

DIVINE COMEDY

GLEN SCRIVENER

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WHAT IS LIFE?

HUMAN TRAGEDY

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TRAGEDY OR COMEDY?

You know how they categorize Shakespeare's plays, right? If it ends with a wedding, it's a comedy. And if it ends with a funeral, it's a tragedy. So we're all living tragedies, because we all end the same way, and it isn't with a ... wedding.

ROBYN SCHNEIDER, *The Beginning of Everything*¹

What is life: a tragedy or a comedy?

A lot depends on your definition. Mel Brooks once said, 'Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.' That's one perspective – not one I'll use in this book though. I'm thinking of 'comedy' and 'tragedy' in a more technical sense.

I'm not asking whether life is a barrel of laughs. We all know it's not. 'Comedy' and 'tragedy' have particular meanings. In literature 'comedy' and 'tragedy' refer to the shape of a story, not so much its content, or even its tone.

Shakespeare's tragedies, for instance, were full of jokes. Or at least that's what our English

teachers told us at school. If we're honest, we probably hadn't noticed the gags – I hadn't anyway. When the alleged 'humour' was pointed out, I dutifully said, 'Oh,' and wrote in my exercise book: 'Hamlet is making a joke, apparently.'

Tragedies can have jokes, and comedies can have heartache. In fact much of comedy depends upon the banana-peel moment, the pompous being brought down a peg or two, or the grand farce where everything falls apart.

Tragedies contain joy, comedies contain pain, but the distinguishing mark of both is the ending. At the end of a Shakespearean tragedy the bodies are piled up on the stage. At the end of a Shakespearean comedy – in fact in all 14 of them – there is a wedding. Or four.

To help you fix it in your mind, think of it this way: a comedy is shaped like a smile. You go down then up – descending into darkness before rising up to joy. A tragedy, on the other hand, is shaped like a frown – up then down. You climb to prosperity then tumble into the pit.

So now that we've clarified the question, let me ask it again. What is life: a tragedy or a comedy?

Tragedy, surely! That's what Professor Lawrence Krauss would tell us: 'The picture that science presents to us is ... uncomfortable. Because what we have learned is that we are more insignificant than we ever could have imagined ... And in addition it turns out that the future is miserable.'² We are the flotsam of a cosmic explosion and biological survival machines – wet robots – clinging to an insignificant rock, hurtling through a meaningless universe towards eternal extinction. Still, all that being said, the new flavoured latte from Starbucks is *incredible*. And have you tried hot yoga? We're renovating the kitchen too. So, you know, that's nice ... As the annihilating tsunami of time bears down on us, we obsess over our sandcastles – the promotion, the holiday, the new gadget – and we dare not look up.

Life is a tragedy and this dismal tale is sold to us in every magazine and paperback: 'The thousand books you must read before you die'; 'The ten must-see destinations for your bucket list'. The shape of the story is *up* then *down* and the advertisers are primed to sell you the *uppiest up* that money can buy because the *down* really is a downer. The photographs are glossy, but they

mask an unutterable tragedy. Life, according to the wisdom of the age, is about enjoying our brief 'moment in the sun'. We clamber upwards, grab for ourselves all the achievements, experiences and pleasures that we can and then, so soon, we are 'over the hill' and the grave awaits. It's up then down. The frowny face. The tragedy.

If you want proof that our culture tells a tragic tale about life, witness its obsession with youth. Since our story's ending is so bleak we focus on the beginning. On billboards we emblazon images of 17-year-old models who look like 12-year-old girls and who tell us how to fight the seven signs of ageing. Undeniably we have a cult of youth while at the same time we keep the elderly and the dying out of sight, out of mind. On my social media feeds the only time I hear of the elderly is when they act like young people. So, occasionally, there's the story of the 70-year-old marathon runner, or the 80-year-old break dancer or the 90-year-olds into speed dating. And we say, 'Aren't these old people inspiring ...?' What we fail to add (but what we undeniably mean) is '*... when they act like 20-year-olds.*' We don't prize the elderly for the qualities traditionally associated with them: wisdom and experience. No. But when they

muster up the vigour to ape our youthful trends, then we'll pay attention. Briefly.

We are constantly being distracted – and constantly distracting ourselves – from the end of our life's story. We are certain that life is a tragedy and so we focus on the beginning as much as possible. All the while though we are marching, inevitably, towards a 'miserable ever after'.

Then – against all the odds and in distinction to all its competitors – the Bible comes along and dares to tell a different story.