

# Sum

Forty tales from the afterlives

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CANONGATE

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## *Sum*

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In the afterlife you relive all your experiences, but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order: all the moments that share a quality are grouped together.

You spend two months driving the street in front of your house, seven months having sex. You sleep for thirty years without opening your eyes. For five months straight you flip through magazines while sitting on a toilet.

You take all your pain at once, all twenty-seven intense hours of it. Bones break, cars crash, skin is cut, babies are born. Once you make it through, it's agony-free for the rest of your afterlife.

But that doesn't mean it's always pleasant. You spend six days clipping your nails. Fifteen months looking for lost items. Eighteen months waiting in line. Two years of boredom: staring out a bus window, sitting in an airport terminal. One year reading books. Your eyes hurt, and you itch, because you can't take a shower until it's your time to take your marathon two-hundred-day shower. Two weeks wondering what happens when you die. One minute realizing your body is falling. Seventy-seven hours of confusion. One hour realizing you've forgotten

someone's name. Three weeks realizing you are wrong. Two days lying. Six weeks waiting for a green light. Seven hours vomiting. Fourteen minutes experiencing pure joy. Three months doing laundry. Fifteen hours writing your signature. Two days tying shoelaces. Sixty-seven days of heartbreak. Five weeks driving lost. Three days calculating restaurant tips. Fifty-one days deciding what to wear. Nine days pretending you know what is being talked about. Two weeks counting money. Eighteen days staring into the refrigerator. Thirty-four days longing. Six months watching commercials. Four weeks sitting in thought, wondering if there is something better you could be doing with your time. Three years swallowing food. Five days working buttons and zippers. Four minutes wondering what your life would be like if you reshuffled the order of events. In this part of the afterlife, you imagine something analogous to your Earthly life, and the thought is blissful: a life where episodes are split into tiny swallowable pieces, where moments do not endure, where one experiences the joy of jumping from one event to the next like a child hopping from spot to spot on the burning sand.

## *Egalitaire*

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In the afterlife you discover that God understands the complexities of life. She had originally submitted to peer pressure when She structured Her universe like all the other gods had, with a binary categorization of people into good and evil. But it didn't take long for Her to realize that humans could be good in many ways and simultaneously corrupt and mean-spirited in other ways. How was She to arbitrate who goes to Heaven and who to Hell? Might not it be possible, She considered, that a man could be an embezzler and still give to charitable causes? Might not a woman be an adulteress but bring pleasure and security to two men's lives? Might not a child unwittingly divulge secrets that splinter a family? Dividing the population into two categories—good and bad—seemed like a more reasonable task when She was younger, but with experience these decisions became more difficult. She composed complex formulas to weigh hundreds of factors, and ran computer programs that rolled out long strips of paper with eternal decisions. But Her sensitivities revolted at this automation—and when the computer generated a decision She disagreed with, She took the opportunity to kick out the plug in rage. That after-