

The Cat's Burden

I awoke in the dark.

The light from the morning sun was all but incapable of penetrating the deep fog that had blanketed the valley. The occasional early fog was not out of the ordinary, in fact, those of us who lived near the lake had grown quite accustomed to this tranquil morning mist. Many days I would relish in the quiet cloud that seemed to absorb even the loudest of sounds. I could hear no birds chirping, crickets chirping, or engines running. The world, to me, was calm. While others may have found the silence eerie, or unnerving, I only ever found it peaceful. It felt like a rest from this world's deafening ever-growing anthem, building to one final crescendo that never seems to come. But on those hazy mornings, I felt as though the whole world had stopped playing, even if only for a brief moment I vowed to appreciate every second. I would take my time getting out of bed, in no hurry to break the silence with the relative roar of rustling sheets. I knew, eventually I must take those first steps. As I rolled onto my side the sound of my movement came like a crash, the first cracks in the vase of silence, but it remained watertight. The ripples were still small; silence continued to permeate the air and did its best to muffle my disturbances. The world still had not fully awoken, and I remained at peace.

I continued my slowed morning routine, not once worrying about the repercussions of a delayed start to my day. The fog had completely hidden the world from both my senses, and my mind. The consequences of actuality had not yet seeped in, and I was in no rush to open the gate. I was in a dream-like state, unconscious to my waking, going through the motions while allowing my mind to be elsewhere, to be nowhere. As blank as the grey that had shrouded my windows, my mind continued its nightly rest. I unwittingly knew that the moment I allowed a thought to enter my mind, the tranquility would be sullied. Like the first snow in the winter, I had no desire to make the first tracks in the freshly fallen white blanket. Enchanted by the blank void it represented, freed from the restrictions of color and form. Simultaneously everything and nothing, yet, this dichotomy was not violent, but complementary. No words are capable of its description, and no attempts should be made, it is in that absence that its fleeting beauty is found.

But that morning in particular I was determined to keep the chaos at bay for as long as I could, snuffing out the embers of intrusive thoughts long before they have the opportunity to

catch fire. I remained at my door for longer than usual that morning. My hand rested on the handle for a minute, or ten, there was no telling. I could not bring myself to step out. Instead, I just stood staring. Staring at the fog. Eventually, as my arm grew weary of its frozen pose, I relinquished control and allowed gravity to take over and finally turned the handle down. As the mechanism released, there was a soft crackle as the door disconnected from its weatherstripping. The seal had been broken. The door had immediately pushed inward, as though outside had been fighting with all its might to invade, to fill the void. As I took my first step into the cool, damp air, I began to inhale deeply, allowing it to occupy all the space of my lungs. It was fresh and pure; a wet, earthly scent that invoked a sense of connection with all that had been birthed from the earth. The air remained untainted by man's unquiet mark; the fog had muffled that too.

The gravel crunched softly beneath my feet as I made my way toward my car. The rhythmic pace of my walking helped to perpetuate the peace that had consumed my mind not minutes earlier, as did the ever-encroaching wall of fog. Soon, I could see no more than a few feet in either direction. The cloud had entirely obscured my cabin from view, and I was still too far away to make out any signs of my car.

After a few minutes of blindly plodding through the mist, my car began to come into view. The tranquility had now almost completely fallen away. As I pulled the handle on the car, the ice-cold metal shocked out whatever stillness still remained in me. The thoughts came crashing in like a tidal wave, flooding my mind with stress and anxiety. As though, I had been locked in a magician's hypnotic trance, and snapped back by a single, chilled touch to my car. It was harsh, the car cared not for the whiplash I endured. I pulled the door open and slowly bent over to take my seat, the pain in my back slowly growing now with each movement I took. I had been plagued by this chronic affliction, for as long as I choose to remember. Some days are better than others, but no days are better than the first. Long before life had taken its toll, pulling and stretching the ligaments in my back as though working taffy. Except my back was not taffy and as you pulled it more, it did not get any looser, only more rigid. The moment I had sat down, the pain eased up a little, but I knew this was temporary.

I started up my car and began my drive into work, awhile back I had equipped my car with LED fog lights for days just like today. Their high intensity, targeted beams helped to slice through the fog and graciously illuminate the road ahead. The way the light seemed to cut a widening line down the middle of two waves of fog, reminded me much of the way Moses had parted the red sea. As my car sped along the road, the way the light diffracted and refracted through the walls of mist on either side, gave the illusion of changing, flowing water.

There were no other drivers on the road that morning, which had not surprised me. Even when the weather was fair, this time of year I was often the only one for days to come down this road. That is the way that I liked it. While there were many good things to say about the summers here in the valley, I preferred the peace and quiet after all the snowbirds had flocked back to their warmer nests for the winter. The town was left with a population of a little more than 400 after all was said and done. The school, where I taught, maintained merely a handful of students in each year. I had been put in charge of grades 1-3 when I first began 15 years ago, but as pay checks went down and responsibilities went up, I was forced to take on

more, first fourth grade, then fifth and this year they finally threw in sixth. Six years of kids all in the same room, one hundred days a year. It was certainly a challenge, but I never minded. I enjoyed being able to be the one there for these kids, they needed someone in their lives after so many had given up. I was happy to be that person. I felt I was making a difference, that I was changing the community for the better. Giving these children hope that there is more out there for them than inheriting their father's bait and tackle business or taking over their mother's restaurant, that they could be something else.

The long drive had helped to clear my mind, the subtle curves and sways of the road reminded me of the way my grandmother had rocked me on the balcony of the cabin on stormy summer nights. When the booming thunder shook every toy off my shelves, and the lightning cast quick, long shadows across the walls, too fast to make out any details, leaving too much to the imagination. Yet, my grandmother was always there. I didn't have to come for her. When the rain started falling and the wind started blowing and I sat frozen in bed, knuckles white from gripping my blanket tight, she would be there. She would take me out on the porch, when I wouldn't even leave my bed. She showed me that there was no reason to be afraid. Every time she took me out on the porch, she was challenging the world to do its worst and every time we walked away unscathed, maybe a little wetter, but no worse for the wear. We would sit there for hours sometimes, listening to the wind and the constant pitter-patter of rain on the tin roof that overhung the balcony, and the subtle creaking of rocking back and forth in the swing that hung from the rafters. This unique symphony of disconnected noises, never failed to ease the fear. It was the sweetest music, in the time when sweet music was most needed. She would never say anything, never offer words of comfort or wisdom, and she never needed to.

While I was not afraid that morning, the sound of the rain on the roof and the warm hug of my heated cloth seats, transported me back to those moments. It was a different kind of relaxing, not empty, but quite full. Full of love and of hope, it was comforting. The intrusive thoughts had not drifted away, but instead I was reminded of the reasons why I have those thoughts in the first place. The meaning behind why I am, as I am and why I do, what I do. Instead of cowering away from the pain, like a mouse taking refuge from the cat, I was facing it head on. Like a knight taking on a dragon three times his size. The challenges seemed insurmountable, but I was there anyway, brave and ready to fight.

As the drive progressed and my thoughts gradually eased, I noticed something off to the left, deep in the mist. A faint red light shone an imperceptible distance through the fog. Concerned that it may have been a stalled vehicle, or an accident, slowed down and got as far over as I could. But as my car drew nearer and the light grew brighter, I realized that this light was not remotely close to the road. It was right out in the middle of Mrs. Caldwell's field. It had seemed a little early in the year to be out working in the fields, but I was no farmer.

This brief disturbance was nothing more than that, a flickering of unknown, a brief glimpse at something out of the ordinary. The rest of my drive into work was just as ordinary as it was every other day.

The rest of the year went by in a colorless cloud, each day more featureless than the last. I was gently floating down a river, it wasn't particularly beautiful, nor unusually ugly. It didn't go too fast, nor did it feel too slow. Until one day I had flowed around a new bend onto a section of the stream hitherto obscured from view, and it was stunning. A break from the peaceful monotony, thrown deep into the rushing rapids, but I wasn't scared. I felt alive, more alive than I had ever felt before, as the waves crashed against the side of my raft, and the current tossed me from side to side, I remained. I was drenched, frigid and sore, but I held onto the mast with more strength than I knew I could muster, because I was happy.

It was the day that I met him, a painter who had come for the summer and stayed for the winter. He was handsomely disheveled, with eyes, that when you gazed into, seemed to eclipse the rest of the world. His presence was quietly commanding, he wasn't intimidating but when he spoke, people paid attention. He said that the hills of the valley felt like the loving embrace of the earth, encompassing the valley, isolating it from the chaos. He was drawn to the simplicity of my world, enthralled by the unenthralling. He spent his days wandering aimlessly through the farmers' fields, awaiting muse to reveal itself. He never had to wander for long, he was like a lightning rod when the strikes of inspiration eluded so many others. He hadn't been here long, before I too felt his inescapable pull. We were happy, I spent my days teaching, he spent his painting, but our nights, we spent together. We had dinner at the local restaurants, got drinks at the local bar or just stayed in cooking and watching movies. Things were better than they had ever been before and within the year we had been married. Our wedding, like so many others in this town, was out on the edge of the lake at the only venue around, but on that day, I hadn't noticed the mundanity, it was perfect.

That was also the day when I saw it again, for the second time. On the night of our wedding, as we rode out of town in the back seat of a taxi, on our way to the airport to fly out for our honeymoon, I saw it. It was just glimpse, only for a moment, but it was unmistakable. Through the dark, the mist and the rain, this time it was clear as day. There was the red light, unwavering, unblinking and unobstructed, shining bright against the monotonous black. It was just a second, but in that second, I saw nothing else. The man sitting next to me, the wedding, the excitement of the impending honeymoon, all faded, clouded from my thoughts by this light. As quick as it had overtaken my view, it too faded back into the depths of my mind. After it was out of sight, for a second time, I didn't give it another thought.

On our honeymoon we went to paradise. Somewhere far off from any coast, a tropical island, where the days were long, and the weather was immaculate. The sun shone brightly every day, and the weather hovered between mid-80s during the day and low-70s after the sun had set. Time passed differently down there, everything seemed to happen slowly. There were no obligations or pressures; but, before you could stop and appreciate a moment, it had passed. Every morning I would awake long before the sun had awoken from its slumber. I would watch as the soft red light slowly began to trickle over the horizon. Studying my husband's body as the sunrise gradually illuminated his bare skin, I had never seen anything so serene. As the light grew brighter and every small detail became more visible, I only became more engrossed. I couldn't look away. I stared intently, watching his chest rise and fall until I couldn't take it anymore. I held out as long as I could, but I needed him. When I was teetering

on the edge and could no longer hold my balance, I would wake him. Then, we would make love.

The rest of the day was spent lounging on the beach, drinking cocktails, eating till my stomach ached, and swimming in the pristine blue waters. A routine, in its own way. One day as I lay on the warm, white sand, staring off into the clear blue water, watching the waves as they slowly crashed on the beach. Listening to the wind effortlessly blowing across the watery plain, my thoughts turned back to the fog, the vast emptiness that had encompassed me then, came back in full force. As though sipping a glass of water, the landscape drank all the thoughts from my mind, leaving the glass filled to the brim with nothing. For the first time since I had met him, I remembered what it felt like to be free: free from responsibility, pressures, and thought. In those moments, the gate to my cage was unlocked, open to the unknown. This was a moment I could savor, and I did. For as long as I could, I allowed myself to sink into that comforting cocoon, I allowed myself to forget about the return to the valley, resuming work and even, my husband.

After my mind had completely cleared, I was surprised to see that one thought had still remained. Throughout my life I had always been unordinarily capable of clearing my mind. I felt I had a deeper connection to the emptiness than most people, but despite my best efforts, I was unable to rid myself of this one image. It had been burned into my retinas. No, it was deeper than that, it been carved into the coast of my mind where the waves of thought crashed on the empty shore. Before I could process this any further, I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and my trance was broken, the glass began to fill, the tide came in and the imprinted thought was reclaimed by the ocean.

My husband suggested that we go for a dip in the ocean to cool off after spending so much time in the sun. He informed me that it had been almost two hours since I had first sat down on the beach, I hadn't realized how long I had been there. I was comforted by his presence and the prospect of a swim excited me. We gathered our snorkeling gear and made our way out toward the water. There was an active reef just off the coast, somewhere within swimming distance and so, we waded our way into the ocean, hoping that we had our bearings straight. The moment that I felt my head bob below the surface, and the water plug my ears, everything went silent. The shock from the chilled water enveloping me had caused me to have doubts about our excursion, remembering the warm sand and the hot sand of comfortable land. But as my husband drew further away, I knew I must follow. Along the supposed path to the sandbar the water was cold and a deep blue, the floor was far out of site. If I left my head below water for too long, I could feel reality drifting away, being replaced by only blue. But only for a moment. As soon the world beneath the surface was not silent, the reef was teeming with life. Brilliantly colored fish swam in and out of every crevice in the coral. Each fish moving independently, yet there was an obvious synchronicity amongst them. The push and pull of the water and the natural currents guided their every move, choosing the path of least resistance wherever it presented itself. Together they formed an intoxicating twirling and twisting of colors, as though painted by a great artist. Vibrant colors not of this world woven into an unpredictable ephemeral tapestry for only me. Despite the cold, and the arduous swim far into the unknown, the reward was well worthwhile.

Our plane touched down hard back home. The torrential storm had seemingly not faltered since our departure. The sky was dark, and the rain was hard. As we walked along the jet bridge, the entire construction shook back and forth, and the rain pounded against the roof and walls. The lights were dim, with brief flashes of light as lightning raged on beyond the thin metal sheet that impossibly kept the chaos at bay. We slowly made our way through the empty airport, passing the endless rows of chairs outside of the gates. The bright fluorescent lights illuminated uniformity across the manufactured desert. Depriving the building of natural uncertainty and severing it from all the might of the wind and rain. The occasional mural plastered an empty wall, each more soulless than the last. It amazed me, how something, intended to be unique and beautiful, created to give life to an empty box, only serve to suck all the energy that remained. It was man's poor imitation of a beauty that only time and disorder was capable of creating. A perfect representation of humanity's curse, the inability to savor the unknown, a collective belief that it is our right to understand and to conquer, to replace that which is natural, with that which we know.

Our daughter was born about a year after our honeymoon, and the whole world slipped away. My life suddenly had actual meaning: tangible, innocent meaning. Everything became about her, my husband slowly painted less and less, but he had only switched mediums. Our daughter became his canvas, and while I was at work, he stayed home and painted, taking care of her and teaching her. His brush strokes were visible, but did not constitute the whole, her own nature complemented his gentle touches in every way. He loved her more than I could have thought possible. I was never envious, I loved her just as much, and was happy to provide for her in my own way. Our family grew quick and strong, like a dandelion in the summer, we burst out quickly from the most unlikely of places, and did not only survive, but together, we thrived. My whole life had been spent staring at the crimson curtain from the theater seats, patiently enjoying the silence., ignorant of the coming show, contented to wait there forever, when suddenly the lights dimmed and the curtain lifted, and the real show began.

Each day that passed filled me with renewed happiness, the light from my daughter fell brilliantly upon me and gave me energy to grow. My branches reached to the sky, standing out against the all the other trees beside me. My leaves had reached their zenith. I no longer felt I needed anything at all, my appetite had been sated and I no longer dreamed of food. I was not content to remain still, instead I was happy. I was no longer feeling burdened by my heavy roots but empowered by their strength.

These thoughts all rushed through my mind as I stand here, once again buried by this morning's heavy fog staring at a light off in the middle of Mrs. Caldwell's field. My life replaying rapidly through my mind as I stare off into the gray abyss, entranced by a single point. A point disconnected from everything, alone, free even from the weight of gravity as it floats there. A point which I had never given much thought to but had never really left my mind either. Over the course of the years, I had only seen it for a total of a few seconds, but it was so strange, so out of the ordinary, that it was impossible to forget. And now, here I was, observing it from the

road head on, trying my hardest to memorize every detail, but it is futile. Its presence is a mystery and its form, an enigma. The longer the I stand here, the more I choose to forget, the more I let go. Because today the impossible light was different, no longer was it the color of blood and pain. Today, it was green, it was calling to me, and I would not let it go unanswered.