

Fear Collector

As a child I was a fear collector. Just as the other kids collected pins and stamps, picked up colorful bottle corks before the grocery store, foraged for unusual stones at the beach or bought used model cars at the flea market, I was assembling my vast collection of fears. I was constantly looking out for them, and when I saw one I grabbed it right away, shoved it under my shirt and ran home. There I took it in my hands, curiously feeling and smelling it then marking it and carefully putting it away with the other collected fears. I must have brought my first ones from the maternity ward already, pilfering a couple from my mom while she was breastfeeding, a couple from my dad while he was singing me lullabies. The fear of dark I probably found in my first abode on Brezovica, and the fear of abandonment in Vnanje Gorice where my parents put me in the nursery. I was about four or five when I stumbled upon the fear of big snarling dogs on a walk by the Kamniška Bistrica stream, and soon after, the fear of big snarling boys I came running home with from a playground in Polje where we'd moved from Brezovica. In darkness under the bedcovers, I quite unexpectedly discovered the small fear of death. What's going to happen when my mom is no longer around?, I asked it.

One summer at the boy scouts I caught a new fear every night. The fear of crashing waves, the fear of thunder, of howling wind. And then, the fear of loneliness. On the small island we were camping at, the world split into myself and the others, and in two weeks I was able to polish my fear-collecting skills to perfection. I saw them where none other could, some with eyes closed, some with eyes open, some I heard, while some were invisible and soundless and yet there for my awareness to sense. I was a born fear hunter, after all. Early on in school I located the fear of ridicule and of humiliation. Soon after, I spotted the fear of girls and the fear of rejection. Actually, these were all connected in a way. The rejection of a girl to a confessed romantic interest would of course be humiliating, and followed promptly by the ridicule of classmates. School was one big vicious circle of fears, and my collection kept on growing nicely. Fortunately my body was growing nicely, too, so I could store in it every last gathered fear, without discarding a single one.

In my collection were also fears growing with me. Such was the fear of showing fear. I think it was always part of my album, tiny at first, barely perceptible, but by high school grown into a fear so big it was knocking its head into door frames. In fact, I spent my whole high school in the fear of anyone unveiling my fears. Four years I obsessively hid my collection, I was a fear collector desperately trying to appear fearless. I must have looked funny I imagine, but the others were just as funny as me, we were all playing the same game after all.

By the end of adolescence, on my return journey from a prom trip to Crete, I came upon the fear of flying. I would likely have caught it earlier, but the last time I'd flown was back as a six-year-old child who let the fear slip, unable to identify anything unusual about the enormous plane just hanging in the air, defying gravity. The eighteen-year-old-me, though, peeked through the airplane window for just a moment and found his greatest fear yet in the infinite chasm stretching below. The terrific fear of flying differed from the other fears by having a precisely specified end, timed to a second. The moment the plane wheels touched the landing strip, the fear of flying evaporated, vanished as if it were never there, while the empty spot in my body was filled by one of the most pleasant sensations I'd ever known, comparable only to the excitement of being close to a girl crush. Dear passengers, we have landed at the airport ... were to my ears the most wonderfully melodious words. Before that, none of the fears could disappear so suddenly that its absence might envelop me so sensually. On

the plane, I was first able to feel the sudden absence of fear as something decidedly pleasant, even thrilling.

I felt something similar only a couple years later. It was in Morocco, my first longer journey, where I discovered the fear of crowds. Strolling the narrow lanes of the Casablanca medina, I felt the swarming throng of dark, foreign faces swallowing me. The Moroccan bazerdjani shouted over one another, and all were shouting over the adhan resounding from the nearby minarets, beckoning me to stop, pause and browse their shops, but to my ears their calls sounded like threats, chasing me off, unsettling me. I felt trapped in a gargantuan human mass, helplessly carried along by the crowd from one alley to another. Perhaps it was also a fear of the other, of the unknown, but I didn't quite want to acknowledge it then.

In the Rabat medina the fear kept on growing. Chaos and noise, a strange mixture of the familiar, the bascarsiac and the alien, new, the insecurity driving my fingers to constantly feel around for the valuables in my pant pockets and backpack, and the still-present childish need for keeping up appearances of fearlessness, all this was too much and the fear began swelling into a panic. I tried running from the deafening screams and scents invading my nostrils, ripping away from the multitude of bodies threading on me. In a sense it was enticing, surreal, moving, but even more it was terrifying and I soon looked only for an escape from the labyrinth of streets and alleys, shadowy, meandering and blind ones.

I can't remember how I found my way from the medina to the Hassan Tower, but as I walked among the supportive pillars of the unfinished mosque and the city behind me fell silent, in a moment, like during a plane landing, the fear of the urban pandemonium was cut short within me as well. I remember it vividly, that feeling. There was peace all around me, the most serene calm, and I was unusually peaceful within, too. I was secure, safe from everyone and everything. Being on holy grounds, in the middle of an empty open space with but a few quiet, motionless visitors, webbed and enshrouded with the silent prayers of the faithful, I erroneously recognized in that instant calmness my first spiritual experience, though in the cool afternoon shade of the Hassan Tower I could almost feel the peace in a physical way altogether. It glided along my skin, relaxing and lulling me to sleep, pulling me closer. The rush of time, of people, of sounds and images all came to a halt. I was still young, still trying to see minute, inexplicable miracles in everything I experienced, without effort to fully bring my emotions to consciousness, unwilling to tie the epiphany of Hassan Tower to the sudden absence of fear. I willfully refused the possibility that the light filling up my being was merely the absence of anguished darkness.

Next year I added the fear of all fears to my fear collection. The great terror of death. Behind me was an autumn that had massacred my self-image of a future successful director. I was only allowed to advance to my third year of studies in film and television direction by the guilty conscience of careless and absent professors, who felt themselves co-responsible that my first film was also the first-ever film in the history of the academy officially deemed unworthy of public screening. The fear of all fears was thus, now I know, found precisely there, at the editing desk in the school basement on which I had been rerolling my film reel the entire summer, looking for a film in it. But on that reel were, as the late professor Franci Slak said so vividly and without mercy, only images fit for accompanying an afternoon television segment.

For a long while I believed I'd picked up the fear of death by mistake, that it was by mere chance I'd started contemplating the ultimate nothing beyond, the eternity after my expiry, infinity, those trillions of years that will keep on running, keep on passing without me regardless. In there somewhere it was hiding, lurking, lying patiently in wait for me to recklessly trip against it, I'd reckoned, and when we finally found one another we became inseparable. Months on end I sank into a bleak and desolate void, at times crawling into it on purpose, as if trying to reach the bottom of my anxiety, to burrow my way through to the other side of fear. Still other times I tried tricking the fear, losing myself in something, at times succeeding, there were also days without the gravity.

Even in the worst days though, I was yet able, largely by chance, to invent things that soothed me, unpeeling me from the bottom. Most of these I have forgotten, in fact I can recall only one, a seemingly banal ritual, the evening viewing of the Seinfeld sitcom transporting me into another, better, in particular a more joyful and lighthearted life. The company of Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine was relaxing the same way it had been relaxing to look at carefree fellow passengers who aren't thinking about a potential plane crash, and I long kept returning to those evening sessions in my mind, trying to understand why Seinfeld had had the effect on me it did.

I suspect it wasn't the clever humor or my sympathy for the four eccentric regular Joes but their fictitious lives that did it, aside from the virtual allure of living in New York rather off-putting, almost boring, but especially not much better, not so much different from my own. But in the life of Jerry Seinfeld and his friends what lacked was, as is so often the case on television, the burden of passing time. Seinfeld on Tuesday was the Seinfeld on Thursday, and the Jerry in season two was the same Jerry from season four. Nothing moved in the grand scheme of things, and no one was in particular hurry. Daily life on the screen was frozen in time, as if Jerry, Elaine, Kramer and George weren't aware of their past seasons, or cognizant of the fact that one day, their last episode was inevitably about to come.

That was what I was subconsciously craving, at least it seems so today. The carelessness flaunted by the four friends in the face of daily struggles, their stoic cheer, defying in my mind's eye of the time so cheekily the fatefulness of clocks and calendars. Each night at the same time I could turn on my TV and for a good twenty minutes contract their magical frivolousness, dissociating from my fears. For a moment in time, they helped me escape my collection.

When I look back at days following my year of gloom, it seems at first glance that this was precisely what I had won in the struggle with myself and others. A seemingly plain, monotonous life enriched by light-mindedness. I conquered for myself an everyday in which I am able to persist though nothing groundbreaking happens. And usually, it doesn't. It seems like in my past fifteen years, I scattered fear after fear all around, like the ashes of the dead. Some left without notice, some I must have outgrown, and some, say like the fear of flying, I wrestled with fiercely until I drove them away. The fear collector was left without his collection.

It took me thirty years to live without fear, and I happen to think that at age thirty-seven I'm living in the echo of its departure. The peace I feel is close to the peace I felt sitting by Hassan Tower in Rabat. More than the presence of something, my peace is the absence of insecurity, of doubt, the absence of clear and present danger. I no longer keep checking my valuables in the fear of losing them, I no longer stand guard against potential threats. If I once refused to believe that light might simply be the absence of darkness, I now allow the possibility my happiness was found in the absence of fear.

A film colleague many times told me that a man needs the approval of his environment, that he's lost without it, and though I didn't really believe him, and still don't, I also have to say I can't refute his stance with conviction. Personally, I can't establish how big of a role in my liberation from fear was played by my surroundings' recognition of me as a director and then as a writer, what part of my current self-image was thus created by the external approval and my consequent faith that I am able, capable, that I can. I don't know whether my success as a writer –success in the blind eyes of our introverted space naturally– was essential for shedding my fears and anxiety, though it was certainly welcome.

In truth I'm much more tormented by the persistence of another question: What if my life, as I live it now, is merely a gradually learned skill of fear avoidance? What if my reality is one big evasion of uncertainty? What if, to crown my fear collection, I finally added the fear of fear itself, the most paralyzing of fears?

Did I not cling to the habits and jobs that eased my unrest? Did I not, knowing myself, learn to quickly give up anything that might cause me disquiet? Was I not consciously staying in safe and comfortable spaces? Was I not, in all things, equal to my generation whose convenience I frequently criticized? Was my conformism not, at its core, just as cowardly as theirs? What is conformism if not deference to small and big fears, surrender due to lack of will, lack of courage. Is it not so that each of us, at some point in our lives, crystallizes within their own collection of fears, solidifies in that moment in which a way to coexist with them is developed? Isn't that what we have in mind when we say we're living life our own way? The way around our fears?

The illusion –which, I must confess, for a while even filled me with pride– that the child who had collected fears grew into a fearless man, brave and courageous, daring to delve into the unknown, to cross boundaries and tear down walls, has over the years returned to dust, and now I know my courage and bravery were mere subterfuge, a cloak I wore in my struggle for a better life as I'd once worn my basketball jersey before a match. I played my fearlessness like I played a game of basketball, I even believed in it for a while, especially after the publication of my debut novel when I was sprinkled with compliments and attributed near-mythical grit. In truth, I was always just feeling my way around the dark, seeking my source of light, my little piece of comfort, my small peace; in truth I sought refuge in my current life from all those terrible other potential lives, whose idea alone scared me out of my wits.

I tend to prod myself with the question, thus, how I would have lived were I truly fearless, unable to so precisely predict the consequences of my actions. Willing to live anything, anywhere, with anyone. Would I find, I wonder, on the other side of all fear that true essential light that illuminates me beyond recognition? I prod myself with this question, and then I feel like my fear collection has received another. The fear of answering it.