

A photograph of a restaurant interior. In the upper center, the word "RELAX" is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters. The background is filled with warm, out-of-focus lights, creating a bokeh effect. In the foreground, a table is partially visible with a glass, a bottle, and a small vase with a white flower. The overall atmosphere is cozy and intimate.

RELAX

Aren't You Afraid Of Death?

Brittany Gates

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The two men sit at a table in the back of an empty neighborhood bar, the early afternoon sunlight filtering through thin white curtain drawn shut. Periodically a shadow travels along the curtains as a stranger walks along the sidewalk next to the bar.

The chunky wooden table with thick coating of lacquer holds two cocktail glass tumblers filled with a few ice cubes and a brown liquid and a bottle of Glenfiddich scotch whisky. The classic, armless wooden chairs holding the men creaks when they move.

The man to the left of the table packs tobacco into a straight pipe. After sticking the pipe into his mouth, the man pats the outside of his unbutton navy sports jacket before sticking his right hand into the the inside left pocket. He pulls out a matchbook, flips it open his right hand, tears out a match with his left hand, and strikes the match against the back of the book. The man gently places the lit match on top of the tobacco in his pipe, sucking in air. After lighting his pipe he waves his hand holding the match, extinguishing the flame.

The man to the right of the table nestles himself against the back rungs of the chair, resting his right leg on the knee of his left leg. He rubs his thumb and fingers together on his right hand.

After savoring the tobacco with his eyes closed, the man opens his eyes, looks over to his partner, and says: "What was your question again, Louis?"

"You forgot already, Peter?"

"Well, yes. I was thinking more about my pipe and that scotch over there."

Louis smiles as he drops his head back, causing his blue eyes to appear a brighter hue and his thin, blonde mustache to nearly disappear under his broad nose.

"My question was this: Aren't you afraid of death?"

"Oh that. Yes, I remember now. No. No, I am not," Peter says as he points his brown eyes at Louis.

"You said that so calmly, like it was nothing. Maybe you haven't fully thought through my question?"

Deep lines emerge on Peter's forehead as he narrows his glance. "Why would you say a thing like that? Of course I've thought your question through. You're not the first person to ask me that."

"Oh, is that right," Louis asks as he uncrosses his legs and leans forward in his chair. "Who was the first person to ask you?"

"Me. I asked myself."

"Why would you do that? Oh God! Peter, you're not sick are you? Do you have a terminal illness?"

Peter shakes his head before inserting his pipe to take another puff.

"What?"

"Again, you always think the negative when I say something. Why must you be like that?"

Louis is quiet for a few seconds, his head and his eyes pointed at the oak color laminate floor, mulling over the question. When he returns his attention to Peter he opens his mouth but utters nothing.

"I'll answer the question for you: It's because you're a negative person, Louis."

"Oh come on!"

Louis bolts up from his chair but Peter's firm grip on his right hand stops Louis from leaving. He starts the motion to pull away but catches himself, settling back down into the chair. The pair look at each other - Louis' tan face tight with anger and Peter's baggy face confident with restraint - preparing for another round in their conversation.

"Take a sip of your drink," commands Peter.

Louis grabs his glass and downs the liquor in one gulp. After he replaces the tumbler onto the table Louis grabs the bottle of scotch and pours some into his glass.

"Louis, I mean no offense by my words so don't get upset like that. Seeing the truth in oneself is hard to comprehend, let alone reveal. I went through it myself some time back. I ran away at first, just like you tried to do, but I didn't have anyone to hold me still, to make me face the truth. You're a negative person and that's all right. Just face it."

"You're mean," Louis seethes. "You're a mean person who likes to hurt others."

After taking a long pull from his pipe, exhaling the smoke away from his body, Peter says: "Do you think I get pleasure from this?"

Louis nods vigorously, his blonde locks bobbing with the movement.

"You're wrong."

"Tell em how."

Peter takes the pipe out of his mouth and holds it in his right hand as he sets it on top of his crossed legs. He smooths back his salt and pepper hair with his other hand.

"Louis, realizing the truth in oneself or someone else doesn't give me pleasure. Actually, if a person gets pleasure from this exercise then he or she is sick. When one must confront the truth, again, in oneself or someone else, that person must ready himself or herself for pain."

"I don't understand."

"Just a minute ago you were angry with me and almost left this bar, all because I said you are a negative person. That truth caused you pain, and it caused pain for me too because I knew it would hurt your feelings. But I had to say it anyway."

"Why? Couldn't you just not say anything?"

Peter's free hand goes up in exasperation: "And what would that gotten you? Oh, yes, I would've spared your feelings but the damage to come later, even much later, would be greater than your hurt feelings now."

"So, you were looking out for me?"

"Exactly!"

"But I don't want to be what you say I am."

“First, I’m not putting anything on you that’s not already there. Second, if you don’t like who you are or what you’re doing then change.”

“How can I do that? You make it sound so easy but change is hard.”

Peter nods with a smile as he leans forward to grab his glass and takes a sip. He sets the tumbler onto his lap next to his pipe.

“That’s correct because humans hate change until they see the benefits. However, the process of change is easy to start. All we have to do is start small.”

“Let’s start then. What’s the first step?”

“To do so I have to go back to your original question and show you how I was able to answer you so calmly. You asked me aren’t I afraid of death and at first I was. I was deathly afraid of it, pun intended.”

Louis chuckles and Peter exposes his yellow-ish teeth from smiling.

“First, I was afraid of the pain of death. There are many ways to die and they all have some type of pain attached, be it physical or mental or both. I ran away from that fear by hoping to die in my sleep. Many people hope for that because they have the same fear as me. Yet, over time, I made myself look at that fear, at the yoke around my neck, only to realize I could cast it off anytime. Do you want to guess why?”

“I don’t know. Did you realize your fear was uncalled for?”

“You’re almost right. I realized life was pain. That I, and everyone else in the world, go through this pain everyday. And some deal with more pain than others. Yet, we don’t fear life. We understand this pain is part of our existence. So it must be part of death. Again, some will have a tremendous amount of pain in death, while others will have very little.”

Louis looks away and shakes his head. When he returns his attention to Peter he says:

“I wish your explanation would calm that fear in me too but it doesn’t.”

“Give it time. Change is not quick and the journey is long. I had to make myself face this pain and this fear everyday until one day I found it was gone from my mind. Then I could tackle the next one.”

“The next one,” Louis exclaims, leaning forward in his chair.

Peter laughs jovially, readjusting himself in his chair. “Oh yes, I had several. You do too. Everyone has.”

Peter takes a sip of his drink as Louis grabs for his. He gulps a good portion of the scotch.

“What was your next fear about death?”

“I wondered what would happen afterwards. This is an irrational fear, however, because I will be dead and I don’t have to worry about anything anymore. Yet, I found myself thinking about it more and more.”

“Did you worry about who would take care of your family? Or how your affairs would be handled? Things like that?”

“Yes. But then I started worrying about stupid stuff, like if people would remember me. Or if people would come to my funeral. And if the words I said and the things I did would influence others long after I’m gone. Basically, I feared people would forget me after my death.”

“But you have children and books in print and interviews on tape. I think that would alleviate that fear, no?”

“I thought so too, at first,” Peter says after he takes a pull from his pipe. “And that fear went away for awhile. But it came back later as my children grew up and gained more independence. Then the realization hit me that they wouldn’t need at all me soon. And one day they would have their own families and their focus will rightfully shift to their children. I would move to the back of their mind.”

“Yeah, that happens to everyone that has kids. I look at it as your children are your legacy, and you will live on through them after your death.”

“They are part of me, yes, Louis, but my children *aren’t* me. They are their own people, with their own goals and dreams and legacies to create.”

“Yeah, you got a point there. What about your books and interviews, then? Those you created and they are wholly you.”

“True. But books go out of print and interviews get lost or recorded over or deleted.”

“Peter, It sounds like you never found a solution to this fear. And it sounds like you can’t. Well, maybe I can’t,” Louis says and finishes the rest of his drink.

“It does, doesn’t it? But I discovered how to alleviate this fear and it was so simple. The answer was staring me in the face. I finally realized that we all are forgotten eventually because we’re not meant to live forever.”

Louis replies with a confused look on his face as he reaches over to set his tumbler onto the table.

“Hear me out: If humans continue to remember their deceased loved one, strangers, just anyone, forever and ever, then how could they move on? They couldn’t. I don’t want that for my children, yours, or anyone. Let me be forgotten so the world can continue.”

“I, I don’t want to be forgotten.”

Peter was about to take a sip of his drink when he stops his hand in mid-air and stares at Louis: “That’s the realest feeling you expressed so far during our conversation. Frankly, even though I’m fine with knowing this truth, I don’t want to be forgotten either. But I will. You will. We all will. And that is life.”

“So how did all of this help you not be afraid of death?”

Peter gulps down the rest of his drink, setting the glass onto the table. He check his pipe before stuffing it into his mouth between his teeth and cheek but doesn’t smoke it. He uncrosses his legs and stretches them out fully, rubbing his knees in a circular motion with both hands slowly.

“I decided to look forward to what comes after death. I believe in the afterlife and dying in this world doesn’t equal a forever death. Yes, I’m dead in this world but I will be alive in the next. Do you understand?”

Louis nods. "You want to see what's on the 'other side,' so to speak."

"Oh God yes! And the price of admission is to feel the pain of death, be it short or long, and cast off the desire of remembrance."

Peter smokes his pipe lazily as Louis pours both of them another drink. The men stare off at different points of the bar as he enjoy the hum of the conversation from a couple sitting at the bar, their growing buzz from the alcohol, and the ambiance surrounding them.

"The way you explained it made me slightly happy," Louis says, restarting the conversation. "I feel the pang of fearing death subsiding a little."

"Then you're on your way to being completely free of it."