

Approx. word count 1300

How Could I Not

I stride through a veil of fatigue toward bitterly imposed conclusions. Dull images of black and gray float, press and pierce the surface of my mind. That day smothers me as sleep thrusts my thoughts toward unrealistic images of people and beaches while my conscience cries out.

I fall. Wanting to land, wanting to stand.
Then I wait.

The sun, a strobe light marking each day, kept time with fetid dreams and living nightmares. Bars filtered freedom that seeped into my room. Freedom that gives life to plants and animals, animals and man. Freedom that I took away, freedom that was taken from me.

I think about her and why. Each time I create a new scenario and each time the result is the same. The pulsing sun has blinked - the moon sends blue light. It falls on me while thoughts trace through mazes well traveled so that nothing said takes me by surprise. The pathways I followed are wasted and driven by thorns. Where I walk on virgin ground soon becomes vanquished. The wind howls through bloody vines calling me back, aching to sow the seeds of pain and reap the sorrow of my shattered life.

I had sat with her for hours on the crimson shore, the swells rising, breaking, rust peeling off the crest of each wave when people finally arrived. I can remember the sun pulling an orange blanket into the sea, opening to us a black sky, filtered by grains of shimmering light, dominated by a full moon. A breeze gently pushed at the silence surrounding us. I had never seen anybody die, and nobody saw how she died so I could not simply state, "Not me."

Because it was me. A failure to react, unable to engage. An indirect contributor to the rise and demise of fantasies and life.

What a person freely dreams is slowly dimmed and crushed through endless chores and obligations wearing ruts on once open paths of life. Treading and retreading what must be circles until nothing is new and nothing new can be expected. Numb, withdrawn, unfeeling, alone but comfortable in the patterned grooves. Towed slowly behind life, senses are dulled by the deprivation of monotony. She was younger. She had not made it to that point. Her paths were unworn, grass still grew green in the fields of imagination. Desire, anticipation, expectancy, elation. In each step ahead of me vibrant life could be seen. The insusceptibility of self, without reservation, no checking over the shoulder to see if she was being watched. She didn't care, she was free.

Normal introduction:

"Hi, I'm..."

offer handshake

"Hi. Nice to meet you I'm..."

"do you come here often"

"only with my friends"

But we were not introduced we were crushed together, soldered for such a brief time until death did she part but not completely from this world. She would be always with me. The only commonality in our greeting, a direly requested handshake. A lifeline I could not throw. For my lack of nerve, she gave unending regret; a guilt and conviction from those that would follow. A conviction that would hold me responsible for more than lack of action. A conviction for committing the action. My mute action translated, in the world's eyes, to a deliberate, egregious intent.

We were to meet walking but not together. She, ahead of me, on a beach trail lording the edges of a sheer cliff; not of rock but impacted sand worn of patient wind along its face, further battered by the crushing blow of storm waves at its foundation. I was almost to her. With a look back and a light smile, she disappeared over that cliff. that was the first she spoke to me. But it wasn't to me, she was reaching with her voice out to anyone and that someone was me. I heard and responded to the vanishing lady clinging to the vanishing ledge. I responded by running to her. I responded with calcified ligaments, frozen near the edge, unable to advance any further.

Trapped by the openness of something new. Wanting to help, to be there but afraid to move. Hoping for someone else to come.

If I don't reach out she falls. Reaching out, we fall. Glinting certainty, smiled it's decay as death was promised for either one or two but was certainly promised. Her eyes clawed at me, reaching wide and far, to take a step, take a knee, take her hand while her hands unwillingly degraded the small, sandy ledge. Wearing ruts in virgin ground. I could only stand until she fell. As the ground to which she relentlessly clung eroded beneath her fingers my resolve to risk my life and save hers, eroded beneath my anchored feet. I spoke once as I turned to leave.

She screamed "Where are you going?"

"To catch you"

Such a brief time to have something to say

She gave orders

"You can't catch me from down there! Please my fingers,"

clawing, "I can't hang on," breathing, "Lie down on your stomach and give me your hand!"

My jaw dropped to speak, to explain I couldn't, to rationalize that the sand wouldn't hold and we would both fall. I tried to tell her I was afraid.

"What are you looking at? Save me!"

The orders launched, commanding me to act.

I wanted to, but couldn't.

Standing there, impotent, I could not feel the sun heating the ground at my feet. I could not see the grass lightly bending under the oblivious soft wind. My vision was focused only on her pleading eyes and the words being thrown from her mouth pelting me, scarring on contact, pulling at my shoulders, trying to drag me forward, trying to free the anchor from my legs. I could see only her. As she cried to me, the ground below called her name, I heard it beckoning, promising safety.

Looking down she heard it's plea and, back to me,

"Don't let me fall, my fingers..."

I know! My mouth only open, my mind screaming the words, You said that!

"I can't..."

ah.

breathe.

Release.

I could only move when I no longer heard her screaming, when I heard the sand below receive her.

I went to see her. I went to be the first to pay my respects.

I went to say I'm sorry.

No one was there to watch her, catch her; only the ground. I abdicated her debt to me by doing nothing. After her strength gave way, mine returned and I could go down. I could descend in

safety walking around the side of the cliff. Rounding the bend of the cliff hoping for movement but seeing only the result of my shame. I knelt beside her and cried. Cried for her life, cried for my impotence and inability. I sat with her, my hand resting on her forehead, blank eyes looking without condemnation, but I wondered. Had it been there during her fall, seething at me for my inaction or was there only confusion. Why?

Why didn't I move? Why did I only watch?

Company and accusers arrived to question with questions I could not answer.

"What happened?"

"She fell"

"I'm calling the police" and "From where"

I looked to the top of the cliff

"How" and "What's her name?"

"I don't know?" to both questions

"How could you not know? What the hell is that?"

I stared only at the horizon as the sun crushed the sky into open sea, repeating their questions in my mind.