

The Year Death Didn't Take Me

Negar Banakar

As I gripped the steering wheel and dug back into the seat, the pronounced burnt rubber smoke singed my throat. And yet, I could not move. I closed my eyes, only for a moment, to process whether what I thought had happened actually occurred. Perhaps it had been my imagination.

In the action movies my dad made me watch as a preteen, there were always people doing back flips on moving vehicles, characters yielding swords as if they had been born slashing villains' limbs, and furiously fast car chases. In all of those movies, the hero would always stealthily jump out of the beaten up (and often shot up) sports car, brush off the dust from their leather jacket, and stroll off into the sunset, unscathed.

My eyes flickered open to the sight of two girls peering into my driver's window, assessing whether to call for the jaws of life. I nodded an acknowledgement with a smile that was reassuring only because they didn't know me. In an effort to relieve their stress – especially as one of them was calling 911 – I attempted getting out of my light blue Yaris, only to realize that the door had been compressed. It took two of us to open it wide enough for me to stumble out.

I started taking a turn around my car, barely noticing the traffic. The little blue hatchback was in the right lane but facing the other lanes of the busy street. The noises blurred into the background as I took in the mangled bumper that was lying on the street, hanging by a thread of metal to what was once the engine. The entirely pressed metal underneath seemed to be breathing in relief at no longer moving, even as the blinkers pressed an orange presence onto the grim sight. It was only then that I noticed the airbag had been deployed.

There was another car that was further ahead, and past the shoulder of the road going onto the hillside. I wondered whether his car was only stopped by the slope...how fast had he been going when he hit me?

In a shuddering flood, the peripheral angle replay came to me. I saw the silver sedan rushing closer and closer, even as the car spun and spun before coming to a crashing stop. If my breathing wasn't as shallow, or if my head was less numb, I probably would have chuckled at my own play on words. But I was dazed and didn't laugh.

I did call a friend to pick me up. I did wait for the police officers. I did provide a statement. I did empty my car so the city tow truck could break the hanging metals off and lug my car, which was barely rolling. I did call the insurance company and report the accident.

The next day, I spent much of my waking hours trying to ignore what happened. I got a ride to work with a colleague and began the day in as much of a hustle as any other Friday morning. During my lunch break, my insurance adjuster called and gave me many pieces of information I would not remember in my state of exhaustion and pain. It was apparent that he recognized my disbelief and was perhaps even used to individuals in such states. He patiently clarified that he was assigned to my case as part of the “total loss” department. Even then, the truth didn’t sink in.

That night, I was very lucky. I had no idea that I could have been hit six seconds later and been paralyzed. I also had no idea that the world was about to change. In fact, it had already begun the process and like that accident, I had been too numb to realize it. That very day, the virus had entered the city. In another eight days, all schools would close down. And another five days after that, the entire country would shutter their doors for nine weeks.

It would take a whiplash diagnosis, two bruised ribs, a few bruises, and many days for me to finally admit how close I had been to death. That warm March night, with the clear road, and a freakish accident I had never thought possible outside of a movie set, death had been less than a metre away.

It would take much more to come to terms with the “new normal”, which didn’t feel normal at all. It would take hundreds of litres of hand sanitizer, face shields, masks, physical distancing, and the ultimate moral dilemma indefinitely running through my mind when approaching any social situation for years to come.

Yet death walked away.

And together, so could we.

Footnote: The novel virus that wreaked global havoc in 2020 was contagious. Beyond the virus itself, the fear and uncertainty it brought were even more infectious. 2020 was the year that many people realized the injustices our elderly population faced in long term care homes. 2020 was the year that anxiety forced individuals to take their own lives. 2020 was the year that separated families and friends. 2020 was the year that shut down the economy of the entire world. But 2020 was also the year that brought a community spirit to the global village. It was the year that reminded families how precious time together would be. It was the year that held the world captive, with a singular hope in thoughts and prayers, to spare the rest of the population. It was the year that death took one million people. And another 700% more than would normally have died. It was the year that divided, but provided a window for union, too.



Negar teaches English at the Secondary level and enjoys engaging in writing, translating, and reading alongside her students. She believes that introspection and existential writing allows for rich, meaningful communication and relationships in life. We are all made of stories and must empower ourselves to write our own.