

THE JOHN D. MacDONALD QUOTEBOOK

compiled by William Rotsler
from QUOTEBOOK

ADVENTURE

Every single unwed person knows that the world is always a little out of focus when there is no one who gives the final total damn about whether you live or die. It is the price you pay for being a rambler, and if you don't read the price tag, you are a dull one, indeed. PGG

ARCHITECTURE

Windowless rooms always give me the feeling of having been tricked. Now they've got you, boy, and they're going to come through all the doors at once. PGG

BACHELORHOOD

There are alarm systems, bachelor devices to detect poisonous types. One good way to watch how other women react. When they are around all your mouths got a little tight, and you were very polite to her. And you made no girl talk at all with her. No clothes talk. No date talk. No guided trips to the biff. No girl secrets. Just the way a woman should be damned wary of a man other men have no use for. BOS

BEAUTY

The expression some attractive women wear for the world betrays them. Their faces are arrogant, or petulant, or sensuous. That is all right because their desirability makes up for it, and you know they will be good for a little time and when you have grown accustomed to the beauty, there will be just the arrogance or the petulance left. BC

THE BODY

The body, once you are old enough to stop taking it for granted, becomes like a separate entity. The way it will endure neglect makes you feel guilty. Having survived trauma, and being still willing to carry you around after healing itself, it deserves better. Cherishing it and toughening it is an act of appeasement for past omissions. BOS

CRIME

The psychiatrists call it a sickness. The cops call it a hell of a problem. The sociologists call it a product of our culture, our puritanical tendency to consider sex a delicious nastiness. Some of them escalate to the big violence. Others stay with a small kick, peering into bedrooms. You can't give a man life for that, nor even constructive psychiatric help during a short sentence. He cuts brush on the county gang, tormented by the other prisoners, driven further into his private madness. Then he comes out and cuts up a woman, and at once everybody is an expert on how he should have been handled by the authorities, up to and including gelding the very first time he committed a nuisance in a public park. BOS

The most dannerous animal in the world is not the professional killer. It's the amateur. When they sense that somebody is taking back what they went to so much effort to acquire, that's when they get violent. The essentially dishonest man is capable of truly murderous indignation. BOS

CULTURE

Every generation that gets into its forties believes firmly that the world is going to hell. But our culture seems like a big machine that's tracking itself to bits. Parts keep flying off. Parts that are important. Decency, dignity, morality. We've all gone impulsive. Anything you want to do is all right, provided your urge is strong enough. It's a sociological anarchy. PD

DIGNITY

To any person just learning to stand on his own feet, personal dignity is a bit too important. TD

EDUCATION

He is in complete mental stasis. What he believes now, he'll believe when he's sixty. TD

Education is something which should be apart from the necessities of earning a living, not a tool therefor. It needs contemplation, fallow periods, the measured and guided study of the history of man's reiteration of the most agonizing question of all: Why? Today the good ones, the ones who want to ask Why, find no one around with any interest in answering the question, so they drop out, because theirs is the type of mind which becomes monstrously bored at the trade-school concept. A devoted technician is seldom an educated man. He can be a useful man, a contented man, a busy man. But he has no more sense of the mystery and wonder and paradox of existence than does one of those chickens fattening itself for the mechanical plucking, freezing and packaging. PPD

EGOTISM

People take you at the value you put on yourself. That makes it easy for them. All you do is blend in. Accept the customs of every new tribe. And you try not to say too much because then you sound as if you were selling something. And you might contradict yourself. Everybody in this wide world is so constantly, continuously concerned with the impact he's making, he just doesn't have the time to wonder too much about the next guy. BOS

EMOTION

In all emotional conflicts the thing you find hardest to do is the thing you should do. PGG

We're demonstrating one of the big fat flaws in the logic of the western world. All of us try to attack emotional problems with logic. And logic with emotions. Emotion is more of a physical problem. It's as though you see a man drowning and you stand on the bank and explain to him the mechanics of the flutter kick. TD

EVIL

It takes a special man to tell the difference between right and wrong, but any damn fool can tell the difference between good and evil.

FEAR

He had the look of a man who reaches into a familiar drawer and feels something close around his wrist. TD

Little rivulets of fear ran through his mind the way that rain will trickle erratically down a window pane.

To know hazards, the human animal can react with fear bleached with reason. The unknown drops him into the cave nights, into the sabered terror, awash with adrenaline, the sphincter precarious, muscles knotted for the sideways leap, the head-down whimpering run. G, GW, E

FRIENDSHIP

Acquaintance rather than friend. The dividing line is communication. A friend is someone to whom you can say any jackass thing that enters your mind. With acquaintances, you are forever aware of their slightly unreal image of you, and to keep them content, you edit yourself to fit. Many marriages are between acquaintances. You can be with a person for three hours of your life and have a friend. Another one will remain an acquaintance for thirty years. BOS

You can be at ease only with those people to whom you can say any damn fool thing that comes into your head, knowing that they will respond in kind, and knowing that any misunderstandings will be thrashed out right now, rather than buried deep and given a chance to fester. DTA

GENIUS

It is only genius which is capable of the unique viewpoint. And the observations of genius give us our chance of seeing old ideas in new depth. This can stretch your mind, and it is a frightening thing. D T

LIFE

Every day, no matter how you fight it, you learn a little more about yourself, and all most of it does is teach humility. OFYE

If there were one sunset every twenty years, how would people react to them? If there were ten seashells in all the world, what would they be worth? If people could make love just once a year, how carefully would they pick their mates? OFYE

Life is so damn valuable and so totally miraculous, and they give you such a stingy little hunk of it from womb to tomb, you ought to use ^{all} ^{all} the parts of it there are. OFYE

For playing games, logic is a fine thing. Chess, bridge, solving puzzles. Maybe it's handy for practicing law or making money. But people don't stand around on game boards, waiting to be moved or captured. There isn't any rule book. Freud isn't Hoyle. You can put in fifty cold facts and leave out one hot little emotion, and you come out-dead wrong. When it comes to emotion, everybody is usually wrong. So the only chance you've got is to try not to be wrong so often. And give other people permission to be wrong, too. TLOL

In every contact with every other human in every day of your life, you become what you sense they want of you or, if you are motivated the other way, exactly what they do not want. Were this not so, there would be no place left to hide. DBG

Figures lie and liars figure, and the only thing worth all the trouble is a good bourbon, a good bed and a busy woman. APPD

Nothing is so forlorn as the fanatic who suddenly ceases to believe. MFTB

Simplicity is the master of all subterfuge. MFTB

Something has happened to satisfactions. People don't seem to be getting as much as they deserve out of this fuller, richer life. People have physical ailments that are purely and simply the result of the emotional strain of working year after year at pointless, empty jobs. Okay. So how does modern man arrange to rebel against all the wastage of the big dreams he had about himself when he was young? Our civilization is so compartmentalized that the little guy can't see the relationship of his efforts to the

whole. So his work is unreal to him, and hence meaningless. The artisan is pretty damned rare. So we get into psychosomatics. A woman spends four years soldering wire A to terminals B and C, and gets an arthritic condition of the hands that gets her out of the trap. Safety engineers put every known safety device on a punch press, but a man will work on it for five years and then manage to get his hand into it, even if he has to push the release with his nose. A meat cutter in a packing house will become an alcoholic. A truck driver will acquire a classic ulcer. But some of them will react in other ways. After eight years of running the same piece of IBM office equipment, the once decent girl will become an after hours pushover. Or the lathe operator will take to beating his wife up. Or killing his entire family and himself. People with dull little jobs become maniacs on the highway, or turn accident prone in all manner of ways, or just get sick. Or a man expresses his rebellion by indulging himself in an affair. Nobody will be able to measure all the human misery that is the indirect result of the inescapable boredom and sense of purposelessness that derives from a civilization too mechanized and complicated that a man can no longer take pride and satisfaction in the one little fragment that is his part of the whole ball of wax. TD



There are a lot of little social goals that I think are pretty damn dubious. But she accepts all the truisms without question. Sometimes I envy her because it makes life so damn simple. If you accept everything you read and everything you're told, then you can be at home in the world and you don't waste time, as I do, trying to detect how society is kidding you. And trapping you into a lot of empty effort. TD

LONELINESS

The more complex a civilization grows, the more violent are the effects of loneliness. YLO

LOVE

A woman, due to her reproductive obligations, and her responsibilities before and after the birth of a child, has a very primitive yen for total security. So that means that love--and by love I mean all aspects of the marital relationship--must occupy a much greater area of importance in her mind than in the mind of a man. The emotional-sexual relationship is just one area of interest in the male. He has many other areas. For a woman it is damn near everything. TD

Love creates its own symbolism, and touches the meanest things with magic. DT

MAN

Hungry men think everyone else is just as hungry. Conspiratorial men see conspiracy everywhere. PGG

A man with no trace of the feminine in him, with no duality at all, is a man without tenderness, sympathy, gentleness, kindness, responsiveness. He is brute-mean, a hammer, a fist. A woman with no trace of the masculine in her makeup is merciless in a different way. The empathy of kindness is a result of the duality, not of the feminine trace. BOS

Any man who thinks of himself as therapy should not have a license to practice. ADSC

His mind had never gone beyond anecdote, had never advanced to the point where he could reason. He could argue wildly, but without reason. He wanted warmth, food, drink, a bed and a woman. He had a closed shallowness of mind. The people who wrote the books understood and despised him. Steinbeck knew all about him. And Farrell. And also those long dead. He had been in all times, all places. The shallow animal, preening itself, using others, thinking only of itself and its pleasures, dead to everything significant in the world. Jaunty trousers and swagger and the glittering eye and the tattoo on the upper arm--ogler on every street corner--rapist in uniform--lyncher when the crowd was large enough--flexer of muscles--goat-boy, smug and bounding--but sidling back into the shadows, wary as a rat, when danger came. And like all the others this goat-youth would change, grow thick and bald. With the quick flex of muscles gone, with the eyes dulled, with the belly sagging the once jaunty trousers, there would be nothing left but a dull man with dull appetites and endless repetitive anecdotes of a youth-time that, in retrospect, seemed shining and gay and ternal. AE

MARRIAGE

If your marriage is right, other things being equal, you will succeed. And each part of your life is somehow equal to the whole. CAOV

MATURITY

Maturity implies the acquisition of a philosophy that not only functions, but that makes life satisfying. METB

MEMORY

The image slipped back and down into the cluttered warehouse of memory. It lay atop the rest of the debris, instantaneously available. TGGWE

MODERN LIVING

Life today seems to be the result of a curious trend. A reversal of values. Basic decency is corny. Sexis used to sell refrigerators. Violence has become admirable. A boy is supposed to toughen himself, seek out the angles, display no emotion, disguise intelligence, avoid any stain of individuality. Public schools have become temporary stockades with such overcrowding that only the most devoted of teachers still try to stimulate intelligence and imagination. The welfare state guarantees that nobody will starve, no matter how badly they goof. And at the end you get your social security. So, from womb to tomb, you just let yourself sink into the warm, selfish bath of conformity, of sex without emotional responsibility, of violence without punishment. DT

Aman with a credit card is in hock to his own image of himself. DBG

It seemed to me that standardization had been accelerated by television. There was less difference between the new cars, between the women, between all conversations. All seemed predigested and tasteless. I knew that in this place we could get ham and eggs that would not differ one milligram in weight or one half degree in serving heat from the same dish in the same chain a thousand miles away. It was all predictable, all designed to eliminate risk. But she was not part of this standardization. Her mind did not work in the flat, trite, acceptable ways. In our own way we were both aliens, bored with all the reassurances of a cooky-cut world. DT

It was like all the other cities in the heartland of America. Or maybe all of the cities of all time. Delicacy mated to venality. Energy and progress linked to idleness and sin. But in this time, louder than ever before, rang out the plea that was more than half command--AMUSE ME. Fill those sour hours of this, my own and only life, with the gut-buster joke, the rancid ranch-hand laments about love, the talcumed armpits and shaven crotch of commercial love, the flounderings and hootings and vomitings of the big bender. By God, I want the girlie shows and the sex books, and a big cigar is a sign of masculinity and success. I want to be slim without dieting, smart without half trying, rich without working. And I want to read all about it, read all

about hell for the other guy==with pics of him strewn on the highway, or cleaved with an axe, or being carried out of the mine. So I can hug old precious, invaluable, unique and irreplaceable me. Amuse me. That keeps me rolling along, boy. So I can live without dying, and right at the end of my world, die without thinking. Then the rest of you can go to hell because I won't be here, and by God, when I was here, I had it good. I had it sweet and hot and often.

TD

The sign of the times is the imaginary whiplash injury.

DBG

The dullest wire services the world has ever seen fill their monopoly newspapers with self-congratulatory pap. Their radio is unspeakable. Their television is geared to a minimal approval by thirty million of them. And anything thirty million people like, aside from their more private functions, is bound to be bad. Their schools are group-adjustment centers, fashioned to shame the rebellions. Their churches are weekly votes of confidence in God. Their politicians are enormously likeable, never saying a cross word. The goods they buy grow increasingly more shoddy each year, though brighter in color. For those who still read, they make do, for the most part, with the portentous gruntings of Uris, Wouk, Rand and others of the same witless ilk. Their magazine fare is fashioned by nervous committees.

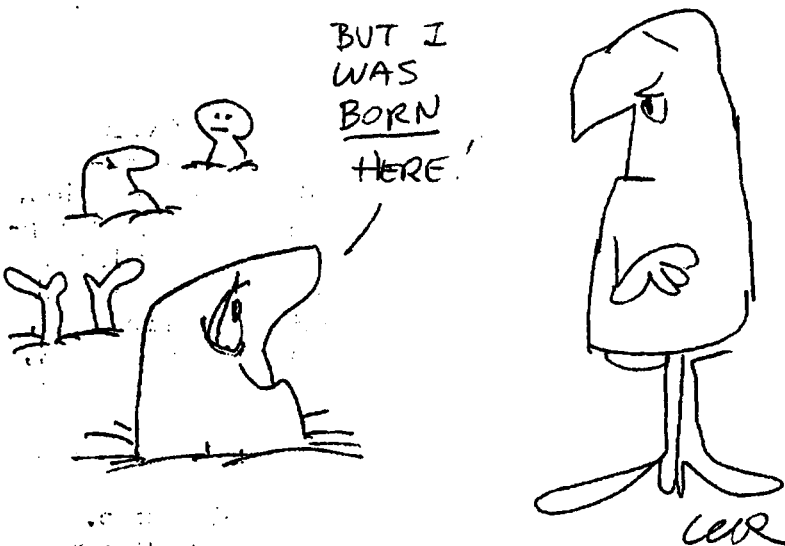
"You see, dear, there is no one left to ask them a single troublesome question. Such as: Where have you been and where are you going and is it worth it.

They are the Undisturbed. The Sleep-Lovers.

And they fill out an enormous number of forms every year, humbly and sincerely. Each one is given a number to use all his life.

...Vote! Consume! Denate! And don't forget to use your number.

QRF



In some remote year the historians will record that Twentieth Century America attempted the astonishing blunder of changing its culture to fit automobiles instead of people, putting a skin of concrete and asphalt over millions of acres of arable land, rotting the hearts of their cities, so encouraging the proliferation of murderous, high-speed junk that when finally the invention of the Transporlan rendered the auto obsolete, it took twenty years and a half a trillion dollars to obliterate the ugliness of all the years of madness, and rebuild the supercities in a manner to dignify the human instead of his toys.

BOS

It is a temporizing world, fading into uncertain shades of grey, so full of complexities all worth and value questioned, hag-ridden by the apologetics of Freud, festering with so many billions of us that every dab of excellence has to be spread so thin it becomes a faint coat of grease, indistinguishable from the Eva-Last plastics. In this tonoggan ride into total, perfectly adjusted mediocrity, the great conundrum is what is worth living for and what is worth dying for. I choose not to live for the insurance program, for creative selling, for suburban adjustments, for the little warm cage of kiddy-kisses, serial television, silky wife-nights, zoning squabbles.

But what is the alternative? I know just enough about myself to know I cannot settle for one of the simplifications which indignant people seize upon to make understandable a world too complex for their comprehension. Astrology, health food, flag waving, bible thumping, Zen, nudism, nihilism--all of these are grotesque simplifications which small dreary people adopt in the hope of thereby finding The Answer, because the very concept that maybe there is no answer, never has been, never will be, terrifies them.

All that remains for the McGee is an ironic Knighthood, a spavined steed, second class armor, a dubious lance, a bent broadsword, and the chance, now and again, to

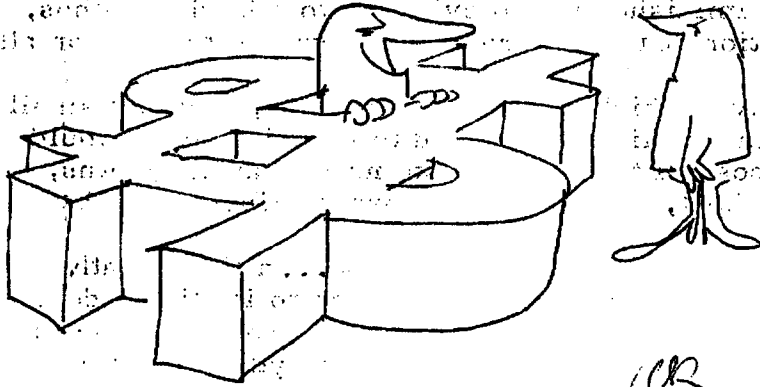
lift into a galumphing charge against capital E Evil, his brave battle oaths marred by an occasional hysterical giggle. He has to carry a very long banner because on it it has been embroidered, by maidens galore, The Only Thing in the World Worth a Damn is the Strange, Touching, Pathetic, Awesome Nobility of the Individual Human Spirit. The end of the banner trails on the ground way the hell behind his horse, and people keep stepping on it.

D 8G

7. MAKES ME FEEL

SAFE

MONEY



A one-dollar bill has a humble and homely look. A five-dollar bill has a few meek pretensions. A ten is vigorous and forthright and honest, like a scout leader. A twenty, held to the ear like a seashell, emits the far-off sound of nightclub music. A fifty wears the faint sneer of race track. It has a portly look, needs a shave, wears a yellow diamond on the little fingers. And a hundred is very haughty indeed.

Then there is quantity. A wad of ones in the bottom of a grubby pocket or fanned between the fingers in an

alley game. Or three frayed fives in a flat cheap billfold. Then there is the flashy billfold, padded fat with ones and fives and tens and twenties. Next step is the platinum bill clip, with its dainty burden of twenties and fifties, crisp and folded but once. After that is the unmarked envelope with its cool sheaf of hundreds, slipped from hand to hand in the corridor of a government building.

Or there are banks. And when you get up to the window there is a stack at the teller's elbow that can stop your heart.

When cute little girls visit the mint the kind man sometimes lets them hold a million dollars. In ten-thousand-dollar bills, the sort of bills that circulate inside the mysterious and cabalistic recesses of the Federal Exchange System. One hundred of them. A little packet only so thick for a whole million dollars. And if the little girl should cut and run with it, it wouldn't do her a damn bit of good.

ST

PLEASURE

Pleasure without purpose feeds on itself until it is finally consumed and the thing is dead.

ATC

PRIDE

The pride in any man says that if he's once bedded a woman he can do it again.

DW

SANITY

Cretons are the only humans who can be absolutely certain of their own sanity. All the rest of us go rocketing along rickety rails over spavined bridges and along the edge of bottomless gorges. The man who believes himself free of any taint of madness is a damned liar.

PPD

SEX

Any woman can accept more than any one man can give. It's a question of mechanics. She can make him feel inadequate, and once she gets him really worrying about whether he can or he can't, then more often he can't.

BOS

When it's good, it doesn't drag you down. It refreshes. When it's a bad thing between people, bad in their heads and bad in their hearts, maybe hating a little, that's when it makes you drag around afterwards, feeling sour and old.

BOS

It was a sound so faint it was not actually a sound, more a rhythm sensed. It is a bed rhythm, strangely akin to a heartbeat, though softer. Whum-fa, whum-fa, whum-fa. As eternal, clinical, inevitable as the slow gallop of the heart itself. And as basic to the race, reaching from the percale back to the pallet of dried grasses in the cave corner. A sound clean and true, a nastiness only to those unfortunates who carry through their narrow days their own little hidden pools of nastiness, ready to spill it upon anything so real it frightens them.

Heard even in its most shoddy context, as through the papery walls of a convention motel, this life-beat could be diminished not to evil, but to a kind of pathos, because then it was an attempt at affirmation between strangers, a way to try to stop all the clocks, a way to try to say: I live.

The billions upon billions of lives which have come and gone, and that small fraction now walking the world, came from this life-pulse, and to deny it dignity would be to diminish the blood and need and purpose of the race, make us all bawdy clowns, thrusting and bumping away in a ludicrous heat, shamed by our own instinct. BOS



Sex should be... a little death, and the cowards go to it blindfolded, or drunk, or both. You should go in such a way that everything is stamped deep and bright on your mind. CAO V

Much of physical love is meaningless. It is an erotic spasm that does not touch the heart or soul, and leaves one feeling soiled and distainful. When indulged in as Don Juanian conquest, it is but a meager victory. As the executioner winds the guillotine blade high and sees the trembling of the

victim, his heart beats faster. Then the blade drops and he stares at the head in the basket, faintly ashamed that he feels nothing. MFTB

The first time is no good. You aren't adjusted to each other. You know absolutely nothing about the other person's wants or needs or tempo or anything else. It takes a lot of times being together before you're--damn it, I hate to sound so clinical--proficient. And that just means from the physical angle, without thinking of any emotional or spiritual aspects. CAO V

Bed is dangerous country. The physical act is the least chancy part of it, requiring only health, maturity, and a reasonable consideration. It is the emotional interaction that makes it mysterious and perilous, turns it into something that mankind finds so endlessly interesting. Perhaps it is this simple. If, through the physical act, you are affirming emotions you believe in, then bed is cleansing, heartening, strengthening. But if the emotional context is greed, or the need for domination, or the yen to humiliate, or just the shallow desire to receive a pleasurable sensation, then bed diminishes, coarsens and deforms. The complicating factor is the great talent of the human animal to place a noble tag on ignoble emotions, intellectualizing something out of nothing, but the emotions are not deceived. They detect emptiness. Men use the available emptiness of the sun bunnies and call it a healthy release, and by so doing, over a period of time, reduce each other to a spiritless vulgarity. DSG

Bed is the simplest thing two people can do. If it goes with a lot of other things, it can be important, and if it goes with nothing else, it isn't worth the time taken. QRF

SURVIVAL

A man with a gun on him better move fast or not at all.

LOL

Any persistent idiot can strain away at the doorframe isometrics and build impressive wads of chunky fibrous muscle with which you can lift the front end of any sedan to make the girlssay Oooo. But if you want the kind of muscle structure that will move you from here to there very very quickly, that will enable you to slip in a punch, snatch amoving wrist, turn a fall into a shoulder roll that will put you back on the ballsof your feet, balanced and ready, then you'd better be willing to endure total expenditure over long, active and dogged periods. I was going to be slowed by by time and attrition, and maybe it had begun, but not to a degree as yet for me to notice, nor to a degree to make a doubt myself--and doubt, of course, is more fatal than slowed reflexes.

PGG

TOLERANCE

All the differences which mean anything are subjective. In the drinking of a fine wine or a deadly poison, the mechanical functioning of the elbow and wrist are identical. Whether the eye sees blood or roses, little sub-electrical impulses in the brain identify the color as red.

DSG

VIOLENCE

Violence is the stepchild of desperation.

QRF

WAR

The days of the brave armies with pennons and bugles are over. Now the trick is to plant your own people in the right spots. Have them ready to hamstring the opposition when the shooting war starts.

MFTB

WEATHER

The heat wave was never going to break. The world was going to be like this from now on.

CAOV

WOMEN

There is no man so assured that he cannot be made to feel slightly oafish if a subtle and complex woman puts her mind to it.

D SG

A woman who does not guard and treasure herself cannot be of very much value to anyone else. They become a pretty little convenience, like a guest towel. And the cute things they say, and their dainty little squeals of pleasure and release are as contrived as the embroidered initials on the guest towels. Only a woman of pride, complexity and emotional tension is genuinely worth the act of love, and there are only two ways to get yourself one of them. Either you lie, and stain the relationship with your own sense of guile, or you accept the involvement, the emotional responsibility, the permanance she must by nature crave. I love you can be said only two ways.

DBG

It is difficult to put much valve on something the lady has distributed all too generously. I have the feeling there is some mysterious quota, which varies with each woman. And whether she gives herself or sells herself, once she reaches her own number, once X pairs of hungry hands have been clamped tightly upon her rounded under-sides, she suffers a sea change wherein her juices alter from honey to acid, her eyes change to glass, her heart becomes a stone, and her mouth a windy cave from whence, with each moisturous gasping, comes a tiny stink of death.

DTA

WORRY

People spend so much time fretting about what they did yesterday and dreading what might happen tomorrow, they miss out on all of their todays. When you realize you can't change the past or predict the future, then you come alive for the first time, like waking up from a half-sleep.

OFYE

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