

## **The last retreat into the chapel**

Yam Pok To Nicholas

In secondary school, we have an hour and a half for lunch breaks. Normal students finish up their meal in thirty minutes, and the rest of the lunchtime would be left for them to do homework from the previous night, engage in club activities, or simply head back to the classroom for extra lessons, catching up to speed on studies. But for me, the one hour that remains is mine and only mine during school time. No annoying classmates. No bullies. No homework to consider even if I did not put in any effort to try and finish them the night before. No teachers. No noises from the football match going on on the pitch below. Only me, my thoughts, and Jesus. It was the last day of school in July, and after that day, there would not be any more connections between me and this school.

I walked past the green cafeteria on the lower ground floor and climbed two floors to the first, sneaking past the bright school office, and walking along the dusty oak floor planks of the first floor. To the right is the D&T room, constantly smelling like dry old wood and at times the stench of cigarettes from the teacher, hiding somewhere to take “a breather”. To the left is the school chapel. It was a small one, tucked away in the old wing of the school, with stained glass planes facing the south and the road parallel to it. No sane student would willingly head to the chapel during lunch hours.

The door was made with colourful stained glass. Opaque, but glimmered ever so mellow, so softly. The rusted brass handle squeaked when I turned it, and with as much caution as I could, I opened the door just wide enough for my body to pass through, stepping on the raised carpet flooring, and with the same precision, closed that colourful door to darkness once again. Now that I was alone in the chapel, I walked over to the air con controller unit, and turned it on to a nice cool twenty celsius degrees, leaving the light switch alone. I preferred to keep my mind in darkness and stillness for the coming hour.

The stained glass facing the sunlight and roads painted the story of Jesus and his twelve disciples written in the Bible. The time their ship threatened to sink but with prayer and faith they survived. The times when Jesus broke apart the five pieces of bread and multiplied baskets of fish to feed his followers. The times he cured the disabled and restored them to

health. Atop the glass were the fourteen plaques detailing the *Via Dolorosa*, each a sculpt of Jesus suffering on his way to his ultimate sacrifice, the crucifixion. The stage was in yellowed marble, with a large unassuming cross of Jesus crucified to the side, and another statue of Mary to the right. Seats were facing the stage and the backs were towards the glass.

As usual, I took my seat on the middle bench, closed my eyes, and even in the most holy, sacred places, I engaged in the most sacrilegious conversation with God and Jesus time and again, for the six years I had been stuck in the purgatory called secondary school. This time, it was the last time I sneaked to the chapel, breaking school rules, and facing the darkness before I graduated.

I closed my eyes, letting the darkness of the chapel envelope me, feeling the sears of crosses and the glares of Jesus and Mary leaving invisible marks on my mind, calling for me to repent, and to redeem my faith. But it was not what I was there for. I did not pray, nor speak of bible verses, nor imagine the suffering Jesus took so I could go to heaven. All I did, was sit there, silently, until the stained glass behind me melted around my static body. By now, I could finally talk to my mind.

It often came in as a silent hum, quietly noting the existence of something in my head. I had never been able to discern the true identity of this something, but often I would ask first,

“Why is it when I was in my time of need, no one showed up, lent me a hand?”

Each time I sat down, I began to realise how Jesus and God never delivered me from suffering. In Catholics’ point of view, suffering is God’s plan, and overcoming it grants them strengthened faith. I argue suffering is suffering. Sufferings are caused by not God, but human beings around me. If twelve years of suffering is to pave my road to becoming a devout Catholic, then all I found was that hiding on my bed was a better, albeit weak form of comfort from the bullying and stress of teenagers and the fear of adulthood. Jesus and God, however, never could do anything to soothe my rage and depression against suffering. In contrast, my suffering seemed small, insignificant even.

“So was I not worthy of help? Because it was not painful enough?”

But each to their own, suffering is suffering. My mind turned back to the first time shying myself to the chapel was out of escapism from the teases and bullies of the school, because no sane kid would think of breaking into the sacred room, and they would not chase me down into this sacred place out of fear from the teachers. I knelt, six years ago, like a proper Catholic, hands clasped tight, and closed my eyes, praying hard and begging for mercy. If there was external help from God, "Please deliver us from evil." Day after day, I kept on praying, kneeling, hoping something could change from praying. But logically speaking, no amount of change will manifest just by praying. There are no miracles for a simple ordinary boy. Even if I was out of the ordinary, then that would not be considered a miracle, but fate, so that I can tell others I was able to overcome the injustice in school with the power of Catholicism. The matter of truth is, prayers brought me no change. So eventually I changed, bit by bit. I stopped kneeling one day to God, only sitting there with my hands clasped. I stopped clasping my hands to pray a year later, only praying in my heart, repeating the verses like a recorder. Eventually, I stopped praying, and I began questioning God. Yet I still sat there, because it felt comfortable and served as a hideaway for me and me alone.

"Are you really going to let me pray away when I have done so all these years?" I finally asked, "And it was not my fault they laughed at my name?"

In all these years, I realised the only thing I can do to improve my life is to change, and do it myself. By December, the bullies would still make fun of my name. It often came as a painful thorn in my mind, to be denied the simplest respect for someone's identity from birth. But on one day, I stopped giving them any reactions, even if they looked at each other, and decided to shout the nickname into my ear.

I pretended there was nobody, though the names they called me still tear at my soul.

They continued, on, and on, until the teacher came into class. The teachers once said ignoring bullies was the solution. They were wrong. Day after day, even without any reaction, they still called me by my nickname. They seek to gain enjoyment from seeing me writhe in pain, and in the last weeks of secondary school, I never felt any clearer in my head, that their screams and corrupted laughter stopped echoing around my ears, but only existed as a constant thorn, only which through a sudden divine punishment would stop it from occurring.

“If you are not going to help me, at least punish them?” I asked, for I lost hope in any salvation from stopping these acts of speech violence. “Or do you think this is all part of a greater plan, to let them go unpunished?”

My eyelids fluttered open slightly, and the mixture of rainbow lights splattered across the seats and stained the air around my body, moving and shifting like liquid in the air. Something is watching me, behind those stained glass, one giant eye staring at the tiny slit of coloured windows, trying to see into my psyche. I did not turn my head, but I could feel the frosted planes glowing and glimmering ever so brightly as the seconds ticked away. They began to melt into the space, balancing out the darkness and void. And I was there sitting in between the dawn and dusk. The bell has yet to ring.

“If I were to curse my enemies, I would be no better than them too,” I hear myself whispering.

I resumed my meditation, closing my eyes once more. Even if I know now I do not believe in Catholicism, I chose to keep true to their morals and virtues. That raised another question for me. “Why do people choose evil?” In the context of teenagers, I do not mean just bullying or calling people names. There were also thieves. Thieves who stole mobile phones in school and nearly got sent to court. Unruly students drinking, smoking and even taking drugs at their age. Degenerate teenagers filming pornography with their boyfriends and girlfriends and posting it online. So many evils surrounding the young generations, and looking back, it was almost fated for me to realise there would be no change possible for others. Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself for others, but that was his fate, to die as a human in order to carry the sins of humanity. I am no Jesus. There is no one way to be sure of a human being’s role when they are born. Some find themselves to be leaders. Some change the world forever. But some close the door to the open world and lock themselves away. Some die of pointless wars and without grace. Some go on to live a bleak, simple life. Some hide themselves in a chapel in the dark, thinking and pondering existential questions. If there was no fate that I know of which binds me, then shall I trust my own thinking, as messy and convoluted as my mind has become over the years? The ideas and minds tangle and contradict one another, like snakes biting into their own bodies and tied up knots of ropes. In the depths of my psyche they manifested as a ball of swirling black lines, each a question and sentence.

A few footsteps could be heard beyond the glass door. Sometimes students would have to take the stairs nearby to go up to another floor, but sometimes they would just pass by. However, there was one time when the D&T teacher caught me in the chapel. We shared looks, but perhaps it was because of my swollen eyes, or because I was sitting there like I was praying, he simply closed the door quietly. In the darkness and molten coloured lights, it was the only place I felt completely safe. The opaque frosted glass is the literal barrier separating me, Jesus, and my thoughts from the world. Perhaps it was because of this holiness, that people would at least give some respect, which normally people at my age back then had none. But between adults, each one of us wished for a place to slow down, cut off from the world, and properly ask ourselves almost meaningless questions since we already had the answer, but to reaffirm it. The bell had still not rang.

The statues and plaques began to come to life. With their fingers they pointed at me, stating faith should not be so easily broken, and that by not believing, I doom myself to hell, just because God did not deliver me from evil. But the colours in the air embraced me. The darkness suspended my mind to allow it to soar. Jesus may have taken upon the sins of humanity so humans may ascend to heaven. But that heaven is meaningless if I suffer throughout my life in order to pray. The only truth that I know of and that I can feel is the current moment. I knew exactly the last few weeks in school became better not because I prayed, but because I tried to live not on the words that hurt me, but by myself. These are the things I could only do after asking my heart dearly. The chapel no longer becomes just a chapel, but a world in which I could finally appreciate the hour of silence and stillness. For the last time, I also had to give gratitude to Jesus and God for lending me a place to hide, to cry, to think, and to rest.

“But who am I kidding, to ask questions I already knew the answers?”

These were questions and answers I concluded every time I sneaked away to the chapel. I realised it a long time ago, and prayers would never save me, let alone answer me.

Finally, the bell rang and pierced the silence. The colours froze and retreated back into the glass, the darkness no longer spread out and drew swirls around me. The statues and plaques resumed their positions, and I was drawn back into reality, seeing the chapel in the dim light. I stood up and went towards the door, reached for the air controller unit and turned it off,

turned the door handle and broke the colourful shell of my sanctuary, returning to the world outside.

The question remains, was I dreaming, or was I simply going insane? Did someone really answer me? Yet when I left school, I could clearly remember the answers in my mind.

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