

Coping With Terminal Stillness

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Section One
Creation

Winter

She used to get quiet
come late October
when the soggy blanket of clouds
drew up to her throat
and suffocated her silently,
when the air dried out and crystallized
or fanned her cheeks
with mist from heavy sighs
at the sight of it all.

Winter in New York
could last eight months
in a bad year, and six in the best of times.
If you didn't like cold, dark, grey
and slushy, you could get
depressed. Or at least down
with no real explanation
handy.

So an uneventful drive
of 736 miles
through brightening evergreens
and milder air, to a town
in the shadow of the southern
Appalachians
seemed a life-saving journey
of forgiveness and retribution.

And the air last night
was moist and mild
Sixty-two degrees on Christmas Eve
in an uncharacteristically
soggy trailing mist that
tomorrow's winter sun will remove.

And she smiles more now.
And she cries less.
And it has all been worth it.

Spring

As snow begins to melt away
the mighty sun agrees to stay
just a while longer in the blue
to watch the things we humans do.

The expanding day permits
each of us a few minutes
to look around and verify
that birds from southern climes still fly,
that animals once hibernating
are indeed alive and mating,
that grass that's peeking from below
the last bare vestiges of snow
is green and vibrant as it was
last autumn. And that's good because
a winter that goes on indefinite
soon loses all its charm and benefit
with everything that's cheerful lost
beneath a plate of permafrost.

The human mind requires a thawing
lest the psyche bend to gnawing
limbs off in a bid for freedom
granted by a passing green thumb
that nurtures shoots and leaves with care
and brings to flourish what once was bare.

This is the great equalizing
when all that once was dead is rising
from the ashes of the cold.
It's just as wise king Solomon told
us in Ecclesiastes one:
"There's nothing new under the sun."

And so we smile as winter softens

and we hope to see it often.
As many years as life may grant us
each one is a gift. We can't just
squander such a precious thing
as every gorgeous, wondrous Spring.

Summer

Summer's known for sunshine
sometimes thick, oppressive heat and sweat.

Summer's known for family vacations
time away from work and school obligations.

Summer's known for long days and short nights,
expanding possibilities and imagination.

But in some lands, summer's not known.

Imagine the cold, barren tundra of the deep north,
where the wind blows constantly across an ice field
devoid of trees or shrubs, just endless, drifting snow.
Flat snow broken on occasion by higher outcroppings
of snow-covered rock piled atop snow-covered rock.
Where the only creatures stirring have been gifted with
layers of life-sustaining blubber and fur
to seal them off from the constant barrage of
horizontal ice-pricked snow that comes down in torrents
or simply blows up from the ground on a bright day
beneath a sun that feels so far away, not an ounce of
warmth will ever touch the surface of this forgotten land.

This is summer.

Summer's known for what you get where you are
when Mother Nature tires of giving you her worst.

Autumn

Last year,
the autumn in New York
was grey and crisp
with windy wisps of leaf-fall
scraping a crumbling backyard
stairway.

This year,
the Carolina autumn
is sunny, mild
and quiet with the same
leaf-fall, but somehow less
denuded.

Creation

(With appropriate nods to Genesis chapter 1)

The page is blank
with darkness in its bright white,
formless and waste
with a spirit moving to and fro
over the surface of the paper

And I proceeded to say
"let there be light!"
and ink appeared, darkening the white,
lighting the dark
and I came to see that it was good
and I went to sleep.

And I went on to say
"let there be space between the words,
and let a division appear between the thoughts,"
and there was, and there is:
A comma, indentation, a sentence, a paragraph
subheads and chapters
Thoughts in bite-size chunks
and I came to see that it was good

And I went on to say
"let the thoughts be brought together,
and given concrete form and publishable means,"
So my fingers found the keyboard and
look! an e-mail query letter followed by another
and another
and another
and another, each according to its kind
And the world began to give forth rejection letters,
each according to their kind, and delightful to look upon
and I came to see that it was not good
but it was ok

And I went on to say
"why should I continue to work and sweat and type and grumble
without fair pay and respect and reward?"
And nothing happened.

And I went on to say
"let my words live on the stage of the world,
and let my thoughts fly into forever on wings of electrons,"
and a blog came to be.
And it came to be evening,
and it came to be morning,
and I kept typing.

And I went on to say
"let us make sites in our image,
according to our likeness, and
let them have in subjection the blogs and the e-books
and the paper books and the New York publishing houses
and every kind of marketing we've ever learned before.
And I proceeded to join Facebook and Twitter and LinkedIn
And it came to be evening and it came to be morning
and I never got around to writing.
And I got to see that it was no good.
But I kept doing it any way.

After that, I saw everything I had made
and look! It was very good.
And I could not figure out why or how this happened.
Because during these six chaotic days/years/lifetimes
I have been so intent on creating for a purpose
that I have forgotten how to create for creating
and yet, from the myopic heaven
of my "artist" mind, I have still managed
to make beautiful things appear and change and shine
And I know you will do what you feel is best with them,
and I may never know.

You may not worship me in my thoughts, on the page
or in your mind.
But I will not be any less a creator for that.

And it came to be evening
and it came to be morning
and I'm tired, but happy
and I still create...
alone

The Wind

The invisible agent of nature
travels swiftly over and between
each obstacle, slowed or diverted
but never halted, tearing bits
from every grand mountain or humble tree
tossing hats and boulders
opening caves and coats
Chilling bone and skin.
Just imagine what the invisible agent
sees and has seen.
Simple air, infused with power and authority,
turns its mighty gaze on me and you.
And suddenly, this thing we use and abuse
every day, we fear and respect and marvel at.
We worry about it and scream at its fury.
We fear what we do not control.

Clouds

Wispy white water vapor
wallowing in windy wells of blue
flowing where the wind wills
and winding up where they
ought not.

Coelescing into crowded cloudheads
gray and grumbling with thunder,
ganging up on grounded groups
of people grumbling about the
coming rain.

What once was white and welcome
turns to gray and gruesome in a
matter of moments since we pay
so little attention to the coming
of the clouds.

Mosquitoes

The first thing I realized when the sun finally came up was that I was still alive. I also realized that a lot of other people weren't.

The campground was silent except for the timid cheeping of birds high in the trees. The air was thick and still. I crawled very slowly out from under the dead log where I'd wedged myself during the attack and walked on numb, tingling feet to the edge of the woods. Looking across the campsite to the beach and the water, I could only stare, open-mouthed, at the horrific scene before me.

There were bodies everywhere. Pale, deflated sacks of flesh with vaguely human features. Limbs splayed unnaturally, signs of struggle in the sand beneath.

The carnage was unthinkable. I wretched and vomited a thin yellow stream, but there was little left inside. I hadn't eaten since the previous day's lunch.

The lunch I was eating when we first heard that horrible high-pitched sound...

* * *

Hamburgers spitting grease on an open charcoal grill. The smell of greasy smoke wafting through the camp. There's nothing better.

I actually don't like camping very much. Not that I have something serious against it, really. It's just that I don't see the point, you know? I mean, it's not like what my friends call "camping" is actually what the nomadic tribes did; or the cowboys out on the plain; or the pioneers settling the west; or the Sir Edmund Hillarys of the world.

What we did was the lamest semi-nod toward those great

campers of old. It was essentially carving a three-day weekend out of our normal schedules to spend sitting on less comfortable chairs in front of a fire, drinking beer that wasn't quite cold enough and ending the day sleeping in nylon instead of cotton. Hardly roughing it.

But, for some reason, I do love a campfire meal. And the sound of the dawn woods is nicer than any alarm clock I've ever woken up to. So, any time a few of my buddies decide to take a weekend to pitch a tent within sight of the campground bathrooms, I'm game.

So I was in charge of the grill, and it was coming out beautifully.

“Burgers in three minutes!” I yelled.

Vicky stuck her head out of the screen house and asked if I had the Kraft Singles. I told her I did, because a cheeseburger isn't a cheeseburger without Kraft Singles. I took in a breath to yell again, but at that moment, Chuck, Vicky's latest boyfriend, rounded the trees at the end of the campsite and waved to acknowledge he'd heard me.

I'd been best friends with Vicky since Junior High School. We dated off and on for a few years in High School, but we both decided we were just better off as friends. Since me, she'd meandered through a long list of guys, none of which seemed to suit her just right. Chuck was ok, but I knew he'd probably be gone before too much longer.

Right at the three-minute mark I flipped the last burger onto a heavy paper plate and laid a slice of cheese on top. I carried them to the picnic table under the small screen house like a snooty waiter in an over-priced French restaurant, a dirty paper towel slung over my forearm and my nose in the air.

“Smells good, Booger.”

Maybe Chuck wasn't ok. That unflattering nickname had stuck with me since Elementary School, a natural alteration of my last name, Booker. Dan Booker. Vicky's the only person who's never called me Booger. Maybe that's why I loved her.

So we started eating a perfect meal together. Cheeseburgers, Vicky's potato salad, Doritos and iced tea. Companionable conversation about whether we wanted to sit by the fire or sit by the water when lunch was over.

Chuck noticed it first.

“Hey, you guys hear that?”

We didn't know what he was talking about. But Chuck was known for grabbing attention in immature ways so we hardly gave it a second thought. But a few seconds later, I heard it too.

A buzzing drone. Kind of like a radial saw in a basement workshop three blocks away. The sound rose on the wind and had a sickening tendency to fill your ears. Like it was actually rising inside of you, instead of in the distance.

But then it quieted down just as quickly as it started, and although we all agreed that it seemed like we could still hear it, it was nowhere near the volume and intensity it had been. It was like someone shut off the saw but the echo of its sound didn't fade.

We looked at each other with strained smiles and tried to laugh it off, but the sound had made us uneasy. Because it had sounded alive.

We continued with our meal, but we were subdued and uncomfortable for reasons we couldn't really express. We cleaned up and Chuck was just starting to lay the firewood when the sound

came again.

It was closer this time. The drone filled the air. We saw campers in adjacent sites up and around, equally nervous. Chuck left the firewood and inexplicably walked to the tent, zipping it up behind him as he went inside. He hadn't said a word.

Then the sound died down again. But we only had a moment of quiet before we heard the first scream.

Our campground consisted of just over forty small tent sites lining both sides of a meandering loop called Dusty Pine Drive. Seen on a map, the loop looked like a dog's leg. To one side of the loop McCullum Lake spread off to the east and nine of the sites had beach frontage. Inside the loop were the bath house and the toilets. On the opposite side of the loop, to the west were the smaller, cheaper tent sites. We were on the cheap side of the loop, right at the crook of the dog's knee.

Someone was dying on a beach front site.

Vicky looked at me with an odd, scared smirk. The screams intensified. The sound carried well in the humid air, and we knew we were hearing death. For that one frozen moment, I didn't want to be just friends any more. I wanted to protect her, to take her away from whatever made that sound and from the screams.

But I never had a chance.

Vicky glanced over my shoulder and screamed. I turned to follow her gaze and screamed myself.

Above the ancient pines, caught in relief against a steel gray sky, was a monstrosity I can hardly explain. It was at least four feet long, with buzzing, transparent wings twice that length. It had six long and spindly legs that ended in two hook-like claws. Two compound eyes the size of softballs refracted the meager light in a

prismatic rainbow. But, despite the instant weird horror that came with the whole picture, my attention immediately focused on the two-foot spear – they call it a proboscis, I found out later – that jutted from the mound beneath the eyes.

It was a monstrous mosquito. And the picture became frighteningly clear as soon as we saw it. The sound we had heard was a swarm of gigantic mosquitoes descending on the campsites on the other side of the loop. The screams were campers dying from the worst kind of mosquito bite.

We jumped up in a panic, dropping food and then clinging to each other with no idea what else to do.

“Vicky, your Jeep!” I yelled it into her face, halting her panicked scream. She slapped at her pockets and swiveled her head, panting,

“I don't have the keys! Where are my keys?”

We locked the car the night before because the ranger told us there had been a series of break-ins in the camp this summer. We both knew the keys were in the tent, probably in her jeans from last night. She was wearing her shorts this morning because it was muggier, and she hadn't expected to be attacked by giant mosquitoes.

We rushed to the tent door and I started unzipping it from the top. Chuck's fist surprised me before, during and after it broke my nose. I tumbled backwards to the sound of the zipper going back up and Vicky screaming again.

As I struggled to sit up and spit some blood out of my mouth, I was facing over the treeline again. The mosquito was gone, but the screams from across the campground had intensified. I could only imagine what was going on over there, but I knew that we only had minutes before it was going to happen to us.

Chuck was violently panicked inside the tent, and he wouldn't let us in. Vicky was pleading in tears at the tent flap, but every time she reached for the zipper, Chuck screamed at her from inside, holding the zipper shut and threatening her.

I finally grabbed her arm and turned her away from the tent. The sound from across the campground rose in volume again and we both turned to see the swarm come into view. There were at least twenty giant mosquitoes buzzing over the treetops, and they seemed to be scanning the area. We started stumbling backwards, our screams silenced in terror. No sound would come out when I tried to tell Vicky to run.

Fortunately, she didn't need me to say it. We turned and ran past her Jeep, turning left at the road and heading toward the ranger office. Several of the sites were empty, and the one car we saw was leaving a cloud of dust behind it as it peeled off toward the office and the main road. We waved and screamed, running after it, and the brake lights blinked for a moment, but they accelerated again.

We realized why a second later when the swarm dropped down into the clearing where the bathrooms were and two mosquitoes landed in our site. They hovered ten feet off the ground, scanning the area with their prismatic eyes. One swooped toward the screen house and one darted toward the tent.

The tent billowed and a pole snapped as the thing came down on it. We could hear a muffled scream as Chuck struggled with the weight coming down on him, and the unmistakable sound of nylon tearing. Chuck's screams became louder as the tent opened up, but then stopped abruptly as the monster found what it was looking for.

I pushed Vicky to turn and run but she stumbled to the ground and a second later I did too. My legs felt like rubber and my mouth had gone horribly dry. I struggled to my feet again when the

creature rose from the empty screen house and headed toward the road.

I grabbed Vicky's arm and began running again, this time focused on putting as much distance between us and the insects as possible. There were no more campers that I could see between us and the office, and the screen house mosquito was heading our way.

I glanced back quickly at our site and saw the one that got Chuck lifting lazily into the air. He was larger than before, bloated and he rose drunkenly toward the treetops. He was engorged with blood.

The rest of the swarm we saw over the trees had apparently spread out along the road to various camps because we heard screams from all around the campground, but we could see very little beyond the brush and trees that lined the camp road.

We just kept running, noting the progress of the insect behind us. It weaved back and forth behind us, its insectile buzz vibrating my back and raising the hairs on the back of my neck. It seemed to be toying with us.

I realized a second later that Vicky had changed. She no longer seemed panicked or frightened. She seemed angry. She yanked her arm out of my grasp and started pumping her arms faster as she ran. Vicky had run cross-country in High School and still held the school record for the 100-meter dash as far as I knew. I, on the other hand, had refused to run unless someone or something was chasing me, and she knew it. I was a spectator, not a player. I was flagging fast, my breath coming in and out in ragged gasps.

She glanced at me and I instantly knew what she was going to do. I pleaded with my eyes, but she didn't give me a chance.

Ahead of us the road forked with the left turn heading

toward the beach, a huge tract of dense woods and eventually the more expensive tent sites. To the right lay open ground, a wider section of road – now paved – and eventually the ranger station.

“NO!” I screamed, but she had already made her choice. She shoved me hard to the left and in the same motion she snapped a small dead branch off a tree that grew at the fork. She spun around and hurled the branch at the mosquito, screaming,

“Come and get me you-” but she couldn't say any more. The mosquito darted toward her, not even giving me a second glance as I fell into the dust of the left-hand fork. I pushed myself up in time to see Vicky lean down gracefully into a full-on sprint, her long legs flying and her hair streaming out behind her.

The mosquito was right behind her when they disappeared behind the trees.

She saved my life, I knew, and she'd sacrificed her own to do it. I felt like my world had been ripped out from beneath my feet, and it had all happened in moments. I wanted to run after her, to help her, but I lay bleeding and breathing raggedly in the middle of the dusty camp road, hardly able to move. Grief came over me in a wave and I moaned. Tears began to pour down my cheeks as the enormity of the afternoon hit me.

Then I heard the whining buzz again. I struggled to my feet and crashed through the brush beside the road. Branches tore at my clothes and thorns opened tiny wounds on my face, my arms and my legs. I tripped and barked my shin on a low-lying pine bough. I clawed my way to my feet again and continued to wind deeper into the woods.

I could hear the sounds changing on the other side of the woods where the long line of camps had first been attacked. The screams were all but silenced at this point and the drone was deeper, slower, lazier. I could picture the swarm, bloated and satiated,

slowly floating up and over the trees and back toward the water, but I couldn't see anything through the thick pine canopy.

I realized how much noise I was making and suddenly halted where I was. The edge of the woods was about fifty yards ahead of me and beyond that a campsite where I could barely make out a flattened tent and an abandoned pick-up truck. There was a rustle and a crash, and I saw one of the things lift off from behind the truck, a bloody windbreaker clutched in one of its claws. The jacket dropped as the mosquito floated away.

Whimpering, I sank to my knees, and then to my side. There was a deadfall log to my left and I feebly scraped some dark soil from beneath it, hollowing out a small pocket where I could wedge myself. I must have passed out at that point, because the next thing I knew, the sunrise was peeking through the pine trunks and glinting in my eyes.

The campground was silent except for the timid cheeping of birds high in the trees. The air was thick and still. I crawled very slowly out from under the dead log then walked on numb, tingling feet to the edge of the woods. Looking across the campsite to the beach and the water, I could only stare, open-mouthed, at the horrific scene before me.

There were bodies everywhere. Pale, deflated sacks of flesh with vaguely human features. Limbs splayed unnaturally, signs of struggle in the sand beneath.

The carnage was unthinkable. I wretched and vomited a thin yellow stream, but there was little left inside. I hadn't eaten since the previous day's lunch.

There was no sign of the mosquitoes and no droning sound of an incoming storm. Numb with horror, I stumbled up the road leading back around toward the fork in the road where my best friend had saved my life. At the fork, I turned left and stepped onto

the warmer asphalt. I saw the broken branch Vicky had grabbed and thrown at the monster to get its attention. A few yards further up the road, I saw one of Vicky's sneakers.

And I saw blood.

There wasn't much, but it brought me to my knees. I cried again, this time for her and not for me. For the girl I'd known and loved and the woman I'd never know. For the person who had given up her own life to give me mine without thinking twice.

That's where Vicky found me a minute later.

She came out of the woods to my right, her t-shirt covered with mud and spotted with blood. Her hair was matted and her face was caked with dirt that streamed in muddy lines under her eyes. But she smiled. And she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Behind her, lying in a broken heap just off the road, was the mosquito. After we hugged and the first wave of uncontrollable words petered out, she explained how her lucky throw with the branch had apparently blinded the creature, at least for a moment. When she had turned to sprint away from it and it had darted to catch her, it had veered off to the left, probably searching for her with the other eye. A pine bough that jutted out over the road had caught it at the base of a wing, and it had spiraled down on top of her out of control.

Despite their horrific size and the fearsome danger represented by their proboscis, the mosquitoes apparently maintained their smaller cousins' thin-skinned vulnerability. In landing on Vicky's back, the thing managed to sink three of its claws into her back and her left arm, but its spear missed her neck by an inch, scraping her as it went past. The momentum threw her to the ground and she rolled, her own weight crushing the monster as she did. When she got to her knees again, she had grabbed the proboscis in one hand, and with a panicked jerk, tore the head from

its body where it stuck to her back. Unable to stand the thing's presence any longer, she had pried off the three claws and attached legs, and then the weight of the flattened body slid off her back to land in a heap at the side of the road.

She had then crawled into the woods, unable to make a sound or move beyond the slight shelter of the roadside brush before collapsing into a stupor much as I had. Like me, she had awoken to the site of the sunrise bathing the new day in a pink haze.

We ran out of things to say, and we locked hands. We both looked back toward our site, but with a glance we both decided not to go back. We walked toward the camp office and ranger station, found it abandoned and quiet, with two rangers dead and pale in the parking lot. One held a set of keys that started a green and white Jeep which brought us home.

Author's Note:

Well, I'm not sure what to say except, I'm sorry.

This story is basically a B-movie from the 50's, and I wrote it during a weekend camping trip where we were plagued by the little buggers every night. I guess my thought was, "These mosquitoes suck. But, it could be worse."

But, for some odd reason, I really, really like it. Pure action. Plot optional.