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Non-Fiction

Paris

The evening I found out the news, I had just finished reading sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I was writing my next essay on romantic love in her sonnets. I was sitting on the floor of the hallway/small living room, leaning against the couch. A few of my friends were across from me on the chairs and couch. The hallway on the ground floor was a popular place for homework, as was the kitchen and the couches in the other living room. The large Victorian home, although seeming small at times when all 40 students were home for dinner, still had some nice hidey holes for homework and hangouts. We were the few who were not taking that Friday night off from writing our next essays.

I was studying abroad at Oxford University for the fall of 2015 in Oxford, England. I lived with students, all from the U.S. (and one Canadian!) from various Christian colleges. It was November now, and we had become a very tight knit group. It was the best group of people I had ever been around.

I was excited because the next day, Elissa Branum and I were going to the National Doctor Who Convention. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I was able to go only because my boyfriend had paid the \$100 for the entrance ticket because I didn't have the money. We had planned it for months. We were going to get our picture taken on a movie set and see Peter Capaldi, Mark Gatiss, and Jenna Louis Coleman in person, as well as other amazing things.

So that had led to me doing homework that Friday evening so I could spend all day out. However, I had gotten done what I needed and decided to check my email before heading off to

an early bed. We had to leave at 5 a.m. if we wanted to get there close to when the doors opened so we could get good seats in the first panel.

I was thinking of the fun we would have tomorrow when I opened up my web browser and pulled up my school email. I obsessively check my email at least every hour, if not twice an hour every day. I love to get emails. So, before going to bed, I logged into my school email and that's when I saw it: "Paris Update."

It was a short email from the Provost. Words jumped out at me: "tragic incident," "attack," "safe," "developments," "lost loved ones." I was afraid to Google the story, but at the same time, I needed to know what the Provost was talking about. It was 10:30 p.m. A sinking suspicion hit me hard: someone had blown up something.

Unfortunately, it was much worse. News headlines flashed before my eyes as I scanned one, then the next quickly, trying to make sense of what happened. "At least 120 dead." "Violent attacks." "Suicide bombs." The list went on. The Bataclan Theater had been hit while a concert was going on. It was the worst of several. Several cafés and bars had been attacked. A stadium where a football game was going on had been hit first. So far, eight places had been hit at intervals throughout the night. We had no way of knowing if the attacks were still going on. Some of the places had many deaths and injuries, and some had hardly any. No one knew yet how many were dead. Terrorists, the news said. ISIS, another source speculated.

I had to stop reading. The news sites were starting to post videos and pictures. As much as I wanted to know what was going on, I was panicking.

First thought.

I was in Oxford, England, right across the Channel from France, 412 kilometers (256 miles) to be exact.

Second thought.

Terrorists and ISIS lived in London, maybe even in Oxford, too. That much we did know. Terrorists do their job quite well: creating fear through their destruction. Terror has the capacity to awaken people to life, truth, and love. When people are afraid, they band together. Facebook has movements where people will write hashtags such as: “#StandWithParis.” They remember to tell their friends and families that they love them. It awakes people to what matters, and it reminds them to fight. For Christians, terror and fear reminds us to rely on God. He will take care of us no matter what happens. However, in the moment, it was hard for me to remember all of this, and all I felt was panic.

I knew we had terrorists living in America. I had lived through the worst terror attack of this century, the attacks on 9/11. I lived near Chicago. And though I was only six, I understood what had happened. Every time we drove into the city from the suburbs, I was scared of buildings falling. My best friend’s dad was a pilot. When the attacks happened, he mowed everyone’s yard who lived in the court. He couldn’t sit still. I remember the images. I saw the plane hit the second tower and the Pentagon. Even though I didn’t live near New York, the news reporters had no idea if other cities were going to be targeted. My six-year-old brain picked up on that and terrified me. That same fear came back that night in Oxford. I couldn’t sit still. I had so many questions and not enough answers.

Third thought.

I realized that if I were still in America, I would be sad and upset that these attacks happened, but they wouldn’t have terrified me, because they weren’t close to me. Even the bombings that happen in Turkey and daily in Syria don’t affect me in the same way. I don’t feel scared, but I do feel sad. However, I wasn’t in America. I was in England. And just like with

9/11, we had no idea where the terrorists would strike next. Were they planning on hitting other major cities in Europe? It's a strange feeling when you are closer to the thing you fear. Your body doesn't quite know how to react. Everyone reacts differently to fear, whether it's far or near. How we choose to deal with it shows who we really are. Are we going to react in hate? Or are we going to react with kindness? If something doesn't directly affect you, do you still hurt and mourn with them? Or does it just mean, "pretending" to and changing your profile picture on Facebook to "standing with so and so." However, the closer you get to that fear, the closer it affects you personally, the worse it gets.

Fourth thought.

And at 10:30 p.m. were the attacks done? Or were more people going to die?

Within the hour, everyone in the house knew about the attacks. One of the groups that had gone to a pub came back not long after the news spread through the house. We were in shock. It was quiet that night. No one knew what to do or say. We just hoped the next news would be good news. Several of my friends had been in Paris a month ago during our holiday. I think we were all affected by the proximity and the fact that it was the largest terrorist attack outside of the Middle East since 9/11.

Fifth thought.

I was supposed to go to London tomorrow. Terrorists seem to like to hit major populated events. They killed more people that way. I knew that because of the attacks, the convention would have extra security, but it still scared me. We'd be taking public transit, like crowded underground trains. What if someone was hiding in a tube station, ready to blow up a crowd of people? I almost didn't want to go. I almost wanted to hide and not come out where there were people who could kill me. But I also knew I would miss an amazing opportunity.

My Uncle Greg texted me asking if I was safe. He always seems to know the news the minute it happens. My parents texted me next, making sure I felt all right with everything. I had people commenting on my Facebook, even friends I hadn't talked to in forever. I assured them that I was OK. I was nowhere near Paris.

Sixth thought.

When I get scared, I think of all the worst scenarios. My mind was racing, and I could feel a panic attack happening. I couldn't calm down. There was no way I was going to bed. I kept thinking of tomorrow. I didn't want to give up tomorrow. I wandered upstairs to find Elissa. She was working on homework in the hallway and stood up when I entered.

“So do you think they will cancel the convention?” I asked.

“No. They wouldn’t do that,” Elissa said. She yawned and brushed her long brown hair out of her face.

“Even because of the attack?” I asked. I fidgeted with my hands.

Elissa shook her head. “No. It wasn’t that close. They will probably just have more security.”

“Ok” I paused. “Do you think we should still go?”

“Yeah! I don’t want to miss it.” She looked at me as if I were crazy. I felt bad for freaking out, but I also knew she was trying to help me feel better.

“Me neither. I’ve waited so long for this. I guess I’m just scared. It’s a huge public place and...I don’t know,” I fidgeted harder, pulling my fingers all over the place. Anytime I got anxious I couldn’t help fidgeting.

“We’ll be fine. Don’t worry” Elissa leaned in and hugged me. “Let’s just have fun, ok?”

“Ok” I smiled. “Has anyone back home contacted you?”

“Yeah, my parents won’t stop texting me. They’re scared,” Elissa said, glancing at her phone.

“Everyone’s scared,” I said. “My parents and my uncle both texted me. And one of my friends from high school who I don’t talk to much anymore. That was weird. Nice of him” I pause. “I’m pretty upset so I probably won’t be able to go to bed for a while, which sucks.”

“Me neither. I have to finish this homework,” Elissa said, gesturing ruefully back at her pile of papers and library books and computer.

“I’m going to go wander,” I said.

“See you tomorrow morning,” Elissa said, sitting back down.

“Yeah, ok,” I said, opening the door that led to the stairs again.

Seventh thought.

This was a terrorist attack. They wanted us to feel terror. They wanted us to not leave our houses, afraid of being blown up or shot. They wanted us not to go to fun, huge gatherings, conventions, or concerts. All they wanted was to kill and create terror among us. Hence the term, terrorist, I suppose. I didn’t want to be one of those people who are so scared that they stay home and do nothing and miss doing wonderful things in the world because “someone might blow it up.” Someone could come into your house and murder you, too. We shouldn’t be scared, cautious, but not scared.

My dad always told me this saying that an Orthodox Christian nun told him when he almost died when I was a kid. You can worry about dying from the disease you have all you want. But that’s not going to stop you from getting hit by a bus tomorrow. You never know what’s going to kill you, and you shouldn’t worry about how or when you are going to die from

one thing, when another that you aren't looking for could come. Just live your life. Live it like every day is your last, but do not worry about dying.

Eighth thought.

I still couldn't sleep. My mind was still racing. I knew if I went into a dark room and closed my eyes, I would have nightmares, but I needed to sleep. Being in the dark and alone is one of my worst fears. It is heightened if I have a fear or a scare from earlier in the day. I have always had a hard time with nightmares since I was a child, after watching particularly scary movies. I knew that if I tried, all I would be doing was lying in bed in a fetal position, crying, and trying not to scream and jump at every little noise. I hated myself for freaking out this badly. No one else seemed that freaked out. Elissa seemed a bit scared, but she wasn't scared enough not to want to go to the convention. At least, if she was, she was not showing it. Why did this affect me so much?

It was now 12:30 a.m. The news had confirmed 89 people had been killed in the Bataclan theater. Someone in the house said that the police had stormed it 10 minutes ago and secured it. The two shooters/bombers activated their suicide belts. The news didn't say if anyone else died when the terrorists did that. I couldn't look at the news anymore without more panic. I was getting the news from my friends.

I wandered into the large living room. A small group was watching *Chocolat*. I curled up on the couch on the left (when looking from the back of the room) near my friend, Jessica. It was dark, and I couldn't see who else was watching, nor did it register much because of the panic and sleep deprivation.

The movie was beautiful. It takes place in France and stars Johnny Depp and Judi Dench. In terms of Depp's non-comedic characters, I think, this is his best. I had missed the beginning,

but I quickly figured out what was going on. Near the end of the movie, I cried because the movie was sad and happy. There are times when I can't cry right away after something like an attack happens. I just go numb, in shock, so scared I don't know what to do. And then, hours later, I can finally cry.

Ninth thought.

I cried for the people who were hurting in Paris. I cried for our group of friends, silently uniting in our prayers, trying not to voice our fears. I cried because the movie was at a particularly sad but yet beautiful part, and I always cry at those. Although, I was trying to cry as quietly as I could because I hate to let other people know I'm crying.

Jessica noticed and pulled me closer to her. "It's ok, Elizabeth. We're safe."

"I know, but...I'm...scared," I finished lamely. I just know how I feel. I have no idea how to voice those feelings to others.

"We're safe," she repeated, squeezing me. "Don't worry. Just watch the movie." Her long brown hair tickled my face. I snuggled close to her for comfort.

I smiled a little. I was able to focus on the movie. I knew that subconsciously we were all watching the movie to calm down. Especially because it was French. I was going to go to bed at 1 a.m., but the movie was so good that I couldn't pull myself away. It ended satisfyingly and beautifully. It's hard to describe the movie and what it makes you feel. All I know is, it definitely helped contribute to my sense of peace that was slowly growing.

The credits rolled, and I suddenly felt tired and drained. There was no new news of attacks. The death count was now 130.

Tenth thought.

Close to 2 a.m. I trudged upstairs to my bed, the happy ending of the movie playing in my head. I felt more at peace now. I was excited for the convention. I knew, God would take care of me, no matter what. Even if something bad like that ever happens to me, God won't desert me. He will be with me through everything. I had calmed enough by now to realize that. I wasn't sure why I hadn't thought of God beforehand. I guess it goes back to how my mind freaks out at things. And as much as I hated to admit it, God isn't always the first thing on my mind.

However, at this point, I was glad to rest all the feelings I had on Him. When terror is strong, we have to be strong. We can't let them run over us, scare us, and hurt us. We can't repay the evil for evil. We can't hide inside physically and emotionally, too scared to live out our lives. Terrorists are supposed to create terror, and they do despicable and terrible things, but we should not give them the satisfaction of showing them we are scared. Otherwise they have done their job. That's really hard to do. I know. I've been there. And that's not to say I won't be scared if something does happen to me or close to me. I will be. That's natural. It's if I let the terror get to me, that's when I should take a deep breath, eat some chocolate, and remember that God is taking care of me no matter what.

So, with that in mind Elissa and I got up very early the next morning and went to the convention. Nothing but fun happened. And we had the time of our lives, praying for the world, but not giving into the terror.