

Exclusive Club

BY DAVID BARISH

The street is bustling. I am walking the three blocks from a parking garage to my office on a warmish and sunny late Winter day. Humanity is in a hurry. Vehicles are striving to reach their destinations. Bicycles are whizzing in between the cars. People, wearing some of the spring clothes they either just bought or just fished out of storage, are bouncing on the sidewalks. Cups of coffee are held, hats have been left at home, purses, briefcases, backpacks, bags and sacks of all sizes, shapes and designs are shouldered, carried, hoisted and schlepped. The urban mise en scene is painted with faces of all colors on the palette and with bodies of all sizes, ages and abilities.

I look about and my usual reaction of smiling and taking in the scope of it all is not there. My eyes mist and my heart is heavy. I do not see beauty but see an exclusive club. I see people with plans for the weekend, hopes for the future, relationships to ponder, tasks to finish and social media to check. Your membership in this exclusive club is tenuous. You do not have the energy to view this panorama of people. You are lying in a bed in a hospice, coping with incredible pain and likely removed from the musings on joy you have shared with the world in your blog for the past few years. My awareness of your location and of your condition mutes my ability to process any of the joy or delight that is so clearly present on this vibrant and energetic street.

The exclusive club claims to be non-discriminatory with equal access for all. Standing at a corner waiting for the light I sense the randomness of membership. I think of the callous way some are thrown out of this club simply because they got sick or were living in the wrong country, riding in the wrong car or walking down the wrong street. I think of the pain, both emotional and physical for those who lose membership and for those who ache for missing friends and loved ones. I think of violent, quiet, disease related, criminally induced and sometimes inexplicable ways in which this exclusive club is closed to all of us at some point whether membership has been long or short. I think I feel the pain that often comes when being thrown out of the club but know it is empathy not real pain. That real pain whether blood is escaping, a cell is multiplying or oxygen is difficult to access is temporary compared with the reality of being excluded from that club and from walking down this beautiful street sensing the warmer days to come and the reality that you will not be sharing those days with your friends and loved ones.

How often have I taken my membership for granted, daring myself to be excommunicated whether by taking a foolish risk or failing to heed a doctor's recommendation or simply wanting to come close to the edge. I wonder if I will get to a point where old, tired and fulfilled I can neatly bundle my membership documents and place them on a table so they can be returned. I tremble thinking about those same documents being snatched from my hands as I futilely grab for them. Will you hold on tight as you have over the past year, your iron grip and your blond determination refusing to yield to the malicious cells that invaded your female anatomy, will you simply let your fingers go slack or, will your fingers give way because the pain prevents you from holding on?

I've voiced my protest. The membership committee does not seem to care. A demonstration was held on your behalf, there have been quite a few protestors. We don't carry signs or chant, We simply bow our heads and bring good wishes, We want to be around you, while we can, while you are still in the club. What power do we have, other than to let you know how painful it is to us to see you leave the club? "Painful?" you might think, "you have no idea." Yes, you are right. We don't have any idea. We are still able to feel pain and although that can be strangely reassuring. It doesn't hurt any less.

The street is bustling on a cooler late winter day but I feel alone. I see lunch hour traffic and people in a hurry to get somewhere. Oblivious to the buzz, I feel the emptiness that has been left in your wake. A few weeks have passed and so have you. Your membership was summarily revoked. You barely had enough time for the flood of friends and family who came to see you the day after you found out that all appeals had been exhausted. I regret thinking I would get to visit the following week and not getting a chance to see you one more time. I hold on tight to the memories shared a few days after you left, when we all brought a dish, showed pictures, told stories and hugged each other.

The street is bustling and I feel vulnerable and wonder if I am still part of the bustle. If a car misses a turn, if something falls from a building, if I get jostled onto the street, if my heart explodes or if my cells, like yours, decide to run amok, I may lose my membership. I have so many things to do, bills to pay, people to call, clients to help, stories to tell, miles to ride, children to love, but could stop doing those things all of the sudden or perhaps with a slow withdrawal, or perhaps like you after guerilla warfare with small victories and false hopes. I believe... I tell myself, "no, this will not happen to me." but then again, it wasn't supposed to happen to you.