

BRAVERY

MAY 2020

Was it fate that had him cross my path? Or me him? Do we have the courage to leave that superstition aside? Nothing is meant to be. It was just luck.

Luck doesn't make it any less significant. No less extraordinary.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed me outdoors. If weather permitted, I was walking, walking, walking all over my neighbourhood. It was better than the alternative of binge-watching shows, sampling every craft beer that could be delivered to the house, baking cookies and posting them to Facebook, and putting on the pandemic norm of 15 pounds. The truth is I had nothing else to do. So I walked.

I walked alone. I do a lot of things alone. I took different routes around my part of town, but I generally started by crossing the highway on the pedestrian bridge. Coincidentally, I passed a Chinese man something like twenty days in a row. I am not sure that I passed anyone else more than once, not that I noticed anyhow. But this gentleman and I passed what seemed to be every single day. He must have noticed too, as eventually we smiled and nodded, acknowledging that we both were focussed on the next quick step, the solitary quest to stay active. We passed at different places until one day we didn't pass, we walked in the same direction and eventually continued together, keeping a respectful 6 feet from each other, and I managed to be brave enough to start a conversation.

"Norman," he said when I asked his name. He had a slight accent, but it wasn't very pronounced.

"I'm guessing that's not your given name."

Norman laughed. "No, my Chinese name is different."

"What is it?"

He waved a finger. "We are in Canada. You are English. You use my English name," he instructed. So I did.

We often walked in silence when we first walked together. But in time conversation kept pace with our steps. He was a few years younger than me. Both of us had kids that had grown, mine had moved far away and his were at university. Both of us had a spouse at home who was afraid to go out and we didn't talk about very much. Most of our conversation was about the virus, the lockdown, the re-opening, the science. We talked about the governments, the conspiracy rumours, and the fears for our futures.

"I am not trying to catch it," Norman said. "But if I do then I do. It would make life much easier to know I cannot catch it again."

“Sure, I really don’t care either. Though we don’t know about the long-lasting impact on our health, our organs, none of that. Different studies keep coming out. Did you read about that last one coming from the UK about how 41 percent of infected people have seen their blood pressure—”

“Sure, sure. The heart rate and all those details. I saw that one. Tomorrow it will say that half of our toenails will fall off in ten years. Who cares? There are bigger things to worry about. The economy suffers. I am not worried about my toenails.”

“But this wasn’t about toenails.”

Norman glanced at me and he was serious. “It is all just toenails.”

We agreed on many things. We had not voted for the same federal or provincial government but we agreed on how they were doing (adequate or better considering the circumstances). We agreed on the situation in the USA (frightening) and their president (unexplainable). We agreed that too many people were isolated and getting used to it and not minding it. That described Norman and me very well, both socially isolated, and the pandemic had only exposed to what degree that had happened. Neither of us felt any inclination to change.

“I was not like this when I was young,” Norman mentioned, referencing my comment that we both led lives with little contact and few friends. “When I was young, I was part of a large group. Many friends. Even though it was large we all felt very close.”

“When you were at school?”

“Yes. Well, before university.”

“Where was that?”

He hesitated just a beat, but I noticed. “It was in China.”

“What group was that?” I asked. Norman didn’t often talk about his past, this sounded promising.

“Just a group of friends. We had many things in common.” There was a longer beat. I thought he would say more about this group. Instead: “I believe that restaurant patios are to be re-opened next week. Is that something you will do?” And that was the end of talking about the past for that day.

“No, probably not. Unless you and I make it part of our route.”

“I like an IPA.” Norman said to my surprise.

“Then we will have to go.” It had been years since I had been out for a drink with someone that I regarded was a friend.

“You like IPAs?”

The thought made me wince. “Too bitter. I just like a light beer, nothing too heavy.”

“IPA is not heavy. It is not a stout or a dark lager.”

“I don’t like those either.” Norman knew more about beer than me.

“You like beer that tastes like water,” he accused.

I nodded my head. "Yes, pretty much."

A week later we found ourselves waiting for a table on a patio. We had walked a few extra kilometres to get there and stood silently in the sun while the hostess made sure a table was ready, one that could ensure we were well away from others. After ten minutes we were seated. Norman had his IPA, and as I sipped my light beer, he quickly had another.

"It has been many years since I had two beers." He laughed. "Should I have a third?"

I was amused and did not want to discourage my friend. I didn't want to see him lose any control either. We were both good at protecting what was inside, a few beers could let that guard down. "It's up to you."

"No, it would be too far for you to carry me," he joked.

"Many years since you've had two beers," I repeated. "So how long?"

"Many years," was all he offered.

"Here, or in China?"

"China. The beer was very different. Not this good."

I smiled but didn't reply. I took another small sip of my beer. It wasn't as cold anymore, I was thinking of ordering another just so it would be cold when without warning, Norman offered up more.

"I was in the army."

"Oh? That was the group you were part of?"

"Yes, we were very close. I had many friends."

Then I said something without thinking it through. "The Chinese army makes me think of Tiananmen Square. I remember being glued to the news back when that happened. Wasn't that awful?"

Norman didn't make a sound, didn't move a muscle. I knew right away I had said the wrong thing. I wanted to say something quickly, but nothing came out, I stayed quiet as Norman was motionless and silent. Finally, I found my voice.

"Norman —"

"I was there."

"Right. I'm sorry."

"I was there," he said again. We left it at that and soon after finished our beers. I was happy to drink my warm beer more quickly and walk home but Norman suddenly ordered another. I wasn't expecting that but didn't object and agreed to get a cold one for myself. We drank them without a word.

It seemed the walk back would also be silent when, out of nowhere, Norman added to the subject.

"What do you remember about Tiananmen Square?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there anything in particular you remember?" he pressed.

I thought back to that time, the students in the square, the negotiations, the weeks of what seemed like peaceful protests followed by the harsh government action and the deaths of so many. But of course, there was one moment I remember, that so many of us remember. "Yes, I remember the one student who stood in front of the tank. He stood there, staring down the tank. When the tank tried to go one way he stepped that way to block it. Then the other way. It was incredible."

"I remember that too," Norman said. He stopped walking and faced me. He brought his hands to his chest. "I was the driver of that tank."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Holy crap. I don't know what to say. I'm sorry. That must have been difficult."

"Impossible."

"What did you do?" I asked.

Norman looked at me like I was an idiot. "What did I do?" he asked incredulously. I shrugged, there was no taking back the question now. "I looked at this man standing in front of me and listened to the orders of my commander in my ears. Orders from my friends. This man I did not know. My friends. One, then the other. This choice. That choice."

I knew he must have made a choice, but I didn't ask. I thought it best not to ask any more questions, I would let Norman talk if he wanted to.

"What do you think of that man?" Norman asked finally.

"Um. I think, I guess I have always thought, he must have been pretty brave."

Norman shook his head while he locked his gaze on me. His eyes looked fierce but I couldn't tell if it was anger or sorrow.

"Brave?"

"Yes," I said. "I think most people think he was very brave."

"Yes, they do. Maybe he was. Or maybe he just didn't care."

"Sorry?"

Now I could tell the look in his eyes was definitely anger, hate-spitting, unabashed anger. "Maybe he didn't care! Maybe he had nothing else to live for, maybe he had no choice, maybe he just was there and there was no reason *not* to stand in front of my big metal tank and so he did it because he did not care what happened next!"

"Yes. Maybe."

Norman brushed past me and kept walking. I struggled to keep up and we didn't talk the rest of the way. We didn't even say goodbye.

Was Norman my friend? I don't know what a friend is. I don't really have them. Was he as close to a friend as I was going to have again?

What of Tiananmen Square? What of the brave young student, and what of the scared young soldier? What did I think of my friend now?

Sleep did not come to me that night. Something did. It kicked me all over inside and out and left me feeling empty and cold and as alone as I had ever been. Oh, I have felt alone many, many times, and have not minded so much and have even come to a certain peace with my solitude. I have embraced being lonely. But this night it assaulted me. It pushed me down and abused me with every slow plodding minute. I felt the harm, it had its foot on the neck of my essence, and it was just enough weight to slowly drain me, end me. What was doing this to me? There isn't a word, it doesn't have a name. But I knew what it was doing. I knew what I felt now.

Nothing.

I didn't care.

I don't know if I expected to see Norman the next day, but I went for my walk at the usual time, out of habit. I had nothing else to do. It wasn't until I had started across the pedestrian bridge that I saw him. He was on the other side of the bridge, about a quarter of the way to the middle, directly over three lanes of fast-moving traffic. He had climbed the five or so feet to the top rail and stood holding a post for balance, but he was not gripping very hard. He was looking down. It was a drop he would not survive.

My reaction was instinctive. It was easy. I was automatic. As he turned his head and noticed me, I climbed up on the rail at my end, holding a light post as he did. My climb was awkward as old muscles and bones struggled to get me to the top rail. And my location was no less dangerous. It was just as far a drop. Cars passed beneath me as well.

He noticed the movement and looked aghast. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

"You jump, I jump!" I shouted back.

"What?"

"You jump, I jump!"

"Don't be stupid!"

"I'm not!"

Norman stared at me. He wasn't sure what to do. He looked furious. "What do you know!?"

"I know!!"

"What do you know!?" he shouted again.

"As much as you!!" I shouted back.

He took one hand from the post and pointed it at me. "You think you are brave!?"

"No!!"

"You are brave!?" he screamed, more an accusation than a question.

"I'm not brave!" I screamed back. "I don't care!"

"You have no ----"

"I don't care!!!!" I shouted louder, leaning forward to project my voice, and becoming even more precarious on the slippery metal rail.

He stared at me. I was still leaning forward. I assumed he was going to jump. I was ready to as well. I wanted to. I was waiting to. There was nothing but a finger holding me, and that muscle was set to relax and give in.

Norman stepped down from the rail. I waited for a moment, surprised. But I stepped down too.

It didn't feel like fate, it just happened that way, whether we wanted it to or not. He had stepped down, so I stepped down too. It was simple and straightforward and unexplainable. I thought he would jump. I thought that was what was supposed to happen.

We watched each other for another minute, then he turned and walked away.

I don't know what became of Norman. The pandemic lockdown is slowly lifting but that isn't why I don't go for walks anymore. I don't have a reason to. I don't care.