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4 Steps of Getting By

1. Escapism

A swirling fog of smoke rose from the tip of the cigarette. Gradually, it diminished into a thin piece of layer and vanished into the air, as if nothing has ever happened – I was smoking outside the MTR station, thinking about the conversation with my dad, thinking about life, about everything.

My dad was driving to Sham Shui Po and dropped me off at the University Station minutes ago. We talked about the dispute between him and mum yesterday. Another argument. Again. Every damn week.

I didn't recall too many details because my head was so cramped with things I had to do for the week, for next week, and for the week after. It was a busy month, that time of the year when assignments, tests, and presentations pile up at your desk. But I was bugged by my father's words.

"If only your mum could learn to sympathize me," he moaned.

Well...

"I have had a lot of downs these few years – the pandemic inflicted serious damage on my business, stalled my plans, your grandfather, my sister, and brother passed away, your aunt's business wasn't looking good... I've been cleaning up messes for a long time, and all I want is someone to sympathize me and allow me to catch my breath. It's lucky I don't have depression after all of these."

It's true our family have been suffering... but what does this mean? Why suddenly telling me this? I thought he'd never tell anyone about his problems. What should I do? How can I help him?

“You know she hates it when I am helping my friends and relatives. She thinks it’s not worth it when they don’t appreciate my work and I always end up being tired and injured. But they’re my family. You don’t weigh the pros and cons when helping loved ones.”

“I get what you mean. I also know you are tired, but you shouldn’t lash out on anybody. Not mum, not us. Not your loved ones.” I replied.

We discussed about the issue the whole journey, even though I originally planned to sleep to make up for my sleeping hours that were spent on work. At least it made him felt better by the end of the ride (he admitted it), and he promised to control his temper. I am trying, too.

Exhausted, I stared blankly at the cigarette as it slowly burnt out. Drew a few more breaths, to sense the irritating feeling inside your throat, that lasting bitterness left in your taste buds, and felt as the smoke travelled within your lungs, your trachea, and rising into the air once you emitted them. As I was smoking, the autumn wind gently breezed through my hair, touching my cheeks. How I wish I could live in this form of escapism forever.

It's time.

I threw the butt on the floor, stepped on it till the tiny flames were extinguished.

2. Reality Hits

Damn. Goddamn bunch of fuc... piss off!

Don’t ask me why, but I kept swearing the whole time doing my group projects. Furious, as the problems were out of my sight, something I didn’t foresee or expect.

What the hell is wrong with them. Thought we agreed to write two thousand words per person weeks ago? Now we are two thousand words short. What now?

Looking at the Google Document shown on the laptop screen, I was beyond shocked to find my groupmates were each one thousand words short in their respective parts. I texted them

immediately, urging them to add more content to it before midnight. Yet not a single soul replied.

Screw this. I'm going to report them to the professor.

Wait! Maybe they are busy as well. It's towards the end of semester, you know?

But that doesn't justify their actions? It's a bloody group project, not a one-man band.

Everyone must contribute!

Well, be sympathetic, like how your parents always tell you. You don't know what others are going through. Fill in their shoes. Think.

These kinds of conflicts keep happening every day in my life: my rationality versus my sensibility. I know what's the best for me, but I also care about others' feelings and often think from others' perspectives. Not wanting anyone to suffer, I'd rather sacrifice myself. In this case, if we do not finish the report, none of us are graduating, which jeopardizes my benefit as well.

Eventually, I surrendered and started adding things to the report reluctantly. Not being intellectual enough, I spent nearly a day trying to add data and sources to it, trying my best to reach the word count, but it was still far from it. Hours passed, it was an hour away from the deadline, five hundred words were still needed.

'Tick, tock. Tick, tock,' the hour hand of the clock kept shifting closer to the number twelve. Time was running short, yet I was the only one editing the document.

Alone in the dark, spacious dormitory, I sobbed painfully, hands covering my face, finding it hard to deal with all the stress. All of a sudden, I was breathing heavily, as my heart was pounding faster and faster, like it was going to explode any minute; my chest was filled with heat, with a sense of tightness, something that gave you an uneasy feeling; my head was dizzy, and my hands were shaking uncontrollably.

I can't die. Not now.

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, trying to calm myself. It was challenging, but I managed to cool myself down until my breathing became smooth again.

Death does not frighten me – love does. Bridges between people are hard to burn down when there is love existing in the relationship. Though death takes away a person, their legacy still exists in our memories, and it is difficult to take them away. After numerous deaths in the family, I would not want my loved ones to re-experience misery again. Some people spend their whole lives grieving and still could not make it out of it. Imagine that.

To not make my parents worried about me, I seldom tell them about my problems. The same goes with my friends.

There was no time to waste – I immediately picked up from where I was and continued working. My groupmates finally showed up and each typed a hundred more words in their responsible parts. We nearly missed the deadline. It was a close call.

Ran out of energy, couldn't care less of hygiene, I laid in bed without bathing or brushing my teeth, trying to recharge myself for another day. I was a mess.

Waking up at four the next day: the sky was still dark, the stars and the moon still hanging in the sky, staring down on the city that's still asleep. After giving myself a brief, warm shower and cleaning up, I repeated the routine as yesterday: smoking, writing, grumbling, repeat. But this time it happened at the university library as I needed reference. Every now and then when I was stressed, I would head out and grab a cigarette.

This bad habit started when I was a year two student, when I was still a committee member of the resident association. It was a stressful period as we had to organize all those activities, burning the midnight oil every day. As a result, I felt unenergetic every day, I'd fall asleep during lectures and failed to finish my assignments on time. I really hated myself for wasting precious a year burning myself out, and missing the opportunity to explore university life, only to devote all my time serving people who didn't even appreciate our work. Although our reign ended in the second semester, the harm had been done and I was still exhausted from a year of self-torturing. I am still paying the debts till this day.

Being a heavy smoker, I always smoke outside of campus, even though it takes me five minutes of walk to exit the campus. I just don't care as smoking provides me with serene, at least that's what I think. The more stressed I was, the more frequent I smoked. Smoking was kind of entertaining, watching as the bright red flame on the tip slowly turns into ashes and fade away, and gradually diminishes into zero, burning brightly until the last moment. All is beautiful.

While smoking, I would always think of unforgettable memories from the past: when my grandfather took me to his industrial building and gifted me a toy, when my aunt baked cakes and the last time we went cycling around fishponds in Yuen Long, when my grandmother bathed me when I was still a kid, going to Ocean Park with my uncle's family to celebrate my beloved cousin's birthday... these were beautiful moments that could never be repeated because the people were no longer here. Some were gone forever, some migrated and could only visit once or twice a year.

Having quite a hectic day, I kept going back and forth between the Chung Chi Library and outside of campus. One, two, three... I didn't even know how many cigarettes did I have, but I know my attention was constantly diverged away from my assignments. At this point, I felt like I was addicted to the nicotine, knee deep into the mud, but already struggling to pull myself back.

Even though smoking killed my grandfather, it was too tempting I couldn't quit easily.

3. Trigger Point

By six at night, I packed up my stuff and headed to the University Station. Today was a special day as I had an appointment with my friend Brian, who suffered from depression. It was also a way for me to check him out, making sure he was alright. But of all days in the month, why would I choose this day? I started to regret my choice, but guess it was too late.

It was a windy night as the sun had already sunk into darkness. Autumn was my favourite season as we could finally wear long-sleeves shirt, covering up our whole body, our flaws, our imperfections, things we don't want people to see, secrets we don't want people to know.

It was still early, therefore we stayed outside to feel autumn's presence. The wind was strong as the tree branches swayed in the wind and the leaves whirled around. To avoid the relentless wind, we hid behind a short building and enjoyed some snacks before the show began. We both leaned on the fence, placing the steaming hot Siu Mai on top of it.

The streets outside Cinematheque were dim, barely illuminated by the stars and the few lamp posts. Only a few people were still on the streets at this time, some were skating, showboating fancy skills mid-air and landing in perfection, while others were jogging or walking their dogs, enjoying the peaceful night. I was glazing at the insects surrounding the lamp post: they were trying to go pass the lamp cover to reach the light source within, unbeknownst to them it was futile after all. We seek answers and tranquillity our whole life, though not everyone succeeds.

As for my friend, he carefully placed the tobacco on the rolling paper and rolled it with the filter, then carefully licked the filter to piece it together, and finally lighting it. It gives a scent of freshness, unlike normal cigarettes. The grey smoke flowed silkily into the sky and vanished as if it never existed before, as if the world we live in was just a mere illusion. The pain, the suffering, happiness, sorrow, none of them had existed before. Makes me wonder if we didn't have emotions or feelings like robots, would we work more efficiently than we are now?

He handed me the cigarette, and made himself another one.

"How are you?" I asked.

"It's pretty good. Since I last talked to you, it felt a lot better. At least those thoughts of harming myself was gone."

I exhaled a mouthful of smoke, feeling relieved that he was able to recover from his devastated state.

We talked a bit about everything, about how he felt better after seeing a counsellor, about his daily life. It was kind of trivial as it was all about his school project, but my god he was criticizing things, about how cringe they were.

“I was trying to get into a group with my friends but we have like more than 5 people. The professor initially said it was fine, then broke his own words, and now I have to find a new group. He is truly delusional, ugh!”

I tried acting like I was listening, though I wasn't paying attention to any of it, being anxious about everything lately – assignments, tests, my family and friends, my outlook, my relationships... everything, but it requires an arduous effort to expose yourself. I'm not good with words, and keeping it to myself was my self-defensive mechanism. Revealing your deepest secrets and your emotions is like exposing yourself naked: Ambivalent, as you question whether it is the right decision; Ashamed, because people will judge you; Apprehensive, since you don't know what will happen next, that people might use it against you. The lyrics 'I want to break free' kept circulating in my thoughts, but how? Not under such institution.

“It's time. We should probably go in.”

While the movie was playing, a bunch of hippies went into the room. They were noisy and chit-chatting all the time at the back, disturbing all audience.

Shut up. Just shut your damn mouth and appreciate the movie!

How I wished I had the courage to ask them to behave, punish those pig-heads and ask them to leave the cinema. How I wish I could take control of every detail in life to avoid cruising on the wrong paths. How I wish I could take control of my thoughts, my emotions so I will not hate myself every day to the point there are only negative thoughts in my head.

Negative thoughts kept coming. Even though I asked myself to focus on the movie it was useless as it just kept getting worse, as more and more flooded in. They turn into voices and kept whispering into my ears:

You should kill yourself, you worthless piece of garbage.

You're not a saint. You are a hypocrite. A liar.

Why are you still alive? When it should be someone else?

You are nothing.

I started panting heavily, my hands were trembling, my chest was aching. I excused myself and went to the toilet, splashing icy water on my face to calm myself down. Pressing my palm on my face, realising tears were swarming my eye sockets and streaming down. I looked in the mirror, wondering to myself:

What is wrong with me?

I didn't go back to the cinema. Instead I went outside of it, lit another cigarette and keep inhaling and exhaling, thinking it would sooth my problem. I didn't work. Even though I took one after another, my hands were still trembling, my chest was still stiff. I walked around the platform, orbiting around the lamp post, but it was still of no use. My heartbeat was still pacy. I kneeled next to the lamp post eventually, with a hand holding my chest where my heart is located.

Why wouldn't it go away? This feeling of being useless and hateful.

Pressure had been building up within me for a long time, like a kettle boiling water on a stove that could overflow any second. I was overwhelmed by emotions, but got nowhere to vent. Not showing any signs of vulnerability is my way of protecting myself and my male ego. But was it too much that I could no longer bear with it?

Minutes passed. Seeing I wasn't back, Brian came looking for me and saw me by the lamp post. He rushed towards me quickly to check on me.

“Hey dude, you good?” he asked anxiously.

“No, I’m not.” I wept, still trying to catch my breath.

“Should... should I call an ambulance?”

“No! Shut up Brian, and sit the heck down!”

He silently sat next to me. Not uttering a word.

“I can’t do it. You know, I... I always know what’s best for me, but why can’t I let good things happen to me? Why I’m always filled with negative thoughts?”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked, confused.

“I don’t know... I’m just sad these days. To be honest, I’m always sad and hate myself loads. I have always hated myself, how I always lose control over my life. Why can’t I ever learn to control it?”

Out of breath due to my lengthy talk, I inhaled and continued.

“I hate myself, the way I always trouble others, dragging others down with me. I couldn’t even be responsible for my consequences, needing others to help me all the time. It feels like shit.”

Brian replied, “My friend, no one can have full control over their lives. It is fate, something written in the stars. You could only change your perspectives, and how you react to it.”

“I know. Life, right? We all are just following the flow, even if it leads us to places we don’t want to be. It’s inevitable we will encounter obstacles right?” I yelled furiously, “Life is already hard, people are sad. People helped me in the past, so I push it forward and help others without requiring anything in return. I thought it makes everyone happy, but no. I never thought it would burden me.” I buried my head into my arms, not wanting him to see my cry.

Brian lit another cigarette and exhaled, “I think the problem is, you undervalued yourself, thinking that you don’t deserve any good in the world. That’s why you think of others first before yourself.” He gazed at me, seeing through my invisible wall. “Have I spoken out of turn?”

I shook my head. I have a lot of friends, but there’re only a few who understand me, who could look through me. Although he only knew me a few years ago when we were studying in community college, he understands me more than my friends who I’ve known for over ten years. Even he knows me through and through, I wouldn’t feel insecure. Instead, it is only serenity that I feel.

“I don’t deserve happiness, not when people around me are suffering. They need it more than I do.”

“Everyone needs happiness in life. Men, women, children, the elderly. That’s why we need to support each other through thick and thin. Tell others what you feel and let them help you, especially we men. ”

“But I can’t even provide happiness for myself. I can’t forget the past...”

“The past is in the past,” he interrupted, “you need to stop lingering to it. You can’t bring deceased people back, you can’t relive memories. That’s why they are special. You could only use them as a driving force and go on with your life.”

“But I... I’m afraid of getting hurt again.” I stuttered.

“The world we live in is an ugly and cruel place. People are indifferent towards each other. It’s difficult to be a good person, I understand. You’ll get hurt at times. But without good people like you, the world would be a darker and colder place to live in.”

“You have a good heart, a container that is stored with love. It’s a waste not to spread love with it, don’t you think so?”

“But what if they don’t appreciate it?” I asked.

“Then spend it on the people you love. Spend it on yourself.”

4. Realization

“I love you, Dad. Let’s meet up for lunch this Saturday.”

After sending the message, I gave out a sigh of relief as I stared at the golden, glimmering lights along Tolo Highway. Not mesmerized, but disgusted by the norms that are tied to men, societal expectations that clips your wings and forbid you to fly.

Speaking up isn’t a weakness, but it’s a strength – to move out from the dark and show yourself to the world is never an simple job. Expressing and telling loved ones you love them is effortless. Even my father, who is kind of a traditional man, is willing to share his secrets with me, unafraid to be judged by me. Then why should I be insecure? What should I be frightened of?

Tired, I cleaned up myself, moisturized my dehydrated face with a facial mask before heading to bed, giving myself the self-love I have always lacked.

Next day, I continued my normal routine: doing assignments, going to lectures, reading... and I reported the free riders to the professor. Instead of guilt, this time I’m doing it with a lighter heart, for I now understand the purpose of love. Like cigarettes, sometimes it seems like the flame has died out. But all we have to do is gently blow into it and the flames will reignite. Love and support – I start to get the hang of it now.

“Hey man,” the Canadian student next door exclaimed, “want to grab one?” His hands gesturing me to grab a cigarette.

“Nah. I’ve quitted smoking.”

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