

Death by Exercise

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<> *Dedicated to Mr. Fink* <>

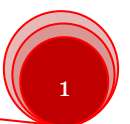
WORD COUNT: 2,224 words

Brad Thompson had been unhappy for a long time. On this particular day he was thinking more about a question that had plagued him for years. Now in his 30s, overweight and feeling lost, he still wondered, "Is this it, the rest of my life?" He couldn't remember where he first heard that question, but it had become an obsession with him.

When Brad graduated from the high school just a few blocks from where he would end up "selling cars," his future was bright and promising. Being a star quarterback had gotten him a football scholarship. He planned to major in business, move to the big city, and maybe even become famous. None of that ever happened.

Instead, Brad married Jena, his high school sweetheart, and they quickly had three children. He tried many different jobs after high school. He was always good at talking to people and that paid off when he landed a job at the new car dealership. He had walked by that dealership every day on the way to and from high school. As top salesperson, year after year for seventeen years, Brad covered the walls of his tiny office with awards.

It seemed a given Brad would one day manage the dealership. He didn't think much about that (though he expected it), because he was constantly miserable, especially over becoming a "fat guy" - something he



swore would never happen to him. And, there was always that question haunting him, "Is this it, the rest of my life?"

Now, on this day the owner and general manager of the dealership called everyone together for a "major announcement," there seemed no doubt this would be Brad's moment to "move up."

"And, so," said Biff Krench, the owner, "it is with great pride that I announce who will be taking over my dealership. There is no doubt in my mind I picked the absolute perfect individual for this job."

Brad felt his heart race as he let out a deep sigh, trying to figure out what he was going to say after Biff introduced him. He felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. Everyone was looking at Brad in anticipation of his name about to be mentioned. Biff's son, Kenny, came from behind Brad and walked over to stand next to Biff. Everyone knew Kenny quite well. He had always been "in the way," but since he was the owner's son, no one ever said anything. Kenny had now finally graduated from high school after "redoing" his senior year twice because of "problems."

Biff smiled broadly, putting his arm around Kenny, as he said, "Kenny has agreed to take over and manage this dealership."

Brad's mouth, along with several others, dropped open. It was profoundly wrong that a kid who was a total screw up got Brad's "prize." Brad barely heard Biff say, "I'm also proud to announce Brad will be promoted to Assistant Manager."

Brad knew in a skipped-heartbeat what that meant. **HE** would be doing all of the work while Kenny did nothing. Seething rage welled up inside of Brad, but he somehow kept his composure. Brad felt like his head was

going to explode from the exasperation of the moment and the anticipation of what was to come. Worst of all, there was absolutely nothing Brad could do or say about any of this!

Like he had done so many other times in his life, Brad suppressed the anger and frustration. He shook outstretched hands, nodding and mumbling. He congratulated Kenny. Brad didn't hear anything anyone said. He was doing all he could in this charade to pretend like nothing was wrong.

Brad bit hard on his lower lip when Kenny shook his hand quietly saying, "Yer gunna haf to help me a whole bunch, dude."

Brad forced a twitching, half smile as he said, "Right!"

A week later Brad was getting a physical required by his "promotion" which also tied to a new company life insurance policy. The doctor casually said "Wow! This is a monster insurance policy. You don't see many like this."

Jokingly, the doctor continued with, "You do realize you're worth a whole lot more dead than alive?" That's when Brad's intellect was smacked by a lightning bolt of simultaneous revelations, a scary epiphany, and something close to, but not quite bordering on a completely disjointed bit of misdirected "inspiration."

Brad now knew exactly what he was going to do!

The word "dead" triggered a chain-reaction of thoughts and convoluted logic deep inside the clockwork structure of Brad's brain. He basically wanted "out" of his life. He instantly decided he was going to end his life, leaving his family the enormous life insurance policy. He scratched his head as the doctor continued talking and examining, but Brad didn't hear anything ... now that he was so pleased with his seemingly perfect escape.

Ah, but how would he kill himself to make it look accidental?

Over the next few weeks Brad “did his job,” covering for Kenny who was killing deals on a regular basis. All the while Brad plotted how to exit the planet gracefully, being sure his family would be financially secure.

The solution for “how to do it” came to Brad one day while waiting for a traffic light to change. It occurred to Brad exactly how he would end his life. He nodded his head up and down as he went over every detail in his mind.

It was an absolutely perfect plan.

Brad was so deep in thought that it took five “**Brads!**” shouted from Jena before he realized the traffic light had turned green. Horns were now honking as Brad zoomed through the intersection, grinning.

The exercise equipment was delivered to Brad’s house a week later. Brad explained to Jena, who knew nothing about why they were getting exercise equipment, that he planned to “get in shape.”

Of course, that was the furthest thing from the truth. Brad planned to exercise himself to death. He was sure no one would ever figure that out.

The doctor, during Brad’s recent physical, had chastised Brad about being overweight, with high cholesterol and “very, very high blood pressure.” While there were no significant problems yet, the doctor insisted Brad should start “moderately exercising” to get rid of excess “poundage.” That’s what Brad knew made his plan so perfect. The doctor had told Brad to get in shape.

Brad “jumped right in,” exercising at a frantic pace, day after day! He was also smart about what he ate, too. No more junk food or wasted calories. Brad then lived in a constant state of soreness. But what he didn’t realize was that he was sleeping more soundly than ever. He was also shedding pounds at an amazing rate.

After thirty straight days of exercising (to kill himself), Brad had lost 19 pounds. He, as well as Jena, was impressed by how good he felt (and looked). He started rethinking his “death by exercise” plan as he was taking out the garbage one evening. “Maybe there really is something to this ‘getting in shape’ stuff,” Brad thought to himself as he suddenly felt a strange sensation at the base of his skull.

Suddenly Brad saw black spots. The stars in the clear night sky started glimmering and shimmering, then exploded like fireworks as everything went black. The last moment of Brad’s consciousness was the realization that he had done it ... he was now going to die ... and now he didn’t want to die!

When Brad opened his eyes, he was sitting in his high school American and Comparative Government classroom. Mr. Fink, one of Brad’s favorite teachers, was looking at Brad, asking, “Is this it, the rest of your life?”

Brad’s eyes widened as he realized Mr. Fink had been the one who had first asked that question so many years ago! Now, here was Brad, somehow all alone in that same classroom from his sophomore year of high school.

“Well?” asked Mr. Fink.

Brad blinked but said nothing.

Mr. Fink smiled and said, "Uh, I think you killed yourself – death by exercise. Wasn't that the plan?"

Brad heard himself ask, "Forget about that. What was or IS the answer to that question about the rest of my life? What really matters in life?"

Mr. Fink whispered, "No one really ever asks for that answer, but here it is. Life is nothing more or less than all of the small, seemingly insignificant moments that add up to the total of who you are and, most importantly, whether or not you made a difference."

Brad raised his hand as he asked, "But how do you know you made a difference?" You always had to raise your hand in Mr. Fink's class before you said anything.

Mr. Fink smiled that wise smile of his and said, "Oh, you'll know, you'll know. But the important thing is that you need to focus on what YOU can do and what YOU can control. Forget about what the other guy is doing. The rest will take care of itself. Now take this Kenny character. He'll do a bang-up job of 'taking care of things' ... so just stay out of his way!"

Brad finally "got it" ... he now knew exactly what he needed to do, but had he really killed himself?

Mr. Fink smiled the widest grin Brad had ever seen and then Mr. Fink said, "Oh, you're a long ways from done, my friend!" Then Mr. Fink pushed painfully HARD with both hands on Brad's chest.

Brad felt himself jerk backwards.

Two strong jolts then made Brad take the deepest breath he had ever taken. Brad blinked several more times, as he suddenly took in more sharp, deep, painful breaths.

As Mr. Fink's image gradually faded into a milky white blur, Mr. Fink very slowly said, "Look ... at ... the ... difference ... you ... have ... already ... made!"

Brad squinted in pain. His head was spinning and his chest felt scorched from the inside out. The white blur slowly came into focus to reveal the ultra bright lights of a hospital emergency room where he was staring into Jena's tear-filled eyes.

Brad heard someone say, "He's back. He's going to make it! Just a dizzy spell from not enough glucose to the brain."

It only took a few days rest in the hospital before Brad was back with Jenna and the kids. One of the doctors told him that he needed to "slow down a bit" on his exercise regime, but not to quit.

Brad did exactly that and he stuck with exercising and eating right until he got to what he referred to as his "fighting weight!" Jenna even started exercising, too. They both experienced a renewed spirit for life.

Realizing he had made a difference in life (his and many others), Brad knew there was much more that he could do to make a difference in many ways and on many levels. Brad made many changes in his life so he could do more to help people. He was so successful at helping people that he started keeping notes. Then Brad turned those notes into a book that was published by a major book publisher.

Brad even helped Kenny “run the dealership” as much as he could. Eventually, Kenny created his own undoing. He got bored with what he was doing and then one day just never showed up again for work. This all happened about the time Brad’s book became a #1 best seller; and, of course, Brad left the dealership.

Now what’s really quite interesting here is that Brad never told anyone about his plan to kill himself by exercising. But, what he did do was title his book, “Death by Exercise.” He told everyone it was a “tongue in cheek” slant basically making the point that you need to exercise like you are going to kill yourself if you really want to see some results ... as well as make great things happen in your life ... and also make a difference in the lives of others!

And, while Brad never revealed the “secret” behind his book and all of his success, he never would have gotten to where he was without Mr. Fink’s direction and guidance (which is also why he dedicated his book and this short story to Mr. Fink). In fact, throughout the text of Brad’s book, he used a unique way of talking directly to the reader. Many say that technique or “voice” was the main reason for the runaway sales of his book.

Brad liked the concept of plays where one or more characters would talk directly to the audience. Brad figured he could easily write his book that way. So he built that into the tone and style of his book by “looking out from behind the words, directly into the reader’s line of sight” asking the kinds of questions that Mr. Fink would have asked. Intellectual stimulation was a direct result of that.

Right now, at this very moment in time, as Brad is looking out from behind this “collected combination of words” swirling deep within your intellect, can you hear him asking, “Did you, could you, would you, will you make a difference?”