

Lions, They're Trying to Eat Me

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 Editorial

 Supplemental content

I rested my head on the steering wheel, wrapping my arms around the sides. The tears flowed freely down my cheeks. A parked car is one of the best places to cry I found out. I had also cried in the shower, on the couch, and—the worst place of all—on the floor of my bedroom underneath the whiteboard hanging on the wall. I liked crying in the car best because it gave the illusion that I needed the privacy. Sobbing loudly in the middle of my apartment where, still, no one would hear or be able to comfort me reinforced the reason I was crying in the first place: I felt exhausted and alone with no one to help me.

The transition to medical school was harder than I ever expected it to be, compounded by the fact that I had no friends or family in the area, no roommate, recently broke up with my boyfriend, and had little avenues for building new social support systems given the state of the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Orientation was planned and canceled. Lake weekend was replaced with a Zoom call. The first day of class was nothing more than sitting at my plastic dining room table in a dimly lit apartment. No bustling to find a seat in a classroom. No wondering which faces in the class would turn out to be my friends. No swinging by the podium after class to say “hi” to the professor. No asking

the person sitting next to me if they wanted to eat lunch together. Just me, my laptop, and a class of 200 people.

I tried to make the most of it. I took notes in a fresh notebook during orientation. I danced on Zoom during lake weekend to try to be part of a tradition. I dressed up in business casual on the first day of class, even though no one would see beneath my collarbone. My optimism and willpower quickly faded. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea what other people were doing. I was used to being a thorough student, completing all required and most suggested assignments. I thought I was getting ahead by watching preparatory modules a few days ahead of class, but after only three days into the first semester I felt irredeemably behind. On the fourth day of class and my first day of our Patient Centered Care course, I hit a wall, breaking down in my car on the way to class. I hadn't done the assigned readings. How was I expected to when I could barely keep up with watching the lectures, much less learning and memorizing all their content? And now I was expected to master the art of clinical skills on top of it all. Everyday felt like a fresh new wave designed specifically to knock me down, like surfing in a hurricane.

I longed for someone to confess to, for someone to witness me in this storm and offer me a life vest of hope, or for someone to simply say, “Me too.”. But there wasn't anyone. Just me, my laptop, and a class of 200 people as seemingly unknowable as

the uncertain future.

I wandered around my parking lot at midday for my daily walk. Otherwise, known as the only place I could go with restaurants and indoor spaces closed. How long had it been since I had spoken to someone face-to-face? Maybe the grocery store cashier two days ago. How long since I'd seen someone smile at me without a screen separating us? I couldn't remember. Social isolation will make you irrational. It will do weird things to your thoughts.

"If something happened to me, who would drive me to the emergency department?"

"If I died in my apartment, how long would it take for someone to notice? Who would that person be?"

I was no more likely to be the victim of a tragedy than at any other point in my life, only this time my evolutionary instinct to surround myself with a tribe kicked in. I wish my evolutionary instinct would shut up.

Time passed and a small miracle happened during fall break. I found someone who wanted to go to Asheville with me. Amber. Amber and I had briefly talked once about our shared interest in plants. Other than that, I didn't know much about her. She expressed interest in exploring Asheville together, but would she be comfortable driving in a car together? Would she insist we wear masks and ride with the car windows open? Would she want to drive separately altogether? Or would she think I was silly for even asking? Or worse, would she think me reckless to entertain the thought of potentially exposing ourselves to one another? Social isolation will make you irrational. It will do weird things to your thoughts.

I was relieved beyond belief to learn that she would, in fact, be comfortable carpooling and staying in the same AirBnB. She was willing to be exposed to me. Quite literally unmasked. Something I never would have thought twice about before. Something I held sacred now.

Amber welcomed me into her pod physically when we decided it would be okay for us to breathe the same air — a saving grace all of its

own, to speak with someone in person, to see their smile. But Amber didn't only welcome me, she remembered me daily.

"Hey! I'll be studying for the rest of the day if you want to join me on Zoom."

"Want to Zoom study with me?"

"It's okay if you say no, but I just wanted to invite you to study on Zoom together"

"I'm Zooming!"

She didn't know, but each and every time I picked myself off the floor, couch, or steering wheel, dried my eyes and said a prayer of gratitude for a friend that wouldn't let my evolutionary instinct lie to me. I would not be eaten by a lion. Not with Amber.

Still, each day dragged on mercilessly, but eventually Thanksgiving was around the corner. I wanted nothing more than to go home and be surrounded by my tribe, my family. Then with the worst possible timing, the universe played a cruel trick. The week before I was set to go home, my mother contracted COVID-19. I was heartbroken and worried, but also more exhausted, frustrated, and angry than ever. Anger gave way to despair. No home for me. No tribe for me.

Even with the reprieve that Amber provided, I continued to struggle under the burden of isolation. I was struggling to wake up and see the point of getting out of bed. Struggling to find the energy to take a shower and change out of pajamas. Struggling to get off the couch and drink water even when I knew I was dehydrated. With seemingly mundane tasks weighing me down, succeeding academically seemed like a far-fetched goal. Who could imagine understanding and memorizing the complement cascade pathways when this way of life didn't feel worth living?.

I talked to my CAPS counselor about it all each week. Typically, I told her what was going well and what was not working, and she offered a listening ear and a few suggestions. I had a particularly hard week after failing the cardiology midterm by just one question. It felt demoralizing to fail yet another exam, and injected self-doubt into every thought.

"I don't know how to be well AND do well"

"Maybe you should consider taking a leave of absence"

I paused. Her suggestion blindsided me. I felt like I got hit by a truck rounding a corner. All of my fears were confirmed in that one sentence. Objective evidence that I wasn't cut out for this and wouldn't make it. I began to cry. She waited silently on the other end of my screen. She suggested I talk to my college advisor about it. I said ok. We hung up. I drove to my clinical skills encounter final exam while crying.

Immediately after my filmed CSE that I knew my instructor would watch and grade, I emailed him to inform him of the state of mind I was in going into it. He was kind and understanding. He gave me his personal cell phone number and offered to talk to me on his day off. I accepted.

"Hey, how are you doing?," he said sweetly. "It sounds like things maybe aren't going so well, huh?"

His gentleness and care comforted me. He said everything I needed to hear.

"I know it's difficult, but I have been teaching this class a long time and you're right on track. I watched your encounter and I'll tell you right now that you passed the CSE final. But if you don't want to do this, just know that you don't have to be a doctor to be worth something. Plenty of people have many other fulfilling jobs. You don't have to be a doctor. But if you want to, you can. If you can get through the cardiology block, you will already have finished the first semester and the hardest part."

I was grateful to be on the phone so he couldn't see the tears running down my face. He believed in me. All I had to do was get through the cardiology block. Maybe I could do it, and maybe I couldn't. I would accept the outcome either way.

I called my college advisor, as my counselor suggested. His only advice for me was to exercise more to help with mental health. I scoffed at the idea as a surface-level attempt to put a band-aid on

a bullet wound. I wanted to wallow in self-pity that there was nothing I, or anyone, could do to help. But I was tired of despair. Despair wasn't working. So, I channeled it into spite. I would prove to the world that everyone's advice was useless and all the resources offered were unhelpful. I didn't believe that anything was going to improve my academic performance or bring joy back into my life, but I resolved that by the time I was done, no one would be able to come up with one suggestion I hadn't tried. No one could say I gave up. No one could say I hadn't given my all. No one could say this was my fault.

The next day began my new workout routine. I would alternate between running and walking every day, no matter the weather conditions, and no matter how early I had to wake up to get it done. My new routine forced me to get out of bed because I had something to do. Then it forced me to take a shower. Taking a shower forced me to get dressed and not stay in pajamas all day. Maybe my college advisor did know what he was talking about after all...

Running became a source of strength and power for me. Realistically, a 5th grader could have easily outrun me, but in my mind, as long as I was fighting through the run, I could fight through the rest too. One song in particular became an anthem for me, and the bridge my mantra.

"I know that I can fight or I can let the lion win!" I screamed while jogging, not caring in the slightest who might hear me. My feet continued to slap the floor as my heart beat vigorously. It was a cold day with little sun shining through the thick cloud coverage. "I begin to assemble what weapons I can find!" I shouted as I clenched my fists with nails digging into my palms. "'Cause sometimes to stay alive you gotta kill your mind!" And I realized that was exactly what I was doing. What began out of spite, became a process of exhausting every possible resource available to me. I would do everything in my power to fight.

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