

Sunblock

Sweet birdsong flutters through the clear and crisp air, shattering the morning peace. An unrehearsed symphony heralding the day with its joyless melody. The glass of the bedroom window and the thick, lined curtains are no match for its piercing, deafening cry. Like a hot knife through soft melting butter, there is only ever going to be one victor. It is white noise, a cacophony of sound, nothing more than an irritant. Every morning, every damn morning. It's a part of life, like breathing, eating, suppressing wind, the quest for love or even the fearful headaches that have overtaken life.

Ah, headaches. From the mild discomfort of a mere background soreness through to the agony of a pain so severe that it feels as if a scalding dagger has been plunged into the temple. And twisted. Disabling and seemingly unbearable until the blissful release of an intricate blend of medications eventually sweeps away the pain.

The incapacitating pains are now as much a part of life as the infernal birdsong that welcomes the day with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Every day, every single day.

'You have brain damage, and severe brain damage at that. The effects this will have on your life will become apparent, but only in the fullness of time. For now, we must wait'

As statements go, it's right up there with,

'You have a degenerative disease,'

'A close relative has died,'

'You'll never walk again,' or...

'Those Ant & Dec fellas, they'll be immeasurably popular for decades.'

They are just words; however their significance can never be lost. Sure, the statements are difficult to comprehend, almost impossible to believe. Nevertheless, they are undeniably true. The sooner the brain is trained to accept them as just that, the sooner life can continue unabated. But that brain is already immensely overloaded, burdened by the enormous task of almost starting from the very beginning. Again.

Some of the lessons that need to be learnt are thankfully brief. Flickering embers in the mind relight when the flame is fanned. But others, others can't be relit even with a burning match. The blaze has long since died and a fire hotter than the sun would fail to even raise a single weak spark.

Grief.

Grief for the life once had, the death just lived through. No longer the person who grew, who learnt, who matured, who loved.

The person who lived.

Now gone, a hazy memory, a distant afterthought. The images are printed on the glossy paper of memory, paper that faded with the passing of time. Soon the images are so distant, so worn that reality and memory simply fades into one amalgam. It's a blend so intricate that reality is unattainable. An alloy of memories, loves, losses, abilities, smiles and tears that falls from the grasp. Clutching, reaching, feeling, ultimately dropping...

And there you have it. Back to that square, the gloomy square marked with a huge and ominous 'One.' Thrust there not by choice, but by an event or a series of events over which there was never any control. An illness, a vessel burst, an impact, whatever the array of causes, the outcome is never the same.

One thing does however expose the outcome, the condition, the aftermath.

Ironically that tell-tale sign is, Invisibility.

The chasm within is betrayed by the façade. The strong outer walls become the enemy. Inside the building the walls have crumbled and rot is plaguing the structure. It soon becomes simply a shell of the construction that once proudly stood. People casually walk by and see those outer walls; the impenetrable shell that hides the truth. The walls become a fortification, a barricade. It's impressive but it's all that can be viewed. The stark reality of what that building contains is undetectable.

And so, forever and a day the truth can never be seen. Just like that building, the damage done can never be seen. From the outside, in the clear light of day all looks well. However the fight within is neatly tucked away out of sight and nobody, *nobody* will ever believe the stories of the turmoil hidden away inside. It can't be true, it isn't true. The building looks so well, so strong that it is somehow utterly impossible to conceive that all is not well inside. And yet, they never ask, they never question. The judgements are set in stone and there they will stay.

Onwards and upwards. Or... sideways.

But the privileged few know the truth, the secret. It never needed explaining to them, they didn't need to be told. They just knew. That alone is an enormous comfort and a huge relief from the doubters and cynics who continue to add to erosion within. It is far from a deliberate act, how can they ever know? Without peering inside, nobody will ever see. And there is much work to be done to get that view, to see within. Much care is required and for most a casual walk by is by far the easiest option. Look but don't touch, view but don't enquire. And walk away.

Life goes on, the clock continues to tick. And every day, every single day, that birdsong slices through the air like a hungry eagle hunting its prey.

Square One is a lonely place. There are long days and even longer nights. The mind is a complex organ. It has an uncanny knack of flexing its muscles in the hours where only the all-consuming darkness resides. The minutiae of life fills the thoughts, the tiniest detail has become so important that it must be dissected with surgical precision. Sleep constantly battles against the powers of deep thought, of worry, of an astonishing lack of self-awareness. Intense tiredness becomes an ugly force intent on overtaking every aspect of life. Sometimes the searing pain of that hot dagger in the temple works in tandem with the mind to stamp on any chance of sleeping. The night draws out like a long, lonely road devoid of all life.

Every night, until the chill of the birdsong. That damn birdsong. Tweet tweet.

Occasionally, very occasionally, light pierces through the darkness. A beacon, to reach for, to yearn after. It glistens, it shimmers, but virtually as soon as it appears, it is gone. Brief, very brief. That darkness is so intense that any light must force a path and the task isn't an easy one. Within the days, weeks, months and years the light appears infrequently. It is a welcome break from the monotony of the gloom. Lessons are soon learnt. The brightness will not be around for long, cherish it while it remains a part of life. There might not be any more along for quite some time. In the meantime memories are all that remain. Memories that flutter like litter in a strong wind. A

damaged brain simply can't distinguish old memories from new. Soon the refuse of life becomes one enormous and utterly confusing mixture that can't be controlled or understood. There just isn't a sweeping brush large enough to cope with that amount of debris.

Aint life grand.

Another morning, another day. Tweet, tweet, bloody tweet.

And then, when the search for any semblance of normality has reached a natural, almost welcome conclusion, it happens...

Sunlight, bright blinding sunlight. It is summer and it's a summer like no other. It is the perfect storm. Time, understanding, more time, acceptance. Then, a smidgeon more time, a dash of medication, a splash more time, a drop of self-awareness and a sun so bright that no amount of lotion will repel its rays. Even a winter coat wont manage that much.

The headaches are still striking with fearful regularity, the pain is mostly agonising, now and again, tear-jerking and in rare and blissful moments they are merely just painful. The sun's rays bathe all around in their warming glow. The pain matters not, the sun still shines brightly.

'You have brain damage, and severe brain damage at that.' The sun still shines.

You will never work again.' The rays of light grow ever stronger.

'Your condition will never improve.' It's warm out there...

'Fatigue will plague your every waking moment.' And still the sunlight burns through the misery.

Those words still have their respective meanings, but they don't matter. The sun doesn't judge, it doesn't care. It carries on shining and lighting up life.

The moment seemed so far away. The years had passed by in the blink of a weary eye. More often than not it had been an Olympic achievement each morning to place a single foot on the floor. The mattress was a much more welcoming prospect when those damn feathered and flying blighters began their detestable chorus. And slowly, very, very slowly, there is the fresh wind of change in the air.

Acceptance. One single word and a simple concept, yet there had been times when it was so far out of grasp as to be unattainable. The meaning of the word had been lost, drowned in the rough undulating sea of recovery and the indolence of loneliness. The dominant feelings were of strain, of illness and their power was colossal. However, the outsider never sees it; they still only see the shroud, the front, the veil that rarely lifts. Time has become irrelevant. Each day became the same as the next and indeed the one preceding it too long ago to even care. Routine is a cruel mistress.

But now...

The wait is over. The time that seemed so unlikely, so distant has now arrived. The light at the end of the tunnel is shining so bright. A bright blue sky has replaced the dark and starry night sky.

It's 4:37 Am.

Tweet, tweet. And there it is again... The birds are awake once more. The collective alarm clock has tolled; each and every one of the feathered beasts is fighting to be heard. Now, however, it is different. For too long to contemplate the din has been nothing other than a nuisance, albeit a break from one of countless sleepless nights. Something has changed.

Where once lay restless, frequently disturbed nights, peace now reigns supreme. Eight blissful hours earlier the demon sleep at last allowed itself a visitor. The guest needed no second invitation and leapt right in, feet first, head first, whichever first it took. The wish for acceptance had been granted and was thus no longer a bar to the world of sleep. Along with it had come a sense of self-worth that was previously merely a dream. Ironically. And still the birds tweet and chirp, ignorant of the impact they were having. They weren't to know, they're only birds after all. They'd just carried on tweeting on the odd occasion when they'd be yelled at in the silly hours. Now, all is different. The song has become precisely that, a song. Where there was once horror, now there is a melody, a ballad. A symphony of nature in all of its glory. Life's rhapsody of which you are now a part. No longer a bystander, a bit part player loitering in the background waiting for life to grab you by the throat. Now, a time to live.

The birdsong is now wonderfully deafening; the sun is shining as fiercely as it has since the dawn of time. With a yawn, the day is seized. And after one tired roll of the body the warming glow is in vision, in all her accepting beauty.

'Good morning, sweetheart.'

For SN