

THE TENACITY PROBLEM

Written by David-Angelo Mineo

Jude slowly came to consciousness beneath a slow-moving ceiling fan, accompanied by a low but annoying hum that seemed to come from it. He sat up confused and looked around to see what appeared to be an empty bar. No doors. No windows. No music. Just a lone stool, the bar, a brass foot rail running along its base and that slow-moving ceiling fan. He heard a voice.

"Oh, it's you..."

Jude looked to his left where the voice was coming from. A lone bartender stood behind the bar polishing a drink glass.

"Who are you?" He was confused rather than frightened. "What is this place?"

The bartender nodded upward. Jude turned to look up at the glowing reddish and purple neon sign that read, "Hey, Jude's Bar!" Jude stared blankly at the sign before saying aloud, "My name is Jude."

The bartender shrugged. "Yeah. Branding department really phoned this one in."

"And you're the bartender?"

The bartender looked directly at Jude with the facial expression of a convenience store clerk interested in checking a big stack of hand-filled lottery tickets three minutes before clocking out for the night.

For a long moment, only the low but dominant hum seemingly coming from the ceiling fan filled the silence. Then he snapped his fingers and smiled.

"Hey, Jude. Don't make it bad. Take a drink, make it better..."

Jude groaned. Maybe he had heard that joke his entire fucking life.

"What do you want?"

The bartender blinked and shrugged. "I was going to ask you that."

Jude got up and brushed himself off and slumped into the bar stool.

The bartender looked around. "Well, unless you came here for the ambiance... Drink?"

Jude ordered a drink. "Bourbon. Neat."

The bartender glanced toward the shelves. "Anything in particular?"

Jude thought about it for a second and glanced over the bottles behind the bartender before responding sarcastically. "If you have Old Crow 100-Proof Bottled-in-Bond, that would be just great."

The bartender stopped polishing the glass and turned toward the random assortment of bottles behind him. "We got it."

Jude looked at him. "Seriously?"

"Dunno, you asked."

Jude said, "Well then, Old Crow 100-Proof Bottled-in-Bond, neat!"

The bartender poured the drink and slid it over to Jude. Jude caught it, took a big sniff, then downed the bourbon in one gulp.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..."

The bartender gave Jude another bored look.

"Surrounded by every bottle you could possibly imagine, and you want Old Crow 100-Proof Bottled-in-Bond."

Jude snapped back to attention and said, "What? You got a problem with Old Crow?" Jude turned the bottle around and studied the label.

"They haven't made this shit in decades."

"I know."

"Then how do you have it?"

The bartender shrugged. "You ordered it."

The bartender again looked bored out of his mind. "No shit."

Jude nodded. "No shit. So, how long have you had that bottle?"

The bartender looked at the label. "Long enough."

Jude asked, "Well, what's something like that cost here?"

"Nothing."

Jude laughed. "Now I know this place is bullshit."

Then Jude stopped stone cold and remembered dying. Just flashes of parts and fragments. Not everything. Just enough.

He remembered his final thought, "I could sure use a drink about now!"

Jude stared at the empty glass.

"I died?"

The bartender continued polishing another drink glass. "That would explain a few things."

"No. I remember it. I fucking died."

"Congratulations."

"Congratulations for what? Dying?"

"Figuring it out. Most people get there eventually."

"Eventually? Where the fuck am I?"

"You already asked me that."

"And you didn't answer."

"I pointed at the sign."

"That's not an answer."

"It answered the question you asked."

Nothing but that hum filled the silence. A new drink came sliding down the bar. Jude caught it reflexively and looked at the bourbon, then at the bartender. "I didn't order this."

"You caught it."

Jude put the glass down. The bartender leaned over the bar with a sardonic expression. "Remember to let it into your heart. Then you can start to make it better." The word "better" stretched out.

Jude downed the Old Crow in one gulp.

Jude looked over. "You know, I used to really love the bar scene when I was younger."

The bartender walked towards the back with a sarcastic look on his face. "You-don't-say?"

"Yeah. Meeting people. Many friends and even more women. Back when the music was bitchin', and I could walk into any place solo, knowing nobody, and leave knowing everybody."

The bartender glanced around the completely empty bar. "Sounds exhausting."

"It was fun."

"Then why do you hate bars?"

Jude paused. "I didn't say I hated bars."

"You didn't have to."

Jude stared at him. "How the fuck would you know?"

"Because you hate bars."

"I didn't always."

"Yeah. You covered that. Friends. Women. Bitchin' music. You were fucking Party Jesus in Zubaz."

"I liked being around people."

"Then what happened there, Jude?"

Jude looked down at the empty glass and shrugged. "I guess drinking happened."

"You guess? Pretty sure drinking was already happening."

"You know what I mean."

"Unfortunately, I do."

"At first, drinking was part of everything else. Going out. Celebrating with friends. Celebrating accomplishments. Meeting people. Getting laid. Making new friends. Having something to fucking do."

"And then?" the bartender asked.

"Then everything else became part of drinking. Before I knew it, I was celebrating 4 to 6 times a week."

The bartender nodded. "There you go."

"There I go where?"

"Dunno. Sounded important. Maybe even profound."

Jude looked at the bartender wearily. "Eventually I didn't even want to drink anymore."

"But you did."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Jude stared at the empty glass. "Because I needed to."

"Interesting word."

At that moment, a bright light blinded Jude for a second. "What was that?"

The bartender gave him another odd look. "Gee, I don't know. A big glowing door."

The bartender poured another Old Crow and slid it toward Jude. Jude caught it and drank it in one gulp, not skipping a beat.

The bartender said, "So, you quit?"

Jude remained captivated by the door now occupying the bar. He just stared at it. He was reasonably certain there hadn't been a giant glowing door there thirty seconds ago. "Years ago."

"And yet..." The bartender gestured toward the empty glass.

Jude looked directly at the bartender. "I'm fucking dead. I think sobriety has served its purpose."

"Apparently not."

Jude looked back toward the door. "So, what's that? You called it a big glowing door. I know what it looks like."

"Good. We're making progress."

"What's behind it?"

"Usually whatever's on the other side." The bartender thought hard for a second. "But in your case, it absolutely will be whatever's on the other side."

Jude stared at him. "You're really starting to piss me off."

"Starting?"

Jude got up from the barstool and slowly walked over to the door. He gripped the doorknob and tried to open it, but it was locked.

Jude pulled on the handle again. Nothing. He stared at the door for a moment. "Purgatory." Jude turned around. "Of course. That's what this is. I'm dead. This is some kind of waiting room. That door is locked..."

The bartender shrugged. "Solid detective work."

Jude pointed at the door. "That door leads to heaven! This bar is purgatory. The booze is my temptation." Jude pointed directly at the bartender. "And you're my Saint Paul, the bartender."

The bartender rolled his eyes and looked even more bored than he did before. "Well, that's brilliant, but no. I am not Saint Paul."

Jude immediately backpedaled. "Or Saint John. Yeah, you look like a John."

The bartender stared at him. "Ah, no. I am not that guy either, and for the record, that's like racist in at least three different centuries."

Now it was Jude staring blankly at the bartender. "What?"

"Why Paul? Why John? Why a fucking Beatle? I don't even look like John. I could be Rick or Steve or a fucking Gary!"

Jude gritted his teeth. "Fine... I will just call you Rick."

The bartender gave him a sarcastic smile. "Thank you. That was RICKsfying."

Jude, uninterested in bartender Rick's bullshit, angrily turned his back on him and pointed at the door.

"Look, Rick, heaven is behind that door."

Bartender Rick shrugged. "If that helps."

Jude heard a glass slide down the bar and turned to see a fresh pour of Old Crow waiting. This time, he confidently walked over, picked up the drink glass, took a big sniff, then downed the bourbon in one gulp.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..."

The bartender Rick asked, "Another?"

Jude looked at Rick. "Yes, a double, please..."

Rick fixed the drink and walked over to Jude. He gave the bar a quick wipe, put down a small cocktail napkin, then gently set the drink on top.

"So, you think you got it all figured out now, do ya?"

Jude took a gulp of his drink before responding. "I've spent most of my life believing that if I analyzed something long enough, eventually I'd understand it. If something didn't make sense, I investigated further. If something failed, I wanted to understand why. If additional information appeared, that meant there was still something left to discover."

"You know, Jude. Some things just cannot be understood. Take this bar, for example, or that door or me. You said it yourself. You died. Yet, here you are. How's that working out for you?"

Jude took another drink. "Enough."

"Enough of what?"

"I know quitting early would've cost me answers."

Rick nodded. "There you go."

"There I go where?"

Rick suddenly lit up with an annoyingly cheerful expression. "You learned persistence works. Congratulations. You also somehow missed the part where a superpower can become a fucking character defect."

Jude shook his head. "You keep trying to tell me something by saying nothing."

"I've been telling you different things."

"What's the difference?"

Rick looked at Jude. "Apparently about six drinks."

Jude looked up. "What do you mean, six drinks? I've had five..."

Rick gave Jude a deadpan stare, then began counting on his fingers. "Let me see. You had your initial drink of a 150-year-old, out-of-circulation cheap bourbon, check. You had the drink you didn't order, check. The drink when you first noticed the door, check. The drink when you pronounced Heaven was beyond the door, check. Then the double you're still working on. Yeah, that's six. Six drinks, Jude. And you're no further along than you were when you first noticed me."

"Okay, fine. I forgot the double." Jude took a second and looked at the mostly empty glass. "But that's bullshit."

"Which part?"

"You said I'm no farther than when I got here."

"No. I said you're no further along than when you first noticed me."

"I've learned plenty since then."

"Didn't say you haven't. Only that you're still exactly where you were when you first noticed me."

Jude pointed toward the door. "I know I'm dead. I know this place isn't normal. I know you know things about me you shouldn't know. I know that fucking door wasn't there when I woke up here."

Rick nodded. "All true."

"Then how the fuck is that not progress?"

"Depends. What changed?"

"What do you mean, what changed?"

"First drink, you didn't know where you were. Five drinks after that, you're sitting in the same seat, drinking the same cheap bourbon, talking to the same absurdist asshole, staring at the door."

"But I know more."

Rick said, very slowly and deliberately, "Absolutely."

"So that's progress."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Toward what?"

"Every drink gives me something."

"Yep."

"Something different."

"Yep."

Jude looked toward the door.

"But the door's still locked."

Rick gave Jude a deadpan stare. "Now you're making progress."

Jude turned toward the door for a moment. "Unless that's the point."

Rick's expression didn't change. "Oh? Here we go."

"Think about it. I'm sitting in a bar masquerading as Purgatory, drinking a 150-year-old, out-of-circulation bourbon that shouldn't exist anywhere, all while some absurdist asshole interrogates me about life choices that no longer matter because I am dead."

"I'm barely interrogating you."

"Confession."

"What?"

"This is confession."

Rick looked around the empty bar. "Bit of a branding problem."

"Not literally confession. Repentance. Judgment. Whatever the fuck you want to call it."

"You seem to be doing fine calling it things without my help."

Jude ignored Rick because he was excited again. "Every drink gets me closer to something. Every conversation makes me confront another part of myself. That's why the door stays locked."

Rick asked, genuinely curious, "Because you're drinking?"

"Because I'm not finished."

Rick put his finger to his chin conspiratorially. "With the bourbon?"

Jude gestured around the bar. "With this!"

Rick gestured vaguely around the bar. "Very specific."

"So, when I've dealt with all this, the door opens."

Rick looked at him. "Who told you that?"

"You did."

Rick stopped and looked at Jude coldly. "No."

"Yes, you fucking did. You said—"

"What? What did I say, Jude?"

Jude stopped. "You said this was Purgatory."

"No. You said it was Purgatory. I said, 'Solid detective work.'"

Jude tried again. "The booze. Temptation."

"No, Jude, you said that too."

"You're the fucking gatekeeper. Saint Paul, actually."

Rick glared at Jude. Jude corrected himself, "Sorry. Rick. But the door leads to Heaven."

"No, I said, 'If that helps.'"

Jude's expression changed. "You said, 'If that helps.'"

"There you go."

"You knew what I meant."

"Sure did."

"And you let me believe it."

Rick shrugged. "You were doing such a good job on your own, though."

Jude glared at him. "That's lying."

"No. That's you asking questions, answering them yourself, then getting pissed at me because you liked your answers. I didn't respond to your statements. I reacted to them. Big difference."

"Then what the fuck is this place and what the fuck are you?"

Rick looked around the bar. "That's finally an interesting question."

"Then answer it."

Rick looked at Jude's unfinished double. "You sure you want another answer?" Another drink appeared out of thin air in front of Jude. Jude jumped, startled for a moment, picked up the glass and studied it intently.

Jude lifted the glass to his mouth and Rick interrupted him. "Hey, Jude, don't be afraid. You weren't made to go out and get it. The minute you let it under your skin then you begin to make it better." Rick again stretched out the word "better" with a dry, sarcastic tone.

Jude looked at Rick coldly for a second and said, "Fuck you," before downing the Old Crow in one gulp. Jude looked satisfied with his act of contempt and spite. "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Rick stood there, arms crossed. "I'm here because you needed someone here."

"I didn't need you."

"You wanted a drink."

Jude looked at the empty glass in his hand. "So?"

Rick pointed at the glass. "How were you planning on drinking it?"

"Apparently out of a glass."

"Good start."

Jude looked at the glass, then around the room. "So, I needed a glass."

"Needed somewhere to put it."

"A bar."

Rick tapped the countertop. "How convenient..."

Jude stared at him for a moment. "And a bar needs a bartender."

Rick spread his arms. "Unfortunately for both of us, it does."

Jude ignored him. "But that doesn't explain this place."

"What's a bar without something holding all this bar shit together?"

"A really shitty business model."

Rick waited.

Jude's expression changed slightly. "Structure. It needs some kind of structure."

"There you go."

Jude looked around the room again. The walls. The ceiling. The floor. The bar itself. "And structure needs boundaries."

Rick said nothing.

Jude looked toward one wall. "Otherwise, there isn't an inside."

Still nothing.

"There's just... everything."

Rick smiled slightly. Jude continued working it out. "So, the walls aren't keeping something out."

"Didn't say they were."

"They're making an inside."

Rick nodded. Jude stared at him. "And if there's an inside..."

Rick waited. Jude slowly turned toward the glowing door. "...there has to be an outside."

Jude stared at it for several seconds. "No. That's impossible."

Rick crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "You died and woke up in a bar that shouldn't exist, but that's where we're drawing the line now?"

"That's not what I mean. If I'm dead, then I'm somewhere. Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, whatever the fuck this is. There has to be somewhere else."

"Why?"

"Because that's how it works."

"According to?"

Jude hesitated. "Pretty much every religion humans have ever invented."

"Oh, good. Humans. Famous for having firsthand experience being dead and knowing how existence absolutely works."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. That's becoming the problem."

Jude looked back toward the door. "People have believed in an afterlife for thousands of years."

"Didn't say they were wrong."

"Then what are you saying?"

Rick leaned against the bar. "I'm asking how much of what you think happens after death came from somebody who stayed dead long enough to verify it."

Jude started to answer, then stopped. Rick waited.

"None of it."

"There you go."

"That doesn't make it false."

"Didn't say that either."

Jude sighed. "You're fucking exhausting."

"And yet, somehow, still less exhausting than you."

Jude looked around the bar again. "Fine. Strip all that away. No Heaven. No Hell. No Purgatory. What am I?"

Rick shrugged. "Jude."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Jude held up his hands. "I died. This body died."

"Yep."

"Then what the fuck is standing here?"

Rick looked him over. "You really liked having one of those."

"A body?"

"Boundaries. Your body told you where you stopped and everything else started."

Jude looked at his hands again.

"Skin. Eyes. Ears. A brain sitting inside a skull. Everything you ever experienced came through a border. You spent your entire life clothed in one. And now?"

"And now I'm naked."

Rick smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Then why do I still have a body?"

"Same reason you have a glass."

"Take away the walls. The floor. The door. The bar. Me. Take away that body. Take away every line you've ever used to separate this from that, here from there, you from everything else. What's left?"

Jude thought about it.

"Everything."

Rick shook his head slightly. "Still making it a thing."

Jude stared at him.

"Not everything. Absolutely everything. That's the problem with human consciousness and the misconceptions you build around religion, God and existence. Life isn't something 'it' created from the outside. Life is an expression of it. You just cannot conceive of consciousness without imagining some omni-being possessing it. Heaven isn't a destination. Hell isn't punishment. Purgatory isn't judgment. They're human approximations of states of separation and reintegration into absolutely everything."

Jude sat quietly for a moment. "I think I am going to need another drink for this one."

Rick poured another Old Crow and slid it down the bar. Jude caught it, but instead of downing the drink in one gulp, he inspected the glass. His face stared back at him through the brown liquid. The hum from the fan seemed louder to Jude now. He said, "Okay. Let's say I buy any of that. Then what the fuck am I supposed to do?" Jude drank half the contents of the glass.

Rick's expression dropped. "What?"

"To reintegrate. Leave. Whatever you want to call it. What do I have to do?"

Rick stared at him.

"What?" Jude asked.

"You really don't hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"You've spent this entire fucking conversation asking me that question."

"No, I haven't."

"Different words. Same question."

Jude shook his head. "What are you even talking about?"

Rick started counting on his fingers again. "What is this place? Who are you? What's behind the door? Why am I here? What am I supposed to learn? What do I have to do to leave?"

"Those aren't the same question."

"No. They're different ways of getting another answer."

Jude started to respond.

Rick pointed toward Jude. "Another realization." Then he pointed toward Jude's chest. "Another confession." Rick pointed at the half-empty glass. "Another drink." Finally, Rick tapped his temple. "Another answer."

Jude stared at the drink.

"You think the booze is the problem?" Rick asked.

"It was."

"Was it?"

Jude's eyes narrowed.

Rick leaned against the bar. "You told me yourself. At first, you wanted to drink. Then you needed to drink. Eventually you didn't even want the fucking thing anymore, but you still needed it."

Jude looked down at the half-empty glass of Old Crow.

"Sound familiar?"

"No."

Rick smiled. "Bullshit."

Jude said nothing.

"You wanted one last drink. Then you wanted to know where you were. Then you wanted to know who I was. Then you needed to know what was behind the door. Then you wanted to know why it was locked. Now you don't even care about the door, and you don't want the fucking drink anymore."

Jude looked at the glass. Rick pushed it slightly toward him. "But you think you need it to get the next answer."

Jude didn't touch it.

Rick stared at him for a moment. "Different substance."

Jude looked up. "Same machine."

"And anytime you feel the pain. Hey, Jude, refrain. Don't carry the world upon your shoulders. For well, you know, that it's a fool who plays it cool by making his world a little colder."

Jude rolled his eyes at Rick. "Why do you keep quoting that song?"

Rick polished another glass and shrugged. "Well, happenstance. You clearly don't remember, but you happened to be listening to the Beatles, 'Hey Jude,' when you died. The ironic thing about this is you publicly say you hate this song because it has your name in it, but secretly you love it because, well, it's a great fucking song, and—oh, right—right before you died, your last thought was wanting one more drink. Then you woke up here, in a bar, with me, under a sign that says 'Hey, Jude's Bar!' Oh, and by the way your name is Jude. I mean, sometimes branding just absolutely pieces itself together randomly. Don't overthink it."

Jude just stared at nothing. "Oh..."

Rick strolled over. "Another?"

Jude looked at the glass. Long pause. "No." Rick waited. "I don't want another."

“You've said that before.”

“I didn't drink for years. I drank tonight because if I am dead what does it matter? What does any of it matter? The Universe just keeps chucking along whether it matters or not. It's all quite insignificant.”

Rick suddenly became animated. “Jude, it matters. All this matters because of you. This entire construct, the booze, me, all of it exists because in that final moment you couldn't separate wanting that last drink from needing it.”

“But, Rick, why? Why the fuck would wanting a drink do all this?”

“Jude, absolutely everything can't separate what you want from what you need when you're the point of reference making the fucking distinction. You're still thinking this construct came after you died. It didn't. This is still part of dying.”

Jude stared at him.

“The expression of life gives absolutely everything a point of view it couldn't otherwise express. You. Me. Everything. You get wrapped up in a body, handed a little piece of existence and spend a few decades calling it yours. Then the body quits, the wrapper comes off, and normally...” Rick opened his hands.

“Normally what?”

“You stop being somewhere.”

“And I didn't.”

“You couldn't.”

“Why?”

Rick pointed at the glass. “Because you wanted it badly enough that wanting it and needing it stopped being different. The need needed a glass. The glass needed a bar. The bar and you needed me. The bar needed structure. Structure needed boundaries. You still need boundaries.”

Jude looked toward where the door was.

“And congratulations. Somehow, you managed to rebuild separation. You died naked and still needed something. So, your point of reference still needed somewhere to need it that was known and familiar to you.”

Jude's eyes widened. “Oh my... The drinking.”

“How so?”

Jude looked at the untouched glass. “I stopped wanting to drink years before I actually stopped drinking.”

Rick nodded as Jude continued. “But I kept drinking because I now needed it.”

“Yep.”

“And when I stopped drinking, I didn't stop doing that.”

Rick's expression changed slightly. “Doing what?”

Jude looked at him. “Needing something.”

Rick said nothing.

"I woke up here wanting a drink. Then I needed to know where I was. Then I needed to know who you were. Then I wanted to know what was behind the door. Then I needed to know why I was here. Eventually, I might get around to that annoying hum."

Rick gestured toward him. "And every time you needed something?"

Jude looked at the glass. "I stayed."

"Keep going."

Jude stared around the bar. "Every answer gave me another question."

"And?"

"Another question gave me another reason to stay." Rick waited. Jude's expression slowly changed. "No... another reason to stay here."

Rick smiled slightly. "There he is."

Jude looked around again. The bar suddenly seemed different.

"As long as I need something from this place, there has to be a place for me to need it from."

Rick said nothing. Jude looked at him. "And there has to be a me that needs it." Jude looked toward the door again. "The drinks weren't keeping me here."

Rick shook his head.

"The questions weren't keeping me here either."

"Getting warmer."

Jude looked down at himself.

"I was." Jude's eyes widened. "Jesus Christ. I fucking died and kept doing it."

"Tenacious little fucker," Rick said sarcastically.

Jude looked at the untouched drink. "I don't need another."

Rick looked exhausted. "Well, fuck. That was exhausting. Now I need a drink." Rick poured himself a drink from a bottle labeled "Exhausted Bartender Bourbon."

Jude looked at Rick. "So, what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Absolutely everything?"

Rick downed his drink. "Okay. Explain three dimensions to a drawing."

Jude stared at him. "What?"

"Draw a little guy on a piece of paper. Flat little fucker. Length and width. That's his entire universe. Now explain height to him."

"You couldn't."

"Sure, you could. You could draw shadows, projections, slices, maybe poke your finger through their little paper universe and scare the absolute shit out of them. But everything you showed them still has to fit inside the only dimensional reality those little flat bastards can observe, interact with, or exist within."

Jude thought about it. "So, they'd only see a piece of you."

“No. They'd see an expression of me that their reality allows them to see.”

Jude looked at Rick differently. Rick pointed at himself. “Bartender.”

“You're saying you're not actually a bartender?”

“I'm saying that's what I look like from where you're standing.”

Jude went quiet.

Rick poured himself another “Exhausted Bartender Bourbon.” “Now imagine your little flat bastard asks you to explain absolutely everything. Not three dimensions. All of it. Every dimension, every point of view, every expression, all at once, with nothing outside of it to compare it to.”

Jude stared at the bar. “I couldn't.”

“There you go.”

“So, there is an answer.”

Rick shrugged. “Probably.”

“But you can't explain it.”

“Would it help?”

Jude thought about it while Rick continued to talk.

“I can explain what it looks like from here. That's what I've been doing all fucking night. Your question just happens to exceed the configuration asking it. Hence, stop asking questions, Jude.”

“Well, from here, what does it look like?”

Rick thought. “You're looking at it.”

Jude glanced around the bar. “This?”

“No. This is what looking at it looks like from where you're standing.”

Jude just stood there for a minute, then straightened up. “Barkeep. Rick. My friend. May I have a glass of water before I hit the road?”

Rick blinked and stared at Jude for a moment.

“What?”

“Water...”

“I know what water is.”

“Then this is progress. Is it not?”

Rick smiled, reached below the bar and pulled out a bottle that had a lot of dust on it. He gave it an exaggerated blow, sending a noticeable amount of dust into the air. He placed a glass on the bar, opened the bottle and poured water into the glass in front of him. Jude picked it up.

Rick said, “No questions?”

Jude took a drink. “About the water? Actually, yes. Why does a bottle of water have dust on it and the 150-year-old, out of circulation Old Crow looks pristine? Let me guess... Marketing?”

Rick smiled slightly. “Good enough.”

Jude finished the water and set the glass down. “Thank you.”

Rick nodded. "You're welcome, Jude."

Jude smiled. Then he heard a noticeable click. He stopped, met Rick's eyes and slowly turned toward the door. There was no door. Not even a wall where it had been. Just white. Not a blinding white light. Just a clean mute white for as far as he could see, accompanied by that same low hum dominating the background. Oddly, Jude no longer thought it was annoying anymore. If anything, it was almost soothing. He wasn't surprised. He didn't ask why. He no longer cared what had been beyond it. There was no next place he had to reach. He was already there. He was always there. The neon sign that said "Hey, Jude's Bar!" winked out, then slowly faded away into the mute white calm.

Jude turned to look at Rick. Almost everything else was gone. All that remained was the bar itself, the bottles, the empty glass of water, the bottle of "Exhausted Bartender Bourbon," Rick, the towel over Rick's shoulder and one lone barstool. Everything else was the same clean mute white where the wall and door had been. But the bar itself was inverted. Jude now stood behind the bar. Rick looked at him. Jude said, "Were you ever really, you know, real? Outside this place?"

"You're still doing it."

Jude caught himself. He laughed. "Right."

"Jude, I have always been part of your experience that had already happened, in a sense. I am not you. You are you. I'm simply another point of reference within the same experience. From where I'm standing, you're just a little further behind." Rick glanced over the bar and nodded to Jude. Jude took a step to look over the bar and what he saw now did not surprise him. What lay there was an unconscious Jude, moments before waking up in the bar.

"See, Jude. You're dead. There isn't a when, where or 'it' here, and from where I'm standing, how and why aren't particularly useful either. In absolutely everything, whatever your point of reference needs to remain a point of reference can be expressed. The bar. The drink. The loop..."

"You know what's buggin' me? Everything you're describing here sounds suspiciously like the very computer systems I built during my life."

Rick shrugged. "Or maybe computer systems sound suspiciously like absolutely everything..."

Jude stared at him. "Which came first?"

"Now you're doing it again. But, yeah, maybe existence is a simulation, or maybe simulation is existence. I dunno. Some things cannot be understood."

Jude laughed. He walked up to the bar and picked up the bottle of "Exhausted Bartender Bourbon" and said, "I was curious how that bottle of Old Crow got here." Jude waved his hand over the bottle. It became pristine, and the label now read, "Old Crow 100-Proof Bottled-in-Bond."

Jude turned and put the bottle up on the same bar shelf the bartender Rick had drawn it from earlier.

Rick smiled big. "So, what are you going to do now, Jude?"

Jude straightened. "Absolutely, EVERYTHING..."

Rick began humming. The tune was the ending melody of the Beatles' song "Hey Jude." "Nah, nah nah, nah nah, nah, nah, nah nah..." Then Rick abruptly stopped, looked over the bar and down and said, "Oh, it's you..." The bar, Rick and the whole scene faded into a clean mute white. That same clean mute white that already filled the space. It wasn't a room. It was just space.

Now Jude softly sang, "Hey, Jude, nah, nah nah, nah nah, nah, nah, nah nah..." The melody became less distinct as Jude repeated it. Faded in volume. Changed in structure. The song lost words. Words lost to melody. Melody became tone. The tone became a low vibrating hum that had been here all along. A deep, almost impossible low vibration that seemed less like something one would hear and more like something reality itself is, did, or was doing. Calling the hum "bass" almost felt like an insult. Bass was something your neighbor played at two in the morning every Friday night for a summer. This was closer to geological time having a fucking dial tone. Part wind. Part something breathing that absolutely should not breathe. Like a machine that always ran somewhere behind the walls of existence, except there was no machine, there were no walls. Just a clean mute white that was absolutely everything...

THE TENACITY PROBLEM

Written by David-Angelo Mineo

Copyright © 2026 mineofilms.me

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, events, dialogue, and situations appearing in this work are fictional or have been fictionalized. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental or used fictitiously.

AI USAGE DISCLOSURE

Artificial intelligence tools were used throughout the development and editorial process of *The Tenacity Problem*, primarily as a logic and audit machine: testing ideas, questioning assumptions, tracking continuity, identifying contradictions, and systematically reviewing the finished writing. The process itself evolved experimentally alongside the story, with ideas and methods developed for other purposes eventually feeding back into its creation. AI assisted with analysis, discussion, proofreading, and revision; final creative judgment, narrative direction, and approval remained with the author.

Drafting Conception: September 2026

First Edition: October 2026

Word Count: 5,497