

LOW-MAINTENANCE ORGANISMS

by

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FADE IN:

AUDIO:

Against black we hear the sounds of a HOSPITAL, the drone of a MONITORING MACHINE, the rhythmic hush of AIR that could be breathing or a mechanical device.

Both increase in volume against the background murmur of the hospital's air conditioning units, combining and rising to an overwhelming crescendo...

ABRUPT CUT TO:

INT. OFFICE - DAY

BENJAMIN KNOX [late 50's] appears in a modern OFFICE, looking shocked and confused.

The space is an EMPTY FLOOR of a high-rise office block some ten or so stories up. It is devoid of furniture or fittings except for two PLASTIC CHAIRS that look like they have been left by mistake.

Ben stumbles around, taking a few steps forward as he looks around. Outside we see a CITY sprawling in the distance.

Ben tentatively explores the space, evidently disoriented.

BEN  
(Quietly, to himself)  
What the hell am I doing in an office?

GOD  
Don't you feel at home here?

Ben turns to see a mature man [10 or so years older than Ben] some distance away. Too far to hear Ben's quiet murmur.

Briefly pausing, Ben walks to the man at the other side of the office.

BEN  
(Approaching God,  
voice raised)  
What do you mean?

Ben keeps walking until he is about six feet from the stranger.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 What is this place? Who are you?

GOD  
 That is three different  
 questions, Ben.

BEN  
 How do you know my name?

GOD  
 (Gestures to the empty  
 space)  
 Where do you think this place  
 is?

BEN  
 I don't know.

GOD  
 What do you remember?

BEN  
 (Thinking to self)  
 I'm not sure. A hospital I  
 think.

GOD  
 Nothing else?

BEN  
 No.

Ben pauses, as if searching for the memory.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 I don't know.

GOD  
 That often happens.

BEN  
 (Looking closely at  
 God's face)  
 Am I dead?

Ben looks around the empty office, through the large  
 windows, taking it all in. We become aware of the  
 silence.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 (Looking back to God)  
 I mean, is this some kind of  
 hallucination?

God says nothing. Ben seems to remember something.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 You knew what I was thinking. So  
 this is either a dream or...

GOD  
 Or what, Ben?

The question hangs in the air as Ben just looks at the man.

BEN  
Am I dead? Is that it?

A brief flicker of RECOGNITION appears on God's face, gone in a moment.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 Jesus, I am dead.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Ben is lying in a HOSPITAL BED, eyes closed, unmoving. We hear the same sounds as before, the BEEPING of monitoring machinery, the hush of AIR. It is clinical and cold.

A NURSE is present, her UNIFORM stark and clean.

As before, the sounds rise rapidly in volume, Ben never moving.

GOD (VO, PRE-LAP)  
 Yes, Ben. You are dead.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

BEN  
 What do you mean?

GOD  
 You asked. That is the answer.

BEN  
 So what does that make you? God?  
 Is this heaven?

A flicker of RECOGNITION appears again on God's face, this time more briefly. Ben notices.

BEN (CONT'D)  
 You are God.

Ben raises his hands, looking down at them and beyond to the carpet below. We see its interlocking pattern as Ben stares, lost in thought.

BEN (CONT'D)  
(Quietly, to himself)  
I've always believed.

GOD  
I know you believed. You've always been a believer.

BEN  
(Looking back intently at God)  
Yes! Ever since I was a child. So many don't believe, but I knew it was true.

GOD  
Indeed. You've always known. You've always had faith.

God takes a step or two closer to Ben.

GOD (CONT'D)  
And that's a problem.

BEN  
What problem? What do you mean?

GOD  
(Gesturing to take in the room around them)  
What do you think of the afterlife, Ben? Does it meet your expectations?

Ben looks around the empty room. He sees a solitary door, the only exit.

BEN  
Well, I didn't know what to expect. I mean, what is this? Is it heaven?

GOD  
Would you be happy if it was, Ben?

BEN  
Well, it's not quite what I expected if I'm honest.

GOD  
So I gather. That is part of the problem. It is a construct. One you can easily understand. Were

you an ancient Persian, for instance, it might be a garden, which would ironically be closer to what you imagine it should be. Equally, were you a lowly worker in the early days of the Industrial Revolution it might be a textile mill. I'm sure you get the idea.

BEN

So what is this place really?

GOD

A holding area. Somewhere we can talk.

BEN

(Voice quavering)

Before what? Some kind of judgment?

GOD

(Mildly amused)

It's a little late for that, Ben. Think of this as a courtesy.

BEN

So we have a chat then I'm sent to heaven or hell. Is that it?

GOD

No, Ben. Not heaven or hell. You are being sent back.

BEN

Back? What do you mean? Back where? I thought I was dead?

GOD

You are dead. That is to say, you died. Shrugged off the mortal coil and all that.

BEN

You mean I get another chance?

GOD

Yes, but not in the sense you mean.

BEN

I don't understand.

GOD

You are being sent back because despite living your life you haven't lived at all.

BEN

What do you mean I haven't lived?

GOD

Believers never do. Not fully.

BEN

That doesn't make any sense.

GOD

Think about your beliefs. What did you really believe?

BEN

I believed in God. A God at least.

GOD

Someone who created the heaven and the Earth? Someone who watched over you?

BEN

Yes. In a sense.

GOD

Yet there was no evidence for such a belief. No proof. Why would you believe such a thing?

BEN

Well I was right. Assuming you are God and this is not a hallucination of some sort.

GOD

But how did you come to this conclusion, Ben? Was it through rational analysis? The very thing your superb brain is designed to do.

BEN

I don't know. Why does any of this matter? Why am I being sent back?

GOD

(Ignores question)  
Take the ancient Persians I mentioned. The pioneers of horticulture. Obsessed with the

cultivation of plants. Any gardener wishes to see his plants flourish and grow. The ultimate goal for the gardener is to ensure his plants are independent and resilient. If you plant a seed and cultivate it over a long period you are disappointed when, in the end, it refuses to blossom, the key activity of plants. You would view them as failures.

BEN

What does that mean? People aren't plants. Our flourishing, if that is what you mean, is more than just our beliefs. Independence and resilience shows itself in others ways. Usefulness, for example. I was useful.

Ben pauses, thinking.

BEN (CONT'D)

At least I think I was. I can't remember.

GOD

You understand the point. To realise your full potential requires the kind of rational thought you are designed to manage.

BEN

I was rational. I mean, I am rational.

GOD

Belief with no evidence is not a rational position to take, Ben.

BEN

So what? Even though I was a believer I kept it to myself. I mean, I don't think I even went to church. It was just there, at the back of my mind. It's not like I was out there converting the heathens. It didn't interfere in what I did. My usefulness. So it doesn't make sense you'd punish someone because they didn't reject something they were taught as a child. That's absurd.



GOD

You are missing the point, Ben. This is not punishment. Indeed your preoccupation with that aspect is itself one of the effects of the belief system you never quite got round to challenging.

BEN

So what is the point? One part of my life wasn't to your liking. What about the rest? Was that for nothing?

GOD

Now you're getting closer. You had a life, but did you really live?

BEN

What do you mean?

GOD

Do you think your belief system could have limited your potential? Remember what I said about gardening. Gardeners want plants to reach their full expression and to blossom, otherwise why bother?

BEN

How could a private belief make any difference? I kept it to myself as far as I can remember.

GOD

Those kind of beliefs are the most limiting kind, Ben. The internal ones that shape how we think and perceive the world. All self-limiting beliefs are by nature internal and private, even if shared by many others.

God watches Ben closely.

GOD (CONT'D)

Don't you wonder about the life you could have had, Ben?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

SEQUENCE:

A sequence of images and sounds appears to Ben. People laughing, sunsets in exotic locations, a speeding car, cheering crowds etc. A good life.

Ben observes, aghast.

BEN

What the hell? This is crazy.

GOD (VO, PRE-LAP)

It is, Ben. A kind of mental illness.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Ben stares at God's expressionless face.

BEN

But I didn't have self-limiting beliefs.

GOD

Well you believed in an afterlife.

BEN

And I was right.

Ben motions to the empty space around them.

BEN (CONT'D)

I'm in it!

GOD

But you imagined a glorious afterlife. A heaven.

BEN

In a sense. Sure. So what? What's wrong with that?

GOD

Think about it. You believed the amazing life you actually lived was to be superseded after death by something even better. Given how few people ever come into existence, and the unlikely sequence of events required for you to exist at all, you took

for granted all that you had for the promise of something better.

That is what your belief gave you, Ben. Your actual existence was second-rate, to be replaced in the end. Don't you think that might have affected what you did with your life, how you managed your opportunities to really live?

Ben remains silent, staring at God.

GOD (CONT'D)

What we believe affects how we behave. This is true for everyone.

BEN

It still seems like a harsh judgment.

GOD

Is it? As harsh as the meek inheriting the Earth? Just slug it out and you'll get your reward in heaven? As harsh as that? A life of low expectation. An entire, unique existence that achieved nothing of its potential. That really is harsh.

BEN

I mean, fine. I get the point. A belief system and all that. Maybe I did occasionally think about some kind of heaven. But also a hell. It's a two-way street. Some of those beliefs helped develop my sense of morality. Surely that cancels things out?

GOD

Does it? Two wrongs don't make a right. More to the point, you are thinking like a slave. Again I have to remind you of your impressive brain and its astonishing potential. The purpose of this little chat.

BEN

A slave? What are you talking about?

GOD

This heaven you imagined. It is bad enough to think you will get something better after life. But that something is to be provided by someone else. The responsibility to provide this better life is to be outsourced. The rejection of responsibility, Ben, is the hallmark of the slave. Only a slave really believes in an entitlement of that sort.

Such an expectation, a belief that something better will be provided for free simply because you exist, would make for very high-maintenance organisms. And what kind of gardener wants that? Except maybe high-maintenance fetishists like the bonsai people. Even then for them the bonsai tree is little more than a toy, attractive because of its smallness. It says more about the bonsai gardener than the bonsai tree.

BEN

You are assuming a lot. And from a private belief someone holds. That is arrogant.

GOD

Yet you worship God. A God you imagine is paying attention to your mindless devotion. That sounds a lot more like arrogance to me. Logically, any omniscient being, as you imagine your God to be, is unlikely to choose personal worship as a method of interaction. Don't you agree? A powerful being who insists on adulation is only worthy of contempt to the free thinking. Unless one is not a free thinker.

BEN

So that's it? I am sent back to mend my ways? For what, another year? Ten years?

GOD

For another life.

BEN

A new life? Wait, will I remember any of this?

GOD

No. You start again.

BEN

What is the point of that?

GOD

You have everything you need to manage to avoid this fate, Ben. The mental machinery, if you will. Perhaps next time you will make better choices.

BEN

And what happens if I fail again?

GOD

You get another go. You get as many as you need. Everyone does.

BEN

How long have you being doing this?

GOD

Forever. If it is any consolation most are sent back. Fewer now of course.

BEN

But there are a lot of people who die all the time.

GOD

Indeed. The population is rising.

BEN

But how can that work? My parents are dead. They can't have me again. Do I live the same life again?

GOD

No. A fresh start. A brand new life. You will be born very shortly to live again. A soul transference thing.

The OFFICE begins to drift away. We see Ben lost in thought.

As the environment dims Ben eventually notices and frantically tries to get God's attention.

BEN  
(Raising voice)  
Wait. I have questions!

The environment continues to fade away. The sound is dampened, fading with the visuals.

BEN (CONT'D)  
(Shouting)  
This doesn't make any sense.  
This is crazy! What happens when  
no one is ever sent back?

God looks directly at Ben, his voice low in volume, almost gone.

GOD  
(Raising voice)  
By then none of you will need  
any God.

FADE OUT.

END