

THIS AND EVERYTHING ELSE

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My heart's flame had almost been extinguished while my body temperature rose. Once, I could do hundreds of repetitions, but that night I was forced to sit down to catch my breath. My mom, who already tested positive, was a staircase away from me. It had already been three nights since the first sign of the virus in our household. My movements were constricted to the four corners of my room. My footwork was limited. My punches were held back. My training clothes were slowly running out. And the laundry area, despite being a few meters from where I was standing, felt like miles away, unreachable for the next few days. The usual eight hours of sleep shortened to six, not for the lack of time but due to the constant uneasiness brought by inner demons that almost personified, forcing me to watch my back every five minutes. My dad was trying his best to keep the rest of us from falling apart while my siblings and I did everything in our power to assist him. I took it upon myself to remain hopeful until we got through the crisis, but that was easier said than done since the following night he told me to completely stop physical exercise until I take the test for Covid-19, to which I also tested positive.

As I laid in my bed unable to fulfill my responsibilities at home nor train my body and mind, I was left with no choice but to rewind my memories and watch them in chronological order like archived instagram stories. I'd get past certain moments while laughing about it in silence, but one particular day played over and over again, from four years ago. With nothing better to waste my time on, I closed my eyes to picture it play by play, so that I wouldn't miss out on remembering the day of my greatest regret.

When the sun rose that day, I too had a bright expression. All that changed when the skies of Sta. Mesa darkened. We arrived at the fight venue about an hour early. Right then and there, I already felt a punch on my gut, not from a physical opponent but from fear itself. A timer in a boxing gym rings after a full round, that's three minutes, but it also gives a warning at the remaining 30 second mark. When I heard that, I swear it felt as if there was a bomb counting down for detonation and I was standing right in the middle of it. Boxers from different weight classes were warming up. What was supposed to be an exciting sight, turned into a living nightmare as I watched them pound the bags while trying to work up a sweat. I imagined my flesh punished in the same way. I imagined my brain rocking back and forth for coming unprepared.

I was a seventeen-year-old boy surrounded by seasoned amateur boxers, men in their late twenties and early thirties. I thought it was too early for me, that I was too young to be there. It was an unexpected moment of clarity when I told myself that I wasn't ready to fight, and I have so much more to learn before I step in the ring. My mind was going places it shouldn't have gone to, and I didn't realize until it was too late that I had already built a safety net for when I cower in fear and decide not to participate in one of the world's most physically demanding competitions.

I weighed in at 126lb, around 6 in the evening as I remember it best. We were given an hour to eat light supper and digest it so as to avoid vomiting or digestive complications when the fighting starts. It was at that moment that I decided to forfeit. I was desperate to go back to the scales just so I could weigh if my pride really was heavier than my health. And then I thought that even if I stayed, I would've been lying to myself. I wouldn't have enjoyed my time and probably left with

scars to compensate for my recklessness. At home, I'd have to explain myself to mom and dad who were, at the time, against me trying my hand at boxing. I had all the reasons in the world to quit and that's exactly what I did.

But on the night that I reminisced, I still found it difficult to forgive myself for doing so. Four years have passed and I'd still whisper to myself "why couldn't you have just toughened it up and maybe we'd be in a better place right now?" I cried in regret that I did absolutely nothing significant to put me back in the position I was in for a huge chunk of time between the night I tested positive for Covid-19 and the day I turned my back on my once treasured ambitions. That's when I was reminded that contrary to the popular Filipino phrase, it's not actually free to dream. There are consequences to knowing when you're bound to fail. So every bit of my actions since then were done in the fear of paying for the price of dreaming.

What better way to run away than to mask fear with bravado? I did that by changing sports months after the incident. I had friends from high school who were into powerlifting. There were about four or five of them when I joined and then we grew into an army of ten or so. I've always considered it the easier route, mainly because I didn't have to travel it alone. I spent two years training and competing, even winning gold medals in national competitions. At the gym, I wasn't with people I barely knew, but with friends I'd trust with my life. It gave me a sense of comfort that made me overextend my stay, despite being well aware that the path to my ambitions involves overcoming uncomfortable situations.

It looked spectacular on the outside as I gained medal after medal. My progress was measured by numbers, given that the basis for strength and success in such a sport was the weight of the barbell. Deep inside, it was a stalemate. I couldn't develop myself further. How could I? When my will was fueled by the reassurance that I could never fail because I have no enemy. I have no one to expose me for my faults and shortcomings and nothing to hurt me if I make a mistake.

So despite my appreciation towards the sport and to my friends who helped me thrive in it, it wasn't newfound knowledge to me that I should've been doing something else, that I wasn't meant to simply lift weights for the rest of my youth. I knew at the back of my head that when I was fifteen years old, I proudly decided that I wanted to become a professional boxer. That was my dream and even if I was doing good in a different area, I knew that I was still running away, that I was still afraid of taking the road less travelled.

Months before the pandemic hit, I didn't just stop training in powerlifting. I stopped training overall. This time, my excuse was university life. I spent weeks not returning to the gym, telling myself that I wouldn't have the time to balance academics, extracurricular activities, travel, and spending time with my friends if I was busy chasing an intangible feeling built on no reassurance nor hard proof that I will actually get it. But then I also had the luxury to spend three nights in a row partying at clubs, getting wasted, and mistreating my body which I once considered a temple. Doing that every week made it seem that my physical endurance was only built for the tolerance of social situations.

I suppose there was a point in time when I wanted to reconsider my decisions, but just when that thought passed my mind, the city government announced that there wouldn't be classes for a week,

courtesy of a deadly virus. My first instinct was to celebrate. It meant more time to fool around doing counterproductive things, unbeknownst to me that my family would agonize from the said virus almost two years later. It was an initial cause for celebration at the cost of the world's suffering.

That cancellation of classes led to an extended community quarantine that spoke to me through a series of events, saying everything I led myself to believe while living a life of comfort were actually instigated by demons named doubt, sloth, terror, and false contentment. It took me all the moments of idleness I never should have asked for to realize that it wasn't time that I was lacking. For when the country wasn't yet plagued by a lethal virus, all I had to do was go to school, show up at the gym for two to three hours a day, go home and still get plenty of rest. It wasn't a matter of possibilities. It was a matter of how much I wanted it, and clearly before, I didn't want it at all. And I hate myself for that. The fact that it was impossible for me to foresee that I would be locked inside my home for the years to come is an internal torture still left unresolved and unhealed.

I swam in the ocean of blame, holding almost everyone and everything but myself accountable for my actions because I was afraid that I would be alone in this journey, that my friends wouldn't understand when I choose to spend my days at the gym instead of hanging out with them, that my dad wouldn't understand why I'd commit to such a barbaric sport and not to becoming a businessman like he wanted me to be, that my mom would somehow feel responsible thinking that something went wrong along the way when they raised a son that feels no stronger emotion than wanting to thrive in the art of violence and chaos, and that I will never be able to live with myself if I lose my fights despite sacrificing everything else to what I think will bring me true happiness.

And then there's this other voice that tells me I didn't have to do it for a living. It's been six years since I first stepped foot inside a boxing gym, and since then I've trained with amateurs, professionals, and even casuals who just wanted a good exercise. When I was 17, I sparred with an up and coming fighter from Baguio, who sought help from my team to prepare him for his professional debut. It was then that I realized something crucial about the sport. Poverty is a defining motivator for most of the fighters here in the Philippines. They fight to help their families survive, so that they'd have food the next day and some sort of guarantee that they'll last for the next few months or so.

I've had the privilege of growing up without worrying about that, not even for one day. I was enrolled in private schools for all of my life and am even currently studying in one of the most prestigious universities in the country. So in the moments that I think about how much I want it, I always end up just asking myself how my hunger would compare to theirs. What right did I have to assume that I'm in the same league as those people who are literally fighting for their lives, while I'm enjoying the comfort of multiple fallback options and career opportunities waiting for me when I graduate from college?

It was months of isolation from the world before I even began to entertain the thought of boxing competitively again, let alone strive to become a professional. In the first few months of community quarantine, all I wanted was a good workout, something that would make me feel good in the saddest time of life and consume all the idleness I had for the day. From that, it evolved into wanting to push myself despite the lockdown. If I wasn't going to develop as much in social

situations, I might as well improve myself physically so that I'm continuously growing. More months passed and I kept trying to find my individual purpose, trying to separate who I was when others were in need of my services and who I was without my friends, family, or community. It was then that I accidentally rekindled the fire of my ambitions.

The thing about being by myself and not having access to all the things I had before, all the distractions, entertainment, and sources of temporary joy, is that it made me realize what I wanted the most. For the man I was who thought that he had everything he needed would have never realized what he deeply yearned for. But once they were all taken away, I didn't exactly miss going out and partying or wasting time around outside university premises. I didn't miss the relaxation of living without self-imposed pressure nor did I want to decompress from the stress of isolation by doing the exact same things I was doing right before the pandemic.

What I missed was the feeling that I had when I picked up my first pair of gloves. I missed that feeling of positive uncertainty, when I would wake up in the morning and look forward to how I'm going to change myself for the better, what I will learn at the gym for me to carry everyday, and how much closer I can bring myself to making my dreams a reality. And should there be any challenges, I missed being appreciative of them given that they pushed me in a way that a non-challenging life wouldn't. I missed the boy I was before the fear, before I attempted to be ordinary despite having extraordinary ambitions. I missed the person who first stepped in a boxing ring and thought this is what I should be doing for the rest of my life, and everything else will fall into place.

But even with the fire rekindled, there are days when I wish that my physical prime was still so far away, so I'd go back to having high expectations of who I would be in a couple of years, entertaining delusions of grandeur, telling myself that if I'm exhibiting the traits of a prodigy in my teenage years, then I'd probably turn out even better when I reach my fullest potential at adulthood.

Instead, I have this real version of me who's far from what I imagined I would be in my early twenties. This version tried to rebuild himself for a year, thinking he still had a shot at every little thing he dreamed about as a kid, and yet almost managed to lose everything he worked for by exposure to the virus. This version is a culmination of wasted years compensated for by a small amount of time, defying odds all over again, and yet lady luck still refuses to shine on him. This version managed to ruin valuable friendships and relationships because he blamed them for being distracted at the most crucial years of his supposed growth, without taking accountability for his irresponsible behavior. This version is full of internal rage, contempt towards self, and endless questions towards God for not granting him the opportunities he thinks he should have gotten by now.

After recovering from the virus, I can't say I didn't try picking myself up. I made a timeline of how to better myself over the months to come, but failed to factor that the whole experience took a toll in my mind as much as it did my body. I'd reward myself with small moments of relaxation just for making it this far, even going to some sort of social gathering to see that I'm still me.

Except I'm not. I'd smile in front of others, laugh at their jokes, eat with them, drink with them, be with them, but inside, it's still just four years' worth of self-loathing disguised with whatever people want to see. Sometimes I'd break character and they'd shy away whenever they realize that for all the good I have in my heart, I'm usually still a ball of anger, addicted to feeding my ego with lies just to make living as myself tolerable. And they would tell me that all this time, I should've been allowing myself to feel sorrow, that the perfection I thought I saw in myself was nothing but a perfect lie in itself. I'd see the world in two extremes, the highest of the highs, or the bloodiest of red. But how could I try something else if I wasn't familiar with grief, at least not for the last four years. All the pain from everyday was just a fuel for rage, something to motivate me to train harder, be better, and leave everyone I love despite knowing that they only wanted what's best for me.

Now I realize that I didn't just run away from my ambitions that night, but from the essence of goodness itself. I ran away from people who made me feel vulnerable because I refused to embrace their love, believing myself unworthy of it yet, and that I will never be worthy of anything unless I become what I set out to be. I ran away from doing things out of pure intentions, choosing to instead chase titles and status, believing that the world measures everything by it and therefore it should also measure my worth as a person.

I never should have punished myself, but I already did. For once upon a time, boxing was the answer to my joy, and then the bad guy came and turned it into the outlet for my sorrow, my anxieties, my frustration, and envy to those who have it better than me. What was once the most elegant form of art in my eyes, turned into the most excusable outlet for my pent-up frustration.

Whenever I try to open my heart, sometimes I still think that my sentiments towards the sport is all I have. Maybe not because it's all that is available to me, but all that I allowed myself to feel. If it's everything to me, all that gives me hope, and all that it was has turned into a medium for hate, then why am I chasing a dream that's rooted from my pain?

Poetry is at its most beautiful when it's honest and sincere. Chasing dreams is something that I want to do out of love, but love itself is a promise difficult to fulfill.

My fists have been my solace in the form of struggle, and if this is what I have, then this shall be my peace for as long as it has to be. The dream is alive, but there are about a lifetime's worth of things I've failed to acknowledge because of it.

I failed to see that Mom and Dad were always in my corner and that everything they do, they do out of love. For all the times they've told me no, I was saved from making irrational decisions. Although she couldn't stand the idea of her son getting hurt, and he couldn't stand the thought of how one thing could possibly lead me to the wrong path, they've always respected what I wanted. Like me, they have their priorities. My safety will always be of utmost importance to them, but their cautiousness has never gotten in the way of expressing how proud they are of me for endlessly trying to reach the pinnacle of my art.

I failed to acknowledge that goodness comes in many forms, that while my actions may still be the shape of my ambitions, I don't have to define myself merely by my capacity to reach it. I failed to acknowledge that maybe in those four years when I ran away, I did a little bit of living too. For it was in those four years that I realized I can do things without an ulterior motive, and actually enjoy them. I can watch television for fun, and not for the purpose of gathering some kind of information about this or that. I can appreciate literature at face-value, and not always seek to interpret how the conflicts mirror my own. I can love training as an art in itself, and not just as an accessory to a higher purpose. I can go to church without feeling the need to be rewarded. I can love a girl for being the most beautiful person there is, and not feel the need to tell her. I can take care of a dog in hopes that I make her happy as much as she makes me. In those four years, I lived without the pressure of being someone that's not yet me.

I always thought I've already lost in life. I lost the time I needed to become what I promised to be. I lost the friends that cared so much, just because my ego didn't allow me to accept affection. I lost the ability to live in the comfort of the lie I told myself that I will be this guy in the next five years or that guy in the next ten years. But I started thinking about what I gained and realized I have so much to be grateful for. Boxing was everything that was good. And then it was everything that was bad. Now it's just one part of life, just like everything else. I think I finally understand it now, how to allow myself to feel.