There is a certain high that comes from stepping into the ring for the first time.

The moment before the match begins, your nerves go haywire. You wish time could stretch a little bit longer if only to delay the inevitable for just a few precious seconds more, as if those few moments could somehow prepare you to fight an opponent that could be faster than you, stronger than you, better than you in so many different ways. As if a few seconds could somehow teach you how to fight.

But that first fight isn’t something that can be prepared for. You can watch as many YouTube videos as you want and do as many drills as you know and watch as many matches as you can, but until you walk into that ring to face your first opponent, you can never be truly prepared. You can never truly understand what it is to fight.

My taekwondo teacher has a favorite saying: “Being a fighter is not something you are born with. Being a fighter is something you choose.” You’re a fighter when you’re scared out of your mind and still walk onto that mat. You’re a fighter when your mind is screaming at you to run but you stay anyway. You’re a fighter when you keep on trying no matter if you win or lose, when you pick yourself up off the ground and keep moving forward no matter what.

I must’ve wanted to quit at least twenty times that day. To back out, run away – to say, “Next time. Next time I’ll do it for sure. Next time… I’ll be ready.” I thought for sure that this had been one huge mistake and that I would make a fool out of myself out there and never live it down. Most times, I would have done just that – quit before I had even tried. This time, I had no choice. And though I cursed it at the time, I’m eternal grateful for it now. Because I know, given the choice, I probably would have backed down. A had a thousand excuses prepared for why I wasn’t prepared to spar yet. But it’s just so typical of me to talk myself out of something the moment before it happens.

My whole life, I have avoided being backed into corners. I claim that I like don’t like burning bridges when making decisions because I want to keep my options open. In reality, I think I’m just scared of not being able to turn back. I like to act tough and talk big about challenging myself to do things that push me out of my comfort zone, or dropping everything to chase a dream, but have I really done the things I say I would? No. Not at all. Because in the end, the fear of doing something I’m not prepared to do keeps me frozen in place and physically sick to my stomach.

I loved *The Good Dinosaur* because it talked so much about fear, but most importantly, because it wasn’t about getting rid of that fear, but rather getting over it. “If you ain’t scared, you ain’t alive. You can’t get rid of fear. You can’t beat her or outrun her. But you can get through it. You can find out what you’re made of.” Throughout my life, I will always be scared. I’ve learned to accept that now, or at least I’ve started to accept it. But I’ve also realized that it’s not about not being scared. Doing things that others are scared to do? That’s bravery. But it’s doing those same things even when you’re also terrified out of your mind that makes for courage. Fear isn’t evil. Long ago, it kept us alive. Even now it continues to keep us safe. But there is safe and then there is stagnant. I refuse to live among the stagnant any longer.

That day, I found a little piece of what I’m made of. Here’s to many more days of finding all the rest.