

“What Now?”

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“I’m leaving you. You whine too much.” I saw in her eyes an iris of hopelessness and disgust as she shoved me outside the door with a force so assertive that it caused me to trip a few meters into the corridor. A purely unpigmented corridor, with no texture nor color in sight, the kind that crazes you if you are left alone in it. As the door shuts itself like its gears hasn’t been lubricated, producing high-pitched creaks that stabs the palpable stillness around me, I saw two pairs of eyes behind her through the gradually narrowing opening, illuminated only by the contrast of darkness and paleness of the scene. I instinctively recognized those eyes as my parents’, staring at me with an eerie stillness from their unflinching pupils. The muscles in my legs pulsed as I spontaneously sprinted, but to no avail, the door was secured before I managed to get back inside. I frantically twisted the doorknob, but in my panic I tore it clean off, leaving behind a hole with no methods of entering. A strobing red light enters my vision and illuminates this ghastly realm while the alarms blared unbearable sirens that penetrated my eardrums. I opened my eyes. It was just ceiling of my room as I laid in bed, my phone rousing me from my sleep. I got up and did my morning routine, not before wiping the dried tears in the corner of my eye.

On the way back to university I had the opportunity to reflect on the ulterior meaning of the dream I had that morning. I retraced the emotions that I had felt when she had broken with me, the feelings of melancholy and woe that culminated a cesspool of a person that was me at the time. What followed that train of thought was a profound disappointment in myself as I realized nothing had changed since the last time, and I was still that anxious little boy searching for a solution that never existed.

I was always worried about my grades or whatever academic qualities I had as opposed to my peers. This thought pervaded me for quite some time, so frequently popping up in my mind that I had lost count, seemingly regurgitating itself at every instance of the day. Being an introvert, there were no friends for me to confide in, at least not in university. I only talked about these thoughts with my ex-girlfriend, not organized reasoning but a stream of pitiful consciousness, manifesting my misery into brutal verbiage. It was simple for me to realize that I shouldn’t be coercing her to carry my burden, but there was always an insatiable impulse for me to continue my wrongdoings. I had asked her feelings on this, and she said she could take it if it meant for my mental wellbeing. It hardly worked, but the urge overwhelms me. I

tried hard to figure out what's the problem was with me, and with some juggling in my memories I realized my life was laced with haunting mental exhaustions rooting from involuntary and exaggerated expectations as a student throughout the years. Yet as my body matured from a child to a teenager and then an adolescent, so had my worrying evolved from fear to consequentially paranoia. I let it rip me apart, destroying everything that I had ever cared for and loved.

The end of May every year signals the lulling serenity after weeks of crackling keyboard punches and finally the satisfaction of ridding the Microsoft Word interface from my face for future months to come. Travel restrictions relaxed as the pandemic ended, so I planned a trip to Tokyo with my ex-girlfriend just days after the semester ended. Prior to that was a hectic month. I, like every university student in the world, pulled several all-nighters just to be on time with assignments. Completing essays after essays was frankly not the hardest part, but the worrying that you're getting a grade undeserving of the enormous amount of mental labor put in, not to mention the copious cans of Redbull and instant coffee. For months I have tried to suppress these emotions and bury them deep within the depths of my heart, ignoring them as I faced my future tasks, but sometimes they get so intense that well-hidden intrusive thoughts blurted themselves out of my mouth.

It was the 5th day during the Tokyo trip when we went to Disneyland on the request of my ex-girlfriend. The day was perfect: vibrantly blue skies and not a cloud in sight; the weather was cool but not cold, simply suitable for fun. We were having a great time stretching our limbs after continuous weeks of work, hoping to put our academic endeavors behind us for the time being. It sounds just as easy as it is for her, to forget something, to force it out the back of her brain, to wipe it off the face of the Earth. But to me the decomposition of such a mentality is alarming, not to my rationality but a reaction to my insecurities, for to destroy something is always much simpler than rebuilding something. I have always prided myself on my determination, whether it was in academics or general outlooks on life, and such a prospect of truly letting go seemed ulteriorly perturbing. I also knew that my obsession with this trait of mine was unhealthy, garnering me monthly visits to the psychiatrist when I was younger, but it helped me get through the toughest of times, and I considered it to be my strongest asset. Letting go of it would create unneeded doubts in life. What if I could never regain that level of efficiency on doing papers? I wondered. To procrastinate and take too much time on one task would be unacceptable, its apparent outcome undesirable to an achiever like me. The process of peacefulness seemed so foreign and dangerously

alluring; it is unworthy for me to relax, even in another country. So to pull myself back into the mindset, I began a daylong journey pondering what could go wrong in the last semester.

My ex-girlfriend clutched my hand as she led us to whichever attraction she wanted to go, and with her enthusiasm my legs moved not on their own but in the direction she exerted her force onto me. I did not talk whatsoever, wholly indulged in my horrible thoughts, nor had I paid any attention to what was happening around me. She was anxiously concerned about my well-being, not acknowledging me as the usual talkative person, yet she did not raise a question and marched onwards, still being my puppeteer and controlling my destiny. We went on different rides, and browsed through several souvenir shops, but I struggled to recall what they were about as they seemed like a fleeting gust of wind that went by swiftly. I was looking at something, but simultaneously I was not. The joyful atmosphere, the saturated colors and cheery sound effects never once registered in my brain. All I knew was that I was mentally reciting everything I had written in whatever material I had submitted through the last semester to see if there were any glaring flaws that I missed during my initial inspection. My thumbprints were engraved on the luminous touchscreen as I searched on Google the concepts of existentialist philosophers to see if I got their ideas correct on my paper in one of my courses, then I looked for poem analyses to figure out if anybody else had the ideas as me, hoping my essay on it wouldn't be too out of the box for the professor grading it. Time cruelly passed by as I scrolled through lines after lines of text until nearly all hyperlinks on the search page turned purple. I must have never left the desk at my house, still sitting in front of my laptop, paralyzed by the thoughts of not what would be but might be only as I sought solace by satisfying myself.

I was still awfully quiet when we queued for one of the more popular rides in the park. Unintelligible conversations scattered throughout the area along with blaring PA systems pervaded my ears, yet not for a second was I annoyed or troubled. I was still living in my own reality characterized by a false sense of self-reflexivity, separated by a thick wall cemented by fear. It was not until someone violently shook me from the back that my neck rocked backwards signaled by grinding sounds of my joints popping back into place. I turned and looked. It was my girlfriend with her eyebrows slightly drooped and her eyes staring right into mine. As my brain started again to register what I saw, I noticed that she exhaled one breath more forcefully than the latter ones though she was standing still and not panting by any means.

“Are you alright?” She articulated the last syllable like a whimper.

“I’m---I’m fine,” I stuttered, “I was just thinking about what I wrote on the papers I submitted a few weeks ago.”

“What about them?” She inquired with jerked eyebrows while exhaling with her lips jerked upwards.

“Y’know, do you remember what I have written in the ENGE essay? Like that first point I’ve made, saying that the poem is a metacommentary on the effects on social isolation? Do you think that’s too provocative for the Professor’s taste ‘cuz she never covered that in the lectures?” I replied to a question with another question. Ironically, I was expecting answers from her.

“I think that’s fine really. You shouldn’t think about it now that you’ve submitted it since you can’t change anything anymore.” She appeared to get irritated by that repeated line of question that I’ve asked her before, presently and in the future, and her answer regurgitated like a broken but sentient vocoder. I decided to shut up for the time being.

Nonetheless, she hit the crux of the issue, but I was not convinced since there was still fright in my heart. I craved the certainty that anyone or anything could bring me, yet simultaneously I knew I was delusional to fear something without a shred of proof, but contrarily there was nothing to hold for comfort and security. I expected the worst for any outcome and braced for impact mentally despite my logic telling me that it wouldn’t happen.

This feeling of dreading everything crumbling before me without any indication was not foreign. I had done everything I could for my academics up until that point of my life. I had sacrificed time that I could spend with my friends, my hobbies and my mental health to it. I gave everything I had to offer just for my due reward. But I had no say in it, since I was not the one grading my own papers, handing out a number or letter in an attempt to summarize my efforts. I had done this my entire life; this was my capital,

the only thing that culminates my worth. Without it I only had weaknesses to stare into. I had known this since I was small. Now that I think about it, this emotion is integral to my overall being, guiding my every action early on in my life. I might have masqueraded it as genuine motivation, thinking I could sustain it for the rest of my life. And the darnedest thing was that I remember why my life to this point is solely motivated by fear.

From a young age my parents instilled into me the mentality of doing something well or not at all. In retrospect, I was hammered into this concept not for the purpose of excellence but simply to just ensure I tried my best at everything. I had it instilled into me at an early age: my father practically verbally abused me into it. When I was still in primary school, he was the one that instigated my studying as he took a week off work to personally supervise me at home. He was exceptionally invested in my education, perhaps because he had a less than ideal upbringing, where he was relatively poor and resources had not been as abundant for him as they were for me then. Nonetheless, I would be sitting in front the table daily during the week before exams like a 9-to-5 worker would, punching in numbers in my Mathematics exercises and scribbling pages after pages of English words on a substantial number of single-lined papers with him sitting on my side, effectively compelling me to not to leave through his authority. My grades escalated to the top of the class under his torturous approach, garnering me a lot of praise from teachers and classmates alike. Consequently, it most likely inflated his ego, me being the ideal person that he had hoped to be when he was small, finally realizing it after an inopportune childhood.

They say ‘the bigger you are, the harder you’ll fall’. I guess that applies to his ego as well. I vividly remember there was this one time that he did his usual routine with me, the same pencils scribbling on dozens after dozens of exercises for days while he simply observed what I was doing closely, lamenting about how I wrote a ‘0’ like a ‘6’ or how my handwriting is illegible sometimes. I never complained once, and quietly sucked up his instructions as I believed his wisdom to be valuable. This ideal quickly disintegrated as I meandered on the edge of failing every subject (basically nobody fails subjects in my school) one time as I was then, like the person I was a decade later, immobilized by the possibility of not achieving a satisfying grade. This omen quickly turned into reality. When I returned home, he got hold of my tests and was phenomenally furious. One moment he was talking to his colleagues while laughing reciprocally on the phone, the other moment he crumpled my answers with his fists and dug his fingers in the material so deep that I saw visible nail marks soaked with my tears on the paper. I knew I had stumbled into a confrontation inevitably resulting in my indignity as I gazed into the

abyss of his somewhat bloodshot eyes staring at me coldly and sternly. He called me all kinds of incompetent, accusing me of slacking off at school and saying that his efforts were wasted on me. I barely held my tears back as the me at the time thought I deserved it, gaslighted with the conclusion that I must be the problem, something the present me still could not shed.

Nonetheless, I would not have a recollection of this event so graphically if it wasn't for the fact that he took the entire bookshelf worth my comics collection – my most prized possession at the time – and tossed them one by one into the corridor outside the apartment. He vehemently screamed at me to pick them back up. I reluctantly grabbed my slippers, tears still streaming down my face and fetched them back inside my room, staining some pages in the process as he silently observed me doing so. The pettiness of it all! He simply returned to his room and slammed the door shut, an unnecessary flamboyant display of anger like it wasn't established already. He never apologized to me all these years, but this experience stuck with me, his ideologies engrained within everything I did, that only success mattered in the realms of academics. And you need to devote yourself to attain that success, sacrificing something in the process. Unfortunately for me, that was just about everything. This event was merely an isolated incident in terms of the grand picture of what I had achieved thus far then, but I got reprimanded as if I had been unintelligent the whole time. It was then I learned that a rotten apple spoils the bunch, that mistakes are fatal amidst achievements. I had been navigating this minefield for eternity, hesitating if it would cost me my life with one misstep. It felt real to me, and I hated this useless fretting.

This sentimentality has plagued me all my life. I thought entering university would open a new chapter, one where I could finally shed the agony I had endured all these years. Before then, my only reprieve was through relaxing with friends or own my own, but that too was taken from me since I had yet to make a friend group in university while the lectures had taken too much of my time. The torment never faded away but intensified. And there I was, standing in Disneyland, yet my mind was still enslaved in the classroom. I was surrounded by people, yet I felt alone, like I was back in that corridor, its liminality digging deep into my psyche, seemingly uttering the truth that nobody could help me.

After the ride I was vehemently invested in looking for any non-existing faults in my recollection of hours in front of the computer, but then I realized that I might have said something that had left an

unpleasant impression on the Professors or tutors, which they are going to capitalize on and mark down upon. I sought her advice again, knowing that she did not care about politics.

“Hey I remembered I never said anything or never participated in the discussions in my tutorial group. Do you think that leaves a bad impression on the Professor? I-I mean,” She cut me off before I could even finish my sentence.

“I think you should shut your mouth and enjoy the day. You’ve been like that since this morning, and if you don’t want to have fun, then find a bench and sit down.” The sudden outburst of displeasure surprised me, yet I knew she was not about to throw a tantrum in public. She merely narrated her sentiment with a low volume of her voice, almost whispering angrily in my ear. I obeyed, still uncertain how to calm myself.

A gust of resentment boiled up in my veins on that bench. I took a deep and detailed glimpse of my surroundings: children munching on cotton candy on a stick, people taking pictures with a wide grin on their faces and the joyous screaming of excitement from the hollows of the sky. They were laughing at my predicament with a crooked and belittling smile like I was less than them, unworthy of the ecstatic atmosphere they reveled in and isolated from me and me alone. A kid passing by must have noticed my hostile glare as his eyes recoiled from mine. He locked hands with his parents and left, not before turning his head and peeking at me one last time. I remember myself having a firm desire for this unfamiliar child to be in anguish. I wished for his parents to strictly monitor his every doing and slap him once he did anything wrong. I wanted him to be stripped of everything he could possibly do in life to relax so that he could sit at his table, sobbing at his homework under the jarring desk light at 3am. Most importantly, I hope he would be gravely unsatisfied with every achievement he had made in life, so that when he comes back to Disneyland inevitably, he would have a face contorted with rage, sitting in this exact same spot to become me at this very state. These thoughts never gave me solace, yet allowed me to descend deeper into my despair.

She came to pick me up two hours later once she actually had her fun without me, and it was such a quiet train ride back to the hotel. I realized that I had ruined her day with my own fears and paranoia masquerading as anger that I don’t know how to control to this day. I told her I felt sorry about it, and she

replied that it was okay, and she didn't think much about it after the conversation, but I simply treated it as hollow etiquette. After all, I never entertained the thought that she would forgive me, nor would I forgive myself. We went back to Hong Kong at the end on the 7th day, and a week later she broke up with me through text, saying that she was very tired with dealing with my unwarranted emotions, and that she needed a break. I was heavily devastated by the fact and I was sleepless for three days straight, not pondering 'why' but sorrowful that my insecurities affected not only myself but the people around me. I was already isolated, and I had now alienated the person most dear to me. It was also near that time my grades were released and I had done less-than-ideally in every course that semester. My disenchantment swiftly turned into rage as I slammed my phone onto the cold hard ground, its screen still cracked to this day. 'This cannot continue,' I firmly told myself as I promised that night to never speak or think about these vulnerabilities of mine to anyone, including myself, ever again.

Unsurprisingly, it was much easier said than done. The new semester started without a hitch and there I was, back in the same old classrooms with different numbers once again. The first few weeks were not that bad; I had ample time to study and get on with my hobbies. It was not until late October that things got serious with deadlines piling up. I tried to allocate my time, a few hours for this assignment and a few days for that, still hoping to at least give my best shot at everything. But it's simply impossible, as for the first time I felt like I was squashed by the tasks that I was used to doing, an unrelenting brick wall that would stop at nothing until I was completely decimated.

I fell into a deep depression during midterms, unable to muster up any strength to even view what the requirements for the next essay was. I slept all day, yet woke up tired, as if I hadn't been sleeping at all. It was such an excruciating time that I ended up not doing anything for a whole week, skipping lectures and missing deadlines. I knew I was 'burnt out', something I thought needed fire to do so. And I desperately wanted to vent out my frustrations to gain just a shred of relief, but prior experiences told me it would simply make me more miserable, akin to punching myself in the stomach. I searched if anybody had the same experience as me on the Internet, and I was glad that many shared the same sentimentality, their comments often guiding the afflicted to professional therapy. Therefore I followed suite, anticipating that this was the opportunity to finally leave my past and grief behind me.

The counsellor was nice, asking how I was doing and how I was feeling when I first stepped into the room. I told her about my recent gloominess and how it made me powerless and inadequate. She asked me why, and I replied honestly: the incident with my dad, my insecurities with my academics, my anger issues, me breaking up with my girlfriend.....I divulged into every single minute detail that came to mind, and I see that she was listening attentively, making notes along the way. Then she told me to try to materialize my feelings into concrete objects and describe it to her. I really had a hard time doing so because I thought that the exercise was exceptionally eerie. I was silent for a long time, perhaps for a few minutes, figuring out what I should say for the moment. She recognized my inability to construct and gave me suggestions.

‘Imagine that your feelings are a brick wall. What details would said wall have?’ I assumed a brick wall as a metaphor would be par for the course as it was often unsurmountable obstacles that students like me had to face.

‘It should be sturdy, painted in red and dilapidated,’ I remarked offhandedly, and through answering her seemingly misplaced question I aspired to get it over quickly as I struggled to understand how this activity would help me.

She gestured with both her hands and mimicked putting the invisible brick wall aside and gently instructed me to think of another example. The action frankly humored me as I figured she would make a great mime if she ever thought of changing occupations. Nonetheless I obliged, delineating objects like it was a Creative Writing course, never quite speaking from the bottom of my heart. I was frankly too tired, and I simply wanted someone to unshackle me from this torment I subjected myself to.

At the end of the session she bombarded my brain with technical jargons that I had omitted myself from listening, but there was one clear point that I agreed on during her assessment, that I lacked self-esteem or had been pegging self-esteem with grades throughout my life. I felt like my problem had been identified, that my emotions were bonded to my self-conception and identity through academics. After all, this was what I could do, and what I had done in my entire life. For the first time I was optimistic that I could solve the complex at hand.

But then she hit me with an imaginary brick coming from the still-standing wall that was equally unrelenting and stimulating as she proceeded to ask me what direction I was planning to mitigate the issue and untie this horrendous knot between academics and confidence. The advancing thoughts incurred terror again as I recognized that I focused on academics with a very particular reason in mind: it was a capital, and a way out for a sustainable life in society. That was all I ever wanted to achieve, and why I was willing to accept the pain it had brought me. But to discard my academics was to discard everything I had built up for myself, and consequently my hopes, and consequently my dreams. I was already not performing well then, who knew how low I could plunge if I didn't maintain this mindset? The thought alone unnerved me and struck fear deep within my heart. Yet simultaneously I yearned for the release from my predicament, an authentic yet illogical fragility that manifested itself as rage and paranoia, distancing everyone around me. I had not a definite solution to this dilemma, and it took all the courage for me to say the three coherent words of 'I don't know'.

She was not surprised to hear that as she immediately soothed me with anecdotes that a lot of students didn't know what to do in my situation and that I would figure it out through time. I did not believe her in the slightest, as I could not envision a scenario which there was an acceptable compromise. Instead, both choices stood as polar opposites with absolute exclusivity. The burden of choice weighed down on me as I craved a happy ending where I could have none, the powerless and pathetic me unable to garner serenity and achievement at the same time. Hopelessness swept through my entire body as I acknowledged that I could never attain a balance; it was thus the fate of people like me.

The counsellor escorted me to the lobby after our session ended. I was convinced that there was no way out for me as I grew more pessimistic about my current and insolvable plight. She was returning to her room when curiosity overtook me. I turned my head to take a quick look at her, only catching a glimpse of her silhouette devoured by the shadow the door had cast as the faint yet rigid clicking noise fastened the lock to its mechanism. I quietly descended the stairs, asking myself:

“What now?”