To Be

By Pragati Kharel. June 2020.

That night, I woke up with a tight chest, covered in my own sweat. The pillows were on the floor and my blanket was inside out. Why did I have to wake up? I did not want to wake up because no matter how terrible my nightmares were, reality was worse. I scrabbled my hands over the loose bedsheet to find my phone so I could check the time, but I could not find it.

I got up and turned the lights on, but as soon as the yellow light lit, I covered my eyes with my hands. I peeked between my fingers to see my phone lying right beside my bed’s foot, near the fallen pillows and the AC remote. I went there, grabbed it and turned it on. It was 5 in the morning. I was relieved because the day was starting soon. I knew it was going to be a long day.

I turned the lights off again, pressed my chest with both of my hands and staggered to the window. I moved the curtains and opened the glass window. I felt the cool breeze coming in. I pulled my small armchair in front of the window and sat there. I could see the giant buildings that were twice the size of my apartment, the far away bridge that seemed so lonely, my neighbor’s never-opening window and everything I could possibly see in that 5 am light. The view and the breeze made the pain go away for a bit and made me realize how peaceful that busy city could be that early in the morning. It was so peaceful that I could hear my heartbeats. As I felt my heartbeats with my hands and listened to its sound, I prayed for it. I did not want them to stop.

At 7 AM, my alarm rang. I was sitting on the arm chair as I woke up and saw the sun rising from the river. It was probably the first time I noticed how beautiful the sky looked at that time in the morning. The clouds were orange, the sky looked faded pink and the sunlight gently touched the giant buildings creating shadows on the road. Only a few shops were open and the newspaper guy was riding his bike near the neighborhood. I wondered if he appreciated that lovely morning as much as I did. I knew exactly what I needed to do that day. I was scared, but I was well prepared. I knew who to call and what to say.

I suddenly noticed that the pain in my chest was gone. I wanted to take a deep breath in; and as I did, I felt it. I felt it so fiercely that a drop of tear came out of my eye. The pain was still there. I felt stupid for feeling so relieved even for a second. Of course the pain was there. A part of me felt like I deserved it because I had always been a reckless man who took everything for granted.

I thought about my first day at work, how excited I was when I got my ID card. When everyone loved my very first presentation so much that I got promoted a week after. But now, I had been stalling the deadline of my dream project that I used to beg to be a part of. I never realized I had stopped caring about my dream job and started saying that my life was just boring. But that morning, life was not boring. That sunrise, that breeze, that view, the memories, they all felt so precious. How come I never noticed it before?

My phone started ringing and I saw the name Gerald in the screen that gave me a sigh of relief. Gerald had no idea what was happening to me and I wanted to keep it that way. I needed to make sure that I dealt with it without my friends and family having a clue. If I told them, it would become real. They would say things I didn’t want to hear and ask questions I didn’t want to answer.

I picked up the call and he told me he wanted to come over. I would normally cancel it because I wouldn’t want to be bothered. But that day, I realized how important Gerald was in my life. When I came to that town, I did not know anybody and Gerald was there for me and he had always been there ever since. I said yes and I noticed how happy he was about it because he was not used to me saying yes to any plans anymore. I had no clue why Gerald was still in my life. That day I realized he was an amazing friend. It’s not that I was an asshole to my friends; I had just become so ignorant. I just didn’t care. I did not know if I was going to make it out alive, but I was sure that if I did, I would care more.

I called my therapist because he was the only person, I could partially be honest with. I told him what was going on and he asked me to explain everything in detail.

“It’s been a couple of days but I didn’t notice it until last night when I almost could not breathe. I laid still on the bed, pressing my chest with my hands to make myself fall asleep but I couldn’t. I got so irritated by the pain that I got up and started throwing the pillows and the blanket away from the bed. It actually made me tired and I fell asleep.” Dr. Brian asked my routine from last couple of days as if he didn’t already know. Maybe he just wanted me to say it out loud so I could hear it myself.

I had been eating chips, pretzels, or cereal for all my meals. All day I would just lie on my bed and watch Vikings. The dishes and the laundry would pile up but I wouldn’t give a damn. I just laid there like a log. No wonder god wanted me gone. I was nothing but a filthy garbage on this planet that was needed to be cleaned off.

“What do you recommend I do, doc?” I asked.

“Leonard, I can imagine what you’re going through. It is a difficult situation and I suggest you at least consider sharing it with a close friend…. or a family member. I mean it is your call but that’s just my suggestion. Also, do not panic until you see your physician alright?”

“My appointment isn’t until next week.”

“While you wait, why don’t you start cooking for yourself and start doing your chores?”

“That’s what I had in mind.”

I really did have that in mind. Improper diet can explain the pain, right? Maybe it was just gastric. I really wanted to wash those dishes and do my laundry and cook because a part of me thought it could save my life. That sounds silly but it did not seem so at that time. Mainly because that part of me thought I was being punished for being so idle. So, I did.

I was looking at my laundry dry in the dryer and as I watched it spin, it felt like my chest pain was also spinning like my clothes. I noticed a lady beside me was also watching her laundry dry. I looked at her and thought how her life must be like; what exactly would she do when she goes back to her room after doing her laundry? Was she happy with her life? Was she grateful? She should be, I thought. She should be so darn grateful because she could just do her laundry without worrying about being on her last legs.

The lady saw me staring and I looked away. I slowly moved my eyes back to the lady and saw that she was smiling at me. “It’s fun to watch them spin, isn’t it?” she said with her gentle voice. I gave her a small grin and looked back at my dryer. “Didn’t you move in three months ago? Why am I seeing you in the laundry room for the first time?” she said. I was surprised by how she knew when I moved in.

“I’m sorry, do you know me?”

“You held the lift for me once.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right!”

She smiled and looked back at her dryer as if she knew I was lying but didn’t really mind.

My mother used to say I had an “impeccable memory” because I always remembered every single detail about things. I used to clear up my mom and dad’s conflicts by remembering things like who forgot to water the plants or who was supposed to pick me up from school. She used to brag about my impeccable memory to the relatives and ask them to make me guess their outfits from the last time we met. I remembered things because I was genuinely curious to notice every single detail. Holding the lift for such a nice lady was probably something a 10-year-old Leonard would have remembered. I was surprised by the person that I had become.

I came back to my room, did the dishes, swept the floor with my old sweeper and changed the bedsheet. The new bedsheet was brighter and it smelled like daisy. I laid on the bed and let myself think. If all the symptoms I had googled were as worse as I had assumed, they could still be treated. I was not going to die. I knew I wasn’t and that was why I was not as scared as I could’ve been. But again, it’s your heart. It’s delicate. You never really know.

I unplugged my phone from the charger and checked my notifications. I saw a few emails from work that I’d been avoiding and some missed calls from my mom. Her missed calls had become a part of my phone’s wallpaper at that point, I never returned her calls. I was indifferent to it. But that day, it made me think of what doc said to me about telling my family. When I thought about it, I imagined my mother hearing the news. Last I talked to her was about a month ago. Even though I loved her, I always tried to avoid talking to her because she would always overreact about things. One time, she got so concerned because I caught a cold that she almost flew all the way here. At times her love for me felt so overwhelming. I never understood it.

I couldn’t imagine her hearing that her son has a heart disease that might possibly be treated with a lot of money and she cannot go and see him. I would be in the hospital bed and my mother would be thousands of miles away not having a clue whether his son was going to live or die. How can I put her through that? That realization scared the crap out of me. Even more than the possibility of death itself. It became clear to me that the only reason why I avoided her was because I loved her so much that I didn’t know what to do about it. It was my love for her that was actually so overwhelming.

When I am scared, I always go to him. I think I had been neglecting him a lot those days. Maybe because I was questioning his existence. Or maybe because I simply stopped caring, like I did about every other thing in my life. But at that point, it felt like he was the only one who would really understand. I needed to talk to him.

I moved over to the corner of my bed, looked outside the window, clasped my hands together and brought them near my chest.

“I don’t know if you can hear me but…. I just have to say this. I lived my whole life not knowing what I valued the most. I took life for granted. I knew I wanted a tattoo but I didn’t know what to get because I wasn’t really sure about anything in life to make a such big commitment. But now I know what I want. I want a heartbeat sign. I don’t know if I am going to make it out alive, but if I do, I need something that keeps reminding me how grateful I need to be of my heartbeats. If the line goes straight, it is all gone. And as it beats, it keeps reminding me of my values that I realized today: my family, my friends, my job and a bright future. That’s what I care about. Now I know.”

After Gerald and I watched Die Hard that night for the 10th time, I made us my signature pasta that tasted more delish than the $15 bowl at Freddy’s. He was talking about a problem he was going through at work and I told him I would get him a job at my firm if they mistreat him again. Gerald thought it was a bluff but I was afraid it wasn’t. He was my best friend; I would do anything for him.

Just watching Gerald siting on my couch, eating my pasta and making sarcastic remarks on Die Hard’s ending, made me feel at home. At that point, I was so happy because my stupid brain was starting to appreciate small moments like that but so sad at the same time knowing that could be my very last movie night with Gerald. He was right there, laughing and making jokes but he had no idea what was going on inside of me. Just for a moment, I wanted to forget about my pain too and enjoy the moment. But it was in my heart, and it kept reminding me that tomorrow, I may not be.

I told him I had a doctor’s appointment without making it seem like a huge deal. I told him it only hurt last night even though it was still hurting as I was lying to him. He was still concerned and he said he would come with. He also warned me to be careful about doing unnecessary tests if the hospital makes me, just to earn some money.

And they did. They made me take six tests and I don’t even remember the names. After the tests, Gerald and I sat at the outdoor café where he was explaining to me why our hearts make the beating sounds. Turns out the sound is caused by the opening and closing of the valves while pumping our blood. As I listened to him talk, I realized for the first time the kinds of things he knew. It was so funny that I never noticed how smart the guy was, considering the fact that we had been friends for two years.

“Your report must be ready by now, maybe we should go,” he said.

“Could you actually get it for me and tell me what it is?”

“Dude, are you scared?”

“No… I’m just a little nervous I guess.”

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it, I’ll get it for you.”

He left the café. As I saw him walk away, I felt my heart beating again. I was not just nervous, I was scared. That was when I realized I had not experienced fear in so long. I was even immune to horror movies; I could watch them all by myself and still sleep like a horse at night. I was somehow happy to be experiencing that feeling of being afraid. All of my feelings that I had bottled up by ignoring them exploded like a bomb. I was so overwhelmed I had to talk to him again.

“I know I took my life for granted, and maybe this is your way of punishing me…. But please, for my family’s sake not mine, let this one slide. Turns out there are things that I value even more than myself. I was never afraid of losing Gerald, or drifting away from my family or even dying in a plane crash. Remember how I used to say air turbulence was fun? I had lost my sense of fear because my coping mechanism was not letting myself care. And now that I do, I’m terrified. Just... let this one slide. Please!”

“Who are you talking to man?” Gerald, who was right behind me, said.

“No one… a friend of mine. What did the report say?”

He waved to the air and said, “Hello! Leonard’s invisible friend.” and sat down, handing me my reports.

“I cannot believe this dude.” He said.

“Why? What does the report say?”

“Well…. In a nutshell, your chest pain was caused due to inactivity. It was just your muscles; you need to get out of your house more man.”

I just blankly looked at his face.

“This hospital is a scam because they said if you bought medicine, the insurance would cover your checkup costs and when I told them we’ll buy the pain killers your doctor suggested, they said they were out of it and they’re making you pay the full cost…. What a smart little trick.”

The only question I asked was, “So my heart and lungs are okay?”

“Yeah, your heart and lungs are fine but you need to pay the full bill for all your tests.”

I could not help but smile as I heard those words. He said “Are you in shock? Why are you smiling like that? I know work hasn’t been great, if you need to borrow money, I’d be happy to…”

“How much do I have to pay?”

“450 dollars.”

I stood up and grabbed my bag.

“450 bucks for a new life,” I said.

“No, Leonard, you weren’t going to die.”

“Maybe… but I wasn’t going to live either.”

He looked at me with total confusion, “what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to call my mom,” I said.