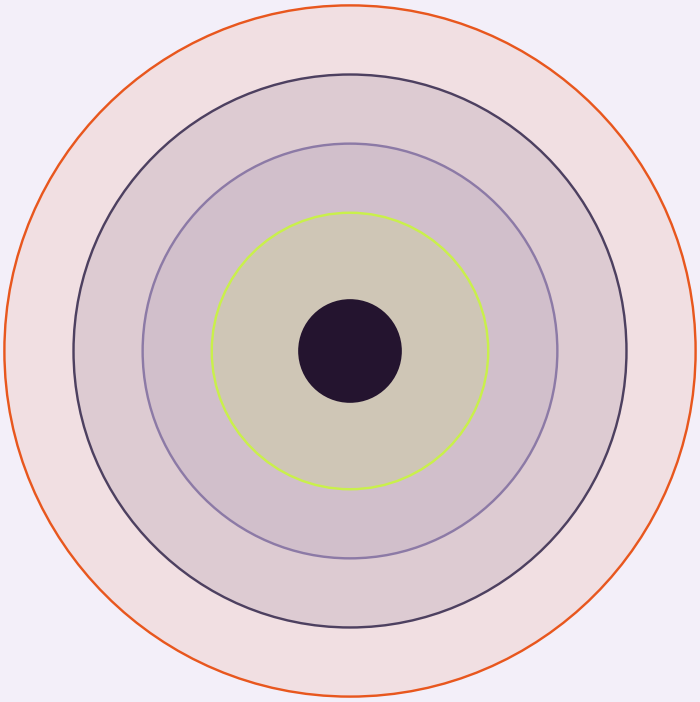


The Cafe on the Edge of the World

A reading of the book by John Strelecky (2003)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Cafe on the Edge of the World, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

A burnt-out consultant takes a wrong turn at midnight and finds a diner that should not be there. On the back of the menu, under the specials, are three questions: Why are you here? Do you fear death? Are you fulfilled? He stays until morning. It is a very short book that a great many people describe as the one that moved them.

Below are the 8 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Why are you here? Do you fear death? Are you fulfilled? They look like three questions. They are one question asked from three angles.

The book's entire architecture is on the back of a menu. Answer the first and the other two stop being frightening — which is the claim the rest of the story spends the night testing on one exhausted man.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Your reason for existing is not assigned to you by anyone. It is the thing you would still be doing if nobody was keeping score.

Strelecky's PFE — Purpose For Existing — is deliberately personal and deliberately small. It is not a calling with a capital C. It is the activity that stops feeling like spending and starts feeling like being paid.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The turtle was never faster than the swimmer. It simply never spent a single stroke on water that was going the other way.

Casey's story about snorkelling in Hawaii, and the best image in the book. She thrashed to keep up and fell behind; the turtle floated through the incoming surge and swam only with the outgoing one. Same ocean, opposite outcome, and the difference was entirely in what it refused to fight.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Everything that wants a piece of your week is a wave. The only useful question is which direction it was already moving.

This is what makes the turtle more than a nice image. The request in your inbox is not good or bad — it is incoming or outgoing relative to the one thing you said you were here for. Most exhaustion is not overwork. It is swimming hard against water.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

An advertisement's job is to install a want you did not arrive with, and the currency you settle it in is hours of your life.

Anne ran an agency, so she says it without flinching: the craft is to make you believe you will be happy once you have the thing, and unhappy until you do. She was not fooled by other people's campaigns. She was fooled by her own.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

You take the job to afford the things sold to you as fulfilment, and the job is exactly where the fulfilment was supposed to go.

The loop stated plainly. It survives because each turn of it looks responsible from the inside — nobody ever decides to trade a decade for a kitchen. They decide it one reasonable Tuesday at a time.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Few people are frightened of death itself. They are frightened of reaching it with the thing they were here for still untouched.

Why the middle question sits between the other two. The book's answer to the fear of dying is not comfort or afterlife — it is that the dread thins in direct proportion to how much of your reason you have already spent.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Do the thing openly and often enough and the world starts handing you more of it. From outside that looks like luck.

Mike's quiet point, and the least mystical reading of it is the true one: people can see what you actually care about, and they route the relevant things toward whoever is obviously already doing them.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Put the three questions somewhere you will meet them
- [ ] Answer “why are you here” badly, in writing, today
- [ ] Reconstruct last week in blocks, honestly
- [ ] Mark each block incoming or outgoing
- [ ] Cut the machinery that manufactures wanting

KEEP UP DAILY

- [ ] Give it thirty minutes a day for seven days
- [ ] Ask which way the wave is going before you say yes
- [ ] Price things in hours before you price them in money

30 days · Nov 11 - Dec 10, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 11 - Dec 10, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Put the three questions somewhere you will meet them

An index card by the kettle, the back of a receipt in your wallet, a phone wallpaper.

The book's device works because the questions ambush you on an ordinary night rather than waiting for a retreat you will never book.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Answer "why are you here" badly, in writing, today

One sentence, and it is allowed to be embarrassing, obvious or wrong.

A bad written answer can be argued with and improved; an unwritten one just floats, and floating is what it has been doing for years.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Reconstruct last week in blocks, honestly

Not a plan — a record.

Go back through the calendar and the phone and write what the last seven days actually contained, in two- and three-hour lumps, including the parts you would not put in a diary.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Mark each block incoming or outgoing

Against the sentence you wrote, tag every block: did it carry you toward it, or did you swim against it?

Do not tag anything "neutral". The whole value of the exercise is being made to choose.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Cut the machinery that manufactures wanting

Anne's version was catalogues; yours is retail email, the shopping tab, two or three feeds.

Unsubscribe from all of it in one sitting. You are not exercising restraint, you are removing the thing restraint was needed for.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Give it thirty minutes a day for seven days

The book's own experiment, and the only part of it that is falsifiable.

Nov 11 - Dec 10, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6 ○
7 ○	8 ○	9 ○	10 ○	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Ask which way the wave is going before you say yes

One beat between the request and the answer, holding it against your sentence.

Nov 11 - Dec 10, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Price things in hours before you price them in money

Divide by what an hour of your work actually leaves you after tax and the commute.

Nov 11 - Dec 10, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

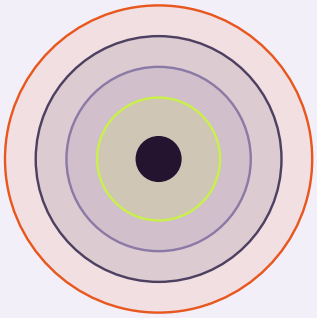
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Why are you here? Do you fear death? Are you fulfilled?

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY