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An Indifference to Death

On a summer day in my seven-year-old life, on the way back from the science museum, I was intrigued by a few quail chicks sold by the road. My grandfather couldn't resist my persistent pleading and finally agreed to buy two chicks from the vendor.

I went home full of ecstasy and released the chicks in our living room, watching happily as these tiny creatures explored my house.

On the other side of the living room, there was a bucket with a hole on the side: the home of a teenage-chick. He was the only survivor of a group of 4 chicks I got a month ago. One of my daily hobbies was to kick the bucket, poke my head over its edge on tiptoe, and watch him panicking in circles inside his den. Constant dripping wears the stone. Constant kicking wears the bucket so that there was now a hole on its side. The teenage-chick could poke his head through the hole I created, and I could have a game of whack-a-mole.

However, on this sunny afternoon, my attention was on the two new friends I got. They were so tiny that I could hold them in my seven-year-old palms, feel their warmth, and giggle as they stumbled away from me. *If I show them to the other chick across the room, maybe he'll welcome them into his house, and they'll become friends.*

I picked up one quail chick and dropped it into the bucket.

Many things can happen in a second. The quail chick screamed during its fall, drawing the teenage-chick's attention. He opened his beak and caught its neck in mid-air, then thrust it onto the bottom. With a few pecks, before I recognized what just happened, the quail chick was gone.

Furiously, I gave several hard kicks to the bucket, sending the teenage-chick close to learning how to fly. But nothing was left, not even blood. The quail chick was simply swallowed to its afterlife.

I was stunned, not because that cannibalism had just happened before my very eyes (which I only realized after a few days), but that even a young chick can eat meat.

I kept my distance from the teenage-chick until my grandfather came back. He frowned at the one remaining chick but did not say much before going into the kitchen. I stayed in the living room and, when it was time for dinner, called out to the remaining quail chick on the other side of the room.

After a few hours of playing, the chick was familiar with me enough that it ran towards my open hands across the living room, past the den of the teenage-chick.

It never reached me. The devil reached his head out of the hole and dragged it into the shadows.

I must have cried very loudly, for my grandfather rushed out of the kitchen and snatched the poor quail from the bucket. Unfortunately, its neck was already snapped.

I was full of sadness and hatred for the rest of that day, mourning the loss of my new friends and resenting the cruel teenage-chick that took them away from me.

But, when I think back upon this even years later, a chill still rises in my body: what was lurking in my mind when I was standing next to the bucket and leading the other quail chick towards its doom?

All humans are born evil, a legalist belief that I couldn't agree with more. There seems to be an innate cruelty that had accompanied me throughout my childhood. There's a difference between accidentally stepping on an ant and deliberately stomping on it; as a kid, I chose to tap dance on ant holes. Have you ever seen a cat climbing up a tree? I have, because I chased it there. I have had a lot of pets: two bunnies, two hamsters, a pair of parrots, seven turtles, eight chicks, a plate of silkworms, and countless fish. Almost all of them have suffered from my torture and some of them died because of me; most of the time, I wasn't even aware of the pain I had inflicted on them. I remember coming home from kindergarten one day, picking up a cocoon from the silkworm's plate, and squeezing the cotton-like shell because it felt good, until some dark brown liquid started oozing out from the inside, and I realized I had just made a kill.

Most of these deaths were accompanied by lots of tears, but as I became busy with school, these animals gradually faded from my life. I did not help take care of them too much, so their conditions did not bother me. After third grade, when our oldest turtle died at the age of 13 in his hibernation, I cried less and less.

After I came to the US for high school, my mom called me while I was in ninth grade, telling me that our turtle was dead. I only felt a little surprised, and the rest was numbness.

I was ruthless towards animals, but I was even crueller to myself. I refused to follow the stereotype of girls by making myself tougher than everyone. I took crying as a crime and treated wounds as if they were not there. When I learned to ride a bike, I fell so many times that my knees were black and blue for a month, but I would just get up and keep going, as if nothing had happened.

Once, when my friends and I were sitting on a rail by the stairs, I tipped over outwards, flipped in midair, and slammed my back hard on the side of the staircase. The concrete hit a certain acupuncture point on my back, and for three minutes I couldn't say a word as my friends panicked around me, asking if I was okay. After I explained that I was fine, we all went back to playing, as if nothing had happened.

In eleventh grade, I was jogging back from the gym after my physical and slipped in a muddy puddle in the parking lot. The rough concrete ground tore open the skins on my knees and covered it in mud. My roommate freaked out when she saw me hobbling towards the bathroom with blood flowing down my legs. The wounds were repeatedly festered and scarred for two weeks, but I just left them to themselves, as if nothing had happened.

My body could not take my nonchalant attitude, so it evolved to quickly heal whatever harm I inflicted on myself. Whether it was a sprained ankle or a mosquito bite or me pinching my arms unconsciously and leaving red nail marks all over my skin, they would all disappear in a day or two. Nevertheless, I used this as an advantage to care even less about myself, to not notice a scrape until a day later, and then to continue ignoring it.

As if nothing had happened.

When COVID struck, many boarders were constantly in fear of a COVID wave on campus that would take everyone down. Some disinfected everything in sight; some refused to leave their room; some washed their hands so often that the skin parched. It was reasonable, under such a pandemic, to be cautious and to take good care of oneself.

It was not reasonable for me to feel nothing and not care about myself.

I didn't really fear the pandemic. I wouldn't want to get it, of course, but it didn't scare me enough that I had to do something to protect myself. I still wore masks, sanitized my hands, and kept social distance, but only because I

didn't want to get COVID and pass it to my roommates. As for myself, it didn't really matter.

Once as a kid, when my dad broke my favorite toy out of his rage, I rushed towards the windowsill yelling, "I don't want to live anymore," before my mom grabbed me by the waist. I have no idea if I was brave enough to leap out of the building and end my life at six, but I knew at that moment, I was determined.

There is an innate self-loathing that usually remains buried deep inside of me. At night, when all memories of the day come back to me, when I remember all the silly things I've done, that hatred will awaken and hit me hard.

Although I don't seem to avoid death, I don't actively seek it either. *I don't like you*, I will commonly say to myself, *but get over it*.

One afternoon in late 2020, I went up the hill in the forest on our campus alone. The sun was lowering faster than I expected, and the woods were almost dead silent; all I could hear was the leaves crumpling under my feet and sliding down the incline. I reached the top of the hill, where a straight path extended along the mountain ridge, tempting me to continue my hike. But at that time, the shadows beneath my feet were almost twice my height, and with every second, the trees seemed grimmer.

A breeze blew through the branches, raising a rustling that slowly faded to silence. What if a coyote appeared behind that tree to my left and lunged at me? I began to think about how I would defend myself, how fast I needed to run, how long it would take for anyone to realize my absence...

I turned and walked back down the hill, following the leaves I kicked in front of me. When the fences of our softball field reappeared between the tree trunks, I let out a relieved sigh, then laughed. I finally realized that I still feared death after all, still could not hold my life so cheaply, and would still actively avoid danger to prevent my demise. I dared not risk my safety by taking the path at dusk; instead, I returned and left that part for another adventure. But that's a good thing: I treasured my life enough to make good decisions and lived for the future, not for the doom.

The pandemic has not ended. My self-loathing mind has not disappeared. I have not stopped digging my nails into my skin when I am bored.

But at least I know that deep down, I want to change my indifference to death, to fear it and thus savor each day, to understand the weight of life and to respect the living. And I'm not so incorrigible.