In a coffee shop, he notices a woman rotating her paper cup in her hands, feeling its embossed ridges, which “run up and down at a diagonal,” with her fingertips.

He notes how satisfying it is to mash a vending machine's big plastic button, or how fun it can be to crunch some twigs underfoot on your way to work. "There you are, touching an escalator handrail, which bobbles slightly in its track," Bogost writes. "There you are, your fingers ribbeting across the sleeves of garments hung close together on a boutique rack." These sources of "gratification," he argues, are free, and everywhere, and appreciating them improves your life substantially.

This sort of gratification feels good in itself, but it can also help you feel good about being a self. Enjoying it "offers a way to express the mismatch between your body and the rich, dense universe of things that are outside that body," Bogost suggests. "It is the good feeling you get from resolving the absurdity of the sensory world." Why should you exist in this place, among these things? There's something random about it, isn't there? If you ground yourself in the here and now, though, it doesn't feel so random. The world can become welcoming. In my current state, I can't easily reach the clothes hanging in my closet—a few storage boxes prevent me from wheeling close enough—and so I've missed the feeling of "ribbeting across the sleeves" that Bogost describes. After reading his book, I decided to appreciate instead the smooth contraction of the trigger on the long-handled grabber that I've been using to extract my shirts. I've realized how much I enjoy the spring-loaded action of the brakes on my wheelchair, and the heavy-metal oomph of its footrest, which shifts into position with a pleasing ratchet sound.

Are these little details, these small physical facts, ultimately meaningless? One strange thing about life is that they sometimes aren't. A few weeks ago, Harrison Bader, an outfielder for the San Francisco Giants, was in an accident while riding a scooter; according to a witness, he collided with a fire engine, which rolled over his foot. The Giants, who won't enjoy his contribution for at least the remainder of the regular season, suspended Bader's payment while he's on leave. Maybe, if he'd stopped to step on some twigs, he would've scootered unobstructed. The trivial and the momentous can be connected; small deviations can set us on larger paths.

Chance, fate—these are abstract ideas that usually raise abstract questions. Do people have story-like fates, or are they just subject to concatenations of occurrences? Do things happen “for a reason,” or do we just make up stories after the fact to tie events together? Broadly speaking, there’s an ancient antagonism between the notion that life must make sense and the observation that it often doesn’t. Numberless thinkers have wandered this territory.

And yet, at times when fate is actually “happening,” such questions recede. Instead, what stands out are the physical particulars of the here and now. In the hospital, after the accident, you know your life is changing; you sense your proximity to what the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard calls “the deep, slow-shifting layers of reality where fate is at work.” Somehow this abstract understanding exists alongside, or by means of, the objects in the waiting room—a paper cup from the water cooler, or a copy of *People* magazine. It’s through those objects that chance expresses itself: they are now part of your real life. Similarly, on the level of physical reality, a hole in the road or a patch of ice can decide your fate. (So can stepping into the right elevator; I met my wife in one.)

If all goes well, in a few weeks, I’ll be taking baby steps. A few months from now, I could be going for long walks. This time in my life will recede into memory, becoming a story I tell. At that point, it will be easy for me to feel in control—to think of myself as the master of my own fate. I’m on the hunt, therefore, for some memento of this experience—some little reminder (My grabber? My boot?) of how things are. “If you are trying to stop her wheel from turning, you are of all men the most obtuse,” the Roman philosopher Boethius wrote, of Fortune. As an idea, fate isn’t very logical. But as an experience, it’s as real as it gets.♦