The Rower

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Time and Place

A present-day college dorm room

Cast of Characters

MARNEY: muscular young woman dressed in neon spandex and a sweat-stained t-shirt

WES: lanky young man dressed in blue jeans and a college hoodie

Synopsis

Considering the futility of existence—not to mention the slight possibility that our entire universe may be nothing more than an illusion of our collective unconscious—why do you do everything you do?
MARNEY: (Lying on her stomach, staring blankly at a textbook. Several open binders and a few scattered stacks of paper, plus a half-eaten apple and an uncapped jar of peanut butter with a spoon sticking out of it, lie on either side of her. She sighs suddenly, slapping the textbook shut. Then she leaps to her feet and begins to pace, peanut butter in hand.) Seventeen pages… only seventeen pages… seventeen pages… plus a paper due at midnight, an exam tomorrow afternoon, two homeworks and a lab report due Friday, and lift in the morning… I should probably shower sometime tonight—and eat something better than a jar of peanut butter for dinner. (Pause, standing over the textbook) Why do I do it? Why do I wake up in the morning before sunrise after four and a half, maybe five, hours of sleep and will myself to abandon fuzzy socks and fleece blankets for a trek up the hill while the roads are slicked with ice and the air is so cold that it hurts to breathe—and the only place I intend to be once I get to campus is the varsity weight room: an overheated, undersized, old racquetball court stuffed with barbells and kettlebells and dumbbells and other contraptions designed to generate sweat and sore muscles? Why do I show up to the longest workouts of the week and will myself to sit back down on the erg after two, maybe three, pieces and pull another stroke and another stroke as hard as I possibly can despite the stiffness spreading throughout my quads and biceps and the stubborn aches climbing up my back and the stupid pains bubbling up beneath my blisters? (Prodding the textbook with her toe) Sometimes I wonder…

Enter WES

WES: (Dropping his backpack beside MARNEY) Sometimes I wonder why you only wonder sometimes!

MARNEY: (Returning to the floor and reopening the textbook) Why?

WES: Because I wonder all the time.

MARNEY: About what, exactly?
WES: Why does the universe exist (if, in fact, it does exist)? Why do I exist within it (if, in fact, I do exist)? Why do I perceive this particular reality (if, in fact, this is reality) in which you, Marney Elizabeth Peterson, of all seven billion people on the planet, appear to play a very prominent role?

MARNEY: That B.S. almost deserves a round of applause.

WES: (Bowing) Thank-you.

MARNEY: Do you wonder about anything else, Wes?

WES: All the time!

MARNEY: Right…

WES: I wonder about me.

MARNEY: (Muttering) I think I prefer the existentialist bit.

WES: I wonder about you.

MARNEY: I definitely prefer the existentialist bit.

WES: (Joins her on the floor) How are you doing today, Marney?

MARNEY: Occupied… preoccupied…

WES: Answer not accepted.

MARNEY: (Glancing up from the textbook) Wes, I have seventeen pages left. I’ll be unoccupied enough to answer you after I finish reading.

WES: (Pulling a laptop out of his backpack) What’s the point of it?

MARNEY: (Huffs) What?
WES: Considering the remarkable inability of a mortal memory to retain precise information and the increasing capability of smart devices to replace dumb minds—not to mention the imminent end of life and the inevitable extinction of humankind—what’s the point of education?

MARNEY: (Pause) Enlightenment.

WES: Enlightenment?

MARNEY: Enlightenment.

WES: Answer not accepted.

MARNEY: Then you can wait for a better one; I’ll be educated enough to enlighten you after I finish reading.

WES: (Sighs) Why do you do it, Marney?

MARNEY: What?

WES: Considering the futility of existence—not to mention the slight possibility that our entire universe may be nothing more than an illusion of our collective unconscious—why do you do everything you do?

MARNEY: (Pushing the textbook away from her and returning to her feet) Because I can… Because I have to—want to—ought to—I can’t not do.

WES: Why?

MARNEY: (Pause) There’s… a moment… At the end of a lift or after the final stroke of a sprint, everything hurts: Every muscle in my body feels stiffer than stone and softer than jelly all at once. My clothes are drenched with sweat, and my head is spinning, and my throat is parched, and my heart is pounding, and my lungs can’t seem to figure out how to breathe, and my legs are shaking so
hard that I can barely stand on my own two feet… Then the endorphins kick in, and I start to gain a sense of accomplishment—satisfaction—and all of a sudden a moment crashes down on me like a tsunami, and everything—the pain, the sweat, the spinning, the pounding—everything is washed away… (Pause, closing her eyes) The air is crisp and clear, and the surface of the lake is so still that the water shines like freshly-polished silver—a mirror to the gleaming crescent of a moon and the glittering handful of stars strewn across the sky. The golden green of the eastern horizon is just beginning to dissolve into the deep indigo above. Our boat is stable, balanced. Our bodies move as one, arms then hips then legs guiding the oar handles towards the stern, air bubbles murmuring ever so softly beneath the boat… I know they say water is just some inorganic molecular compound—one oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms covalently bonded together—inanimate. But I swear something happens—something so strange and so profound that even natural law fails in light of it—once trillions upon trillions of those molecules end up together in some giant hole in the ground: They gain a sort of life; add a boat and a pair of oars, and they gain a sort of magic… Catch—we square and bury the blades. Drive—we press our feet against the foot stretchers and swing in perfect unison, as the hull glides across the surface of the water with all the speed of a shortfin mako and all the grace of a trumpeter swan. Finish—we pull the oar handles into our chests and feather the blades—thump! (Pause) There’s… a moment of silence… perfection… euphoria…

WES: Euphoria?

MARNEY: (Opening her eyes) Euphoria.

WES: As in runner’s high?

MARNEY: As in rower’s high.

WES: There’s a difference?
MARNEY: *(Returning to the textbook)* Yes.

WES: *(Raises an eyebrow)*

MARNEY: But I get the same sensation from solving circuits and writing stories… and eating peanut butter.

WES: *Euphoria?*

MARNEY: Euphoria.

WES: *(Pause)* That B.S. almost deserves a round of applause.

MARNEY: *(Glaring)* Thank-you.

WES: Marney, *why do you do it?*

MARNEY: Wes, I… I… I love it. I love the team; I love the challenge; I love the magic. More than anything, I *hate* the pain, but, more than everything, I *love* the high… I love the high.

WES: *(Pause)* Answer accepted.

MARNEY: Fantabulous. *(Returning her attention to the text book)* And I still have seventeen pages left…