

The Lone Captive

It was distant at first, only as strong as the whisper of a breeze through the trees.

“Help!”

The cry was too far-off to stir the boy. The alarm clock in the corner provided the room with a light glow. The numbers read 12:24 when the next frail call came; it was more pronounced than the first.

“Help!”

Like a child picking at a scab, the call pulled the comfort of dreams away, opening the boy’s eyes to his room.

“Help!”

The final wail was no longer far away. It wavered into the boy’s room, shaky, but clear. He froze.

“Is everything okay?” came a voice from down the hall, followed by the thunder of footsteps down the stairs. The voices grew in number. More footsteps. The boy didn’t move.

“Call 911!” shouted one.

“It’s going to be all right,” reassured another.

The boy couldn’t move. More footsteps. A tear rolled to his cheek. Why couldn’t he move? Trained in First Aid and CPR he should jump to help, right? It was clearly beyond his expertise, but laying there frozen shouldn’t be an option. And yet, there he lay.

A figure appeared in his doorway and broke the trance that fear had imposed.

“What should I do, Mom?” he finally choked out, unsuccessfully masking the unease in his voice.

“Pray. That’s all we can do at this point,” and just like that, she was gone. The fear surrounded him, suffocating his thoughts, seizing his body—the tear still resting on his cheek.

The boy stared vacantly at the pulsing numbers of the alarm clock. The ebb and flow filling the otherwise empty space that was his mind. He couldn’t think about anything, just the slow pulse and the occasional number change. His body lay like a corpse. The only sign of life came from the slight rise and fall of the covers on his chest. Fear had almost completely choked out his thoughts when more voices approached.

“Where is he?” asked one.

“Just up this way.” Their volume increased as they ascended the stairs.

“He threw up about twenty minutes ago and isn’t responding coherently to anything we say.” At this, the boy rose; his body was no longer a slave to his fear, but his mind still ran empty. The uncertainty of the situation drowned out any potential cohesive thought. At least he was standing.

From his doorway, the boy watched as paramedics turned the corner at the top of the stairs. At their calm strides and apparent lack of urgency he grew hot, ready to spew venomous words in an attempt to quicken their pace. Reason, however, stifled this eruption. And then the paramedics reappeared. Snaking down the hall came the procession of people belonging to the voices the boy had heard since he awoke. Except there was one more person than there had been voices. The boy’s heart stopped. His hot anger was replaced by a deep blue cascade of sorrow. And once more, he couldn’t move.

Strapped into the wheelchair sat the weak body of the boy’s grandfather. His grandfather’s mouth was moving, but gibberish replaced the gentle and thoughtful words that had always waited for the right moment to be heard. His once twinkling and smiling eyes were

now vacant glass spheres. His hands, which had once inspired all of his grandkids to learn magic tricks of their own, now trembled. His slight smirk, which always brought the boy joy, was now a grimace. The man the boy loved was no longer there.

Trying to escape the reality coming at him, the boy made his way down the stairs. He was met at the base by a shaky embrace from his mother, and then came his father, leading the rest of the procession. When his grandfather was finally set at the base of the stairs, and the paramedics began to wheel him to the ambulance, the boy's mother leaned in to the boy.

“You can give him a kiss on the head before he gets in the ambulance.”

He couldn't move. Every ounce of his inner being wanted to give his grandfather a kiss on the forehead or a soft hand squeeze or anything of that kind, but he couldn't. His head erupted with cries for his muscles to move, to just reach out for his grandfather, but they refused. The only movement was the slow roll of tears down his cheeks.

By the time they arrived at the hospital, the boy had managed to contain the fear and guilt from his inaction, shoving them deep into the corners of his broken spirit. A numbness overtook him as he aimlessly followed his parents to the room with his grandpa. Around him, the hospital staff buzzed from one patient to the next. Finally, the boy made it to his grandpa's room. The curtain behind the glass door was deceptive, obscuring the reality of what lay on the other side from the approaching family. The boy's father slid the door open and pushed the curtain to the side. There was his grandfather, glassy-eyed and unmoving, aside from the slight rise and fall of his chest. He was hooked up to multiple machines, surrounded by blinking lights and steady beeps. As the boy's eyes fell upon the vitals monitor, he heard the sound of footsteps.

“Hello, I am a radiologist here at the hospital. We have the results of the CT scans we just ran, if you would like to take a look.” The family gathered around the monitor, and though the

numbness had returned, the boy moved to get a better look. The image on the screen resembled a potato, but it was in reality the top-down view of a brain; most of it was a mild grey, but the boy's eyes were drawn to the piercing white blob that dominated a quarter of the image.

“So this here,” started the doctor, “is blood that has leaked from a ruptured blood vessel.” The boy knew what was coming next. “I’m sorry to inform you, but due to the loss of blood, he has gone brain dead. We can keep him hooked up to the machines until the last person you are waiting for arrives.” Again, the numbness overtook the boy.

“It was his time,” he thought to himself. “He’s been brain dead since he left the house. At least he didn’t have to experience this.” The boy found a seat in the large, yet cramped, emergency room bay, ready to wait for his aunt to arrive. Not five minutes later the door slid open, but it wasn’t his aunt.

It was his friend, a tall and muscular doctor, who had just finished his twelve-hour shift. He wore a comforting smile and warm eyes.

“Hey bud,” he offered softly, wrapping the boy in the safety blanket of his embrace. For the first time the entire night, the boy felt like things were going to be okay—the numbness was replaced by a feeling of security and acceptance. For the next three hours his friend’s presence comforted him and his family. Asking questions about school, sports, and countless other topics, the friend guided the boy’s mind away from the loss in front of him.

The clock on the wall read 5:00 a.m. when the boy’s aunt finally arrived. Shortly after, the doctor returned with the morphine—the end was near. Wanting to give the family space, the boy’s friend gave him one final hug and bid all farewell. The time had come.

The family gathered around the mindless body, ready for the monitors to slowly descend to flatlines. Beep. The morphine drip began. The ventilation was removed. Beep. The family was

ready for silence. Beep. The grandfather's body was not. Violent gasps came from the gurney. Beep. Though his mind was gone, the basic life sustaining functions remained. The boy looked on, unnerved, as the lungs clawed for air. Beep. They fought and fought. Beep. Time stood still. For an eternity they kept fighting. Beep. Gasp after haunting gasp broke the silence of the room, until beep ... There were no more beeps as the line on the screen leveled out. Unwilling to repeat his previous mistake, the boy leaned over and kissed the lifeless body on the forehead.

Three hours later the boy rose from his bed and prepared himself for class. His eyes stung and his stomach felt uneasy. He knew he didn't have to go, but if he stayed home the emotions he had buried deep inside would break free. The boy grabbed his backpack, climbed into the car, and ventured to school. As he entered the hallway during passing time, he was met with the familiar high school rumble of laughter, gossip, and conversation. His mind was drawn away from the morning as the atmosphere engulfed him. In class he started to think it would be okay. Nobody knew, and other than his stinging eyes, he was fully engaged. The battle had been won. Victorious, the boy checked his phone before starting his independent work, but he had walked into an ambush. The words of the text from his younger cousin lunged at him: *Is grandpa awake yet?*

Like a skier in an avalanche, the boy was tossed, and then buried, gasping for air. His cousin had no idea. The innocence of the question was crushing. His tears blurred the room around him. The boy made his way to the exit, hoping that no one would notice his eyes, but also yearning for someone to comfort him. In the hall, the boy clawed his way to the top of the snow, forcing all the emotions back inside. He hoped to hold himself together long enough to get through the day. Unfortunately, he stepped right back into the trap not thirty minutes later.

Disguised as one of the boy's best friends, his emotions waltzed into his advisory class. With a simple, "How are you doing?" they tore into him. Curling into a ball on the back table, the boy recounted the previous twelve hours. His eyes burned as he choked out his time in the hospital and the text from his cousin. As his insides flowed out, his friend held him. As his nose dripped, his friend held him. As his eyes dried out, his friend held him. As he regained his breath, his friend held him.

The emotions had managed their escape. Defeated but relieved, the boy made one final effort. His fingers wrapped around one last sentiment and pulled it back inside, where it remained for years. Then one day, the lone captive maneuvered through the boy's memory, dragging itself from the depths where he had buried it. Sitting in the chemo bay with his other grandfather, the boy, now a college student, opened his laptop and began to type, "It was distant at first..."