

What is life
but a death outstanding?
So then, what's living
but a lot of
installments due
on an increasingly
short-term basis?

The transient

By STANLEY ELKIN

Everybody dies. Everybody. But no one really believes it. They read the papers. They see the newsreels. They drive past the graveyards on the outskirts of town. Do you think that makes any difference? It does not! No one believes in death. Except me. Boswell. I believe in it. Listen, John Burgoyne was born in 1722 and died in 1792. The dates of Louis XVI were 1754 to 1793. (Do you suppose that Louis knew of Burgoyne's death? Do you suppose he said, "Ah, he's gone now, the old campaigner"? Do you suppose he suspected he'd be dead in a year himself?) More. Spenser: 1552(?)—1599. Caesar: 102 (or 100) to 44 B.C. Do you notice how as one goes back the birthdays become less certain while the year of death is always absolute, fixed? Do you think that's an accident? It's because death is realer than life. I saw a sign on U.S. 41 in Kentucky. It said REMEMBER YOU MUST DIE. I remember. But I never needed the sign. I had my own father. My father was a healthy man. Content. Vigorous. Powerful. Well. But when he died, he died of everything. The cancer. The blindness. The swollen heart. The failed markets. But even that, the death of one's father in a hospital room, the kiss goodbye inside the oxygen tent, isn't enough for some people. Even if they stretch a point and come to believe in the death of others, they refuse to believe in their own.

I remember reading in the newspaper an interview with the murderer, Braddock, when I was a kid. Braddock, waiting in the death house, told the reporter, "When they pull that switch they'll be pulling it on the whole world. Nobody will outlive me. The warden. The other cons. You. Nobody. Everybody dies when I die." He could believe in a fantastic short circuit that would end the world but not in his own lonely mortality. Do you suppose only a murderer thinks that way? Go on, when they pulled that switch Braddock knew for the first time what it was like to be a murderer. He murdered everybody. And don't you think he didn't close his eyes two seconds before he had to, just to make sure? Even my father, my own father, when I kneeled beside his bed in that white, white stinking room, looked at me and there was blood in his eyes. Why he's angry, I thought. He's mad at me.

I'm different. I remember I must die. It explains everything.

Once I wrestled. I was an athlete. (But I am no sportsman. Scores bore me.) To ward off death I built my body. A fortress, I hid in it. I laid low.

The locker room was my hometown, the gymnasium my university. There I moved for years with steamy abandon inside my glazy body, warm under the taped wrist, the hygienically bandaged knee joint, my muscles smoothly piling and meshing like tumblers in a lock. I was interested in a cautious, planned development of the body part, a sort of T.V.A. of the flesh, an aggrandizement of torso and limbs as real and grand as the cultivation of any hothouse bulb. I worked steadily, absently, without either sorrow or joy. Straining at the weights I developed everything, watching with a kind of pride the steady ballooning of my parts, growing taller, wider—expanding, blooming, becoming. For four years I weighed myself each night on the tall, free scale. For four years I sat naked and wet on the low, peeling bench by my locker, making with others the rude, brutal shoptalk of athletes or drying myself with the intense absorption of a soldier cleaning his weapon.

It was death I trained against, I tell you.

I moved out of my room and into the gym. There, lying on the tumblers' mats at night, my covers a half dozen volleyball nets, I wondered what I would do with my life.

What, I asked myself, were the purposes of strength?

Why to pull, to push, to raise, to squeeze, to win—*why to win!*

I answered an ad in a physical-culture magazine. Frank Alconi, the Jersey City manager of wrestlers, needed men. I sent photos, nine-by-eleven glossies of myself under the weights. He sent me fare. I went to Jersey City. I became a wrestler.

Alconi threw me into the ring at once. I was already strong, of course, and Alconi said I was a natural, but for a long time I didn't know what I was doing. I was supposed to lose anyway, so it didn't make much difference to the ring world, but I was traveling up and down the East Coast from Jersey City to Raleigh, North Carolina, in what might be described as a precariously ambulatory condition. My memories of those first weeks are chiefly memories of liniment. My body

was like some great northern forest, one part of which was always on fire. The other wrestlers kept telling me what a good sport I was and visited me at the rubbing table afterward. Beating me up made them feel young again. They liked to feel my muscles. Often, lying on the rubbing table near unconsciousness and death in the unheated basement of a civic auditorium, I would look up into the gap-toothed smile of ancient apes. They would stand there for a while, lost in wonder, and then, tracing their prehensile fingers over the bumps and hollows of my flesh, point with an inverted pride at their own tough and lumpy bodies, which looked, from the angle at which I saw them, like great red hairy mounds of meat. Then these fellows would shrug, put on their pinstriped businessmen's suits, snap their *Wall Street Journals* smartly under their armpits, and go off with a wave to lose themselves among the traveling salesmen in the hotel lobby. In those days druggists went blind mixing special liniments to keep me alive.

When I got back to Jersey City I told Alconi I would have to have more training.

Alconi grinned. "Tough. I thought you was tough. Rough, huh? Trip's been rough?"

"A cob, Mr. Alconi."

"Sure. It's the gym does it. All the time developing yourself against instruments, against metal, when what you need's contact with human beings. Where's the fight in a barbell?"

"That must be it," I said.

"Sure," Alconi said. "You need the old smash." He ground his fist against his palm. "The old kaboom. The old grrr-rr-agh." He pulled some air down out of the sky, cradled it in the crook of his right elbow, and strangled it. "The old splat cratch." He kneed an invisible back. "The old fffapp!" He grabbed handfuls of invisible hair and gouged invisible holes in invisible eye sockets.

"With all due respect, Mr. Alconi, that's not what I need. That's what I've been getting. What I need is to learn to protect myself against that."

"Sure," he said. "I understand, kid. Only I'm not your trainer, you realize. As your manager I get thirty-four percent of your purses. As your trainer I'd be entitled to another"—he considered my bruises—"fifteen percent."

"Sure," I said.

"That would still leave you with fifty-one