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John Turner

### Carbon

December 21<sup>st</sup>, four days until Christmas, and my friends and I were sitting in one of their basements drinking and playing cards. It was my turn, but my phone started buzzing in my pocket. I wasn't expecting a call from Conor this late in the night. I picked up.

I've heard Conor cry only twice in our friendship, so I knew something was wrong before he actually said anything.

"Dupy's dead, dude."

"Shut the fuck up," I drunkenly slurred, disbelieving, but knowing Conor wouldn't lie to me, especially about something so serious. Dupy had died in his car when it lost hold on the road. Sobriety hit me only lightly slower than the tears did. We wrapped up our phone call so he could tell others the news.

Christmas with my family had a dark cloud over it. I would have to get up early the next morning to prepare for the visitation; the same for the funeral the day after. My family consoled my sister (also close to Dupy) and I to the best of their ability, but the holiday cheer and comradery was lost to the storm inside us.

Dupy, as everyone chose to ignore his first name, Jordan, was a member of my fraternity, so many of our brothers traveled from their respective homes to St. Louis so we could drive to the small catholic church an hour and a half away just across the border into Illinois. I drove as many as my small car could fit. The road passed beneath my tires like a treadmill, moving me begrudgingly along towards the last place in the world I wanted to go. The music my friends were playing in the car might as well have been on mute, because my thoughts drowned it out.

The two days we all spent seeing our friend off were spent at St. Boniface Catholic Church in the morning and my friend Justin's house at night. St. Boniface was a gorgeous church: a striking white Christmas tree was prominently displayed behind the pulpit, a grand organ backed up the hymns of the choir, the air filled the vaulted ceilings with austerity, sunlight shone through the stained glass windows and fell gracefully onto the floor at his parents' feet.

I listened to the endless prayers. We all find rest with our Creator in the Kingdom of Heaven. He's in a better place. When you die, you will meet again, and will find peace in the afterlife. The preacher recited these statements. Many of my friends did the same. I hung my head in silent respect.

Not growing up particularly religious – my mom protestant and my dad Jewish – I realized that I was an atheist when I was 16. It wasn't a particularly large leap for me to go from casual religious adherence to complete independence, but my life was more or less unaffected. Both my mother and father thought it was a phase that I'd grow out of. Neither were angry, but my mother was worried because, without faith, we wouldn't see each other when the other eventually passed.

No one teaches an atheist how to grieve. There are no books. There are no communities. There is no solidarity among us on what to believe, besides the axiom that there is no divinity creating life or keeping an eye on it.

Death, to me, is final. Consciousness is a miraculous, beautiful fluke that happened when nature realized that it exists. We're born, and our body runs its genetic programming to guide us through an indifferent world. We love and we lose. We have triumphs and we have failures. These, of course, are subjective to how we view them. The lucky among us live to experience at most a brief 100 year snapshot of all that ever has been or will be. In death, our

bodies decompose, moving outside-in until our carbon's moved on. What's left of my friend is resting in the pretty box his parents bought for him.

I read once that we die twice – once when our hearts stop beating and again when the last person we knew dies. If I were to describe the afterlife as an atheist, I would describe it as finite (compared to the typical view) and as worthwhile as you chose to live your life. It doesn't redeem and it doesn't validate. It only is.

My mother thinks that when I have children I will change my mind, that I'll gain faith in an afterlife in hopes of spending forever with them. I don't think this will be the case. I hope that I and my children will live impactful lives, however long they end up being.

Eternity is just as frightening to me as finality is to others. I don't want to think that the life I am living is transient, that I am floating along here on Earth until I get released into some paradise. I won't claim that I'm right and that others are wrong, but I can only live in a way that makes sense to me. I think the traditional afterlife is a beautiful concept, but it leaves me feeling empty. I sometimes wish I could grieve like so many others grieve, but that wouldn't be true to myself.

When Dupy died, I saw people come together. Not just physically, but mentally. We shared stories of times with him. We appreciated one another. We weren't afraid to say "I love you." We talked of what it meant to be a truly good person and of how to better ourselves. We even laughed.