

The Watchman

Daniel Wang

Weill Cornell Medical College

It was an ethereal note that hung shimmering in the air, caught in a dewdrop so effervescent he did not dare breathe for fear of losing it. The scent of dirt and moss filled his nostrils, soft sunlight tumbled through leaves overhead to soak into his now firm skin. He stood still, listening. Yearning made tangible hummed around him, a happiness so visceral it ripped out his heart and left him breathless. He closed his eyes.

How did he arrive here, in this magical place? What force had called to him, and dragged him here from that too-thin mattress in a too-cold room? He had been afraid once, to take the plunge. He had spent those years breathing through that fragile strand of hope like an umbilical cord to the surface, a lifeline and chain so cruel in its paradox. He remembered that flash of despair as he watched it break free of its moorings, and snake through the dark waters and float above him in open mockery of what he had lost. He remembered that many lifetimes ago he had been on guard, the sole watchman in the night and day alone in his bartizan that hung, precipitously, above the plunge.

He was flying now, above it all, with the earth laid out in all its splendor below him. The rivers and mountains and forests and jungles sparkled with delight and the note chorused with a million voices, clean and pure as the morning chill. He kept

his eyes closed, filled his pink newborn lungs with a beautiful breath that cleansed every nook and crevice and dark sooty corner, and flew into the light.

–

He had been a paleontologist once, eons ago. But now the only bones he held were his own.

–

He felt far away from everything these days, in his gray and blue room with its tubes and veins and drips and bags. Yellow light flooded it, but the room never seemed warm enough no matter how many blankets he asked for. He never seemed to breathe well enough, either, for all the tanks lined up by him. Each day he pushed his rattling IV-pole through the linoleum hallways, shuffling in his too-thin slippers and steadied by a gloved hand, to and fro, to and fro, until he collapsed wheezing into his too-thin sheets. Each day he forced down or had forced down his too-thin throat pills so large they could asphyxiate a cow, had his veins gutted by needles that in another life had tranquilized a rhino on the rolling savannas of the Serengeti, whose dry, crumbly dirt quakes from the thundering hooves of the wildebeest, and gives rise to the Bermuda grass that shudders from a hot breeze carrying with it the scents of a lazing lion pride under the umbrella thorn acacia, scents that mingled with others

telling of the elusive cheetahs that had once seen a cackle of hyenas try and fail to conquer a Masai giraffe with its sledgehammer hooves and slender neck, supporting a head so tall it saw above the towering kopjes that had stood for millennia and witnessed the destruction of their world with the setting sun and the gun, and that shuddered at the incoming darkness...

He shook his head. He had a tendency these days to drift away, to see and hear and taste and feel things that were not real, though they always seemed in the moment so tangible he might as well have been on those endless plains, hunting and rolling and thundering and dying, watching as the flat mouth of the horizon swallowed that glistening orb of heat and fire and spat out a cooler, prettier version with its entourage of a million sparkling courtiers and its liver spots, gleaming subdued in the night sky with an inner beauty that shone past its craters and pockmarks and cold, dead skin...

No, he had to stop. To focus on the incessant beeping of the monitors that measured just how far away he was from his visions. He had no visitors for distraction, and the warm skins of those scrubs running in and out of his room gave none of the life-giving sustenance he needed. Sunlight could not penetrate these gray and blue walls.

—

He still remembered when the white coat told him. *Cancer*. It had sounded so musical, really, like a major triad feathered. *Chemotherapy. Targeted therapy. We're going to have to try another round. Radiopharmaceuticals and immunotherapy. Bisphosphonates and denosumab and we don't know why it isn't retreating and stereotactic body radiation therapy and quick he's in V-fib call a crash cart and ablation techniques and bone cement and*

Hospice. Palliative care.

I'm sorry.

—

It was fall outside, so he heard. The time of glistening dewdrops on leaves holding the faintest hints of

blush in the early morning pregnant with anticipation, each little gust building up to the climax when in one big *whoosh* everything falls, in a whirlwind of pumpkin-orange, around couples in mittens and children wrapped up in backpacks, shrill voices filling the air. It was the time of blazing fireplaces and steaming mugs of hot chocolate drizzled with chunks of soft marshmallow, of large family gatherings, lit by glowing chandeliers, seen through glass that shivered under the soft touch of frost, of looking out the windows each day only to suddenly realize that fall had gone and winter was here to stay. For that was the magic of fall, that in its exalted celebration of the process of dying, of the beauty in dying, of the life in dying, death itself enters with barely a whisper.

It was fall cooking, the creation of those homemade stews and ratatouilles, that he loved the most. He loved being in his warmly lit kitchen with its spice-filled air and feeling the orange tiles soak into his bones, while outside the wind howled and raged as it prepared for the cold. He had felt life then, when he cooked in the fall. The feeling that the succulent, glistening insides of a tomato, freshly sliced and quivering on the board from the thud of the silky knife, somehow cocooned in the grasps of those gleaming golden seeds the nature of birth and death and love and sex and everything in between. That the sharp sting of ginger as he scratched away its rough skin was a scream of pain and *feeling*, and in that moment it was the purest grasp of reality he had as it took away his own. That in the midst of all the falling leaves in their shades of blood, that ginger yellow and tomato red and squash green and eggplant purple could still demand existence, that they still had a vitality which refused to be stifled. They *demand*ed, like a tantrum-prone toddler or narcissistic dictator or metastatic cancer demanded, to be heard and seen and felt and tasted and lived. And these feelings would flash for an instant before vanishing, not to return until the next year when they would once again blaze and be over in a breath.

Oh, how he had loved fall.

—
How do you tell someone, who made it his life's work to study the long-dead, that he is dying? Perhaps there was no right way. He did not know. For he had never had to handle the dying, to stare the process in the face. He had always been on the sidelines, a bystander who walked by funerals and wondered what was going through the minds of the milling mourners clad in black. He had never had people die in front of him, not even family. Not even his parents, who had died when he was an infant and too young for memories. When the time came for his own life to begin he had thrown himself into marriage with his bones, painstakingly dusting them out of rocky tombs to bring home to museum drawers to study, caress, love. He had given himself to the dead, yet he did not know dying at all. And perhaps that had been why, though unknown to him, he chased death to catch, to dissect with his keen eye and unearth its secrets. Yet through life's great irony, it was not until his own death caressed his skin that he began to realize just how unprepared, how unready, he had been for mortality itself.

But death was, and it came for him one day in the doctor's office after years of nail-biting rollercoaster rides of remission and recurrence. It came in the form of the gaunt oncologist who died a little herself as she delivered the news to this patient who had always held onto hope, knuckles blushing white and fingers digging into bloody palms. But with each syllable from her lips he felt his ramparts crumble further, heard the sucking howl of the plunge draw closer. He saw the rope that chained and gave air to him grow slack, undulating in the soft current, as if someone on the surface had suddenly let go. He found himself uncurling his bloody fist, and falling softly into the depths.

—
He had first heard it when he entered the hospice facility. It had been faint, a mere whisper in the halls, a soft tune as he lay awake in his too-thin sheets in the dead of night. Pure and clear, it had

been. And it never disrupted him as he watched his shows and read his books and annotated his papers that he could not bear to leave behind in his now-empty house; it stayed with him rather like a faithful companion, content to sit bedside and hold his hand in quiet solidarity. It rang louder as he fell into endless dreams of his beloved Serengeti, and trilled with joy as he thought of fall and the homemade stews that he would never taste again. It boomed in a chorus as he retched from the pain, and soared as he fell into slumber from the morphine pumping endlessly through his system. And he listened to it all. He listened with wide-eyed wonder at this celestial sound that pulsed from everything and everyone in this facility for the dying. It tinkled lightly from the smiling nurse who changed his sheets when he soiled them, and laughed gaily from the children who ran up and down the halls in visits to their loved ones. It sang softly in operatic quivers from his neighbor across the wing who, even in her last breath, conducted her long-gone orchestras with twitches of her finger. It cried, in hushed whispers, from the family gathered around her bed.

And one night, after many nights, it came to him.

He was watching his DVD collection of *Frasier*, the sitcom that he had never stopped watching though by now he knew almost every line and every joke in every episode of its eleven seasons. Yet he had never finished the show, always stopping on cue halfway through the last season and watching it all over again from the very first. He had never bothered to ask himself why. But that night, as he lay between those too-thin sheets in his room of gray and blue, he somehow failed to notice the ending as it stepped, ever more threateningly, through the door. And before he knew it he was hearing Dr. Frasier Crane wishing Seattle goodnight for the last time, and reciting that Tennyson poem that made the hairs prickle at the back of his neck. And it was only after the screen had faded to black and looped back to the "Main Menu" page that the truth sank in as an anchor sinks into the silty bottom with its

sharp spike. The truth, that as long as the television was still playing and the characters still talking and the music still flowing and the scenes still changing, he did not have to acknowledge. He felt the tears stream down his skeletal face and he let them pour, muffling his sobs by stuffing blankets into his mouth. His marred frame shuddered and pain streaked through like flashes of lightning that scorched his brain. How long he went on for, he did not know.

He woke to the sound of voices in the hallway. There was Frasier again on his muted screen, hopping comically around in mime-like rage, the fifth episode of the first season. He rubbed his eyes. It seemed like a dream. But the note now rang so loudly in his ears he had to clap his hands over them; it rang with a vengeance so visceral that everything pulsed, as if he could feel the heartbeat of life drumming through the walls, as if the herds of the Serengeti were migrating through his very mind.

And suddenly it all came to him, in a blinding moment of clairvoyance.

He understood why this place, this house of the dying, was filled to the rafters by the note that throbbed in the blood of every living creature on this planet. Why they, the dying, seemed to glow from within with a secret that only they could hear. And why he, a surveyor who made death his business in life, could only now do the reverse. These and a million other thoughts raced through his decaying mind, and he felt a vitality that had long deserted him surge once again through his broken body.

He called for morphine, delivered with a reminder to the nurses as firm as his grip on their wrists of his DNR forms. The singing note sounded urgent now, pulsing in synchrony to his wheezing. And as he drew in yet another raspy breath it blazed into him, cleansing his lungs of mucus and scouring his crippled bones, eradicating all traces of those metastatic nodes embedded deep within his being. And it flew back out with his

cry, breaking down those gray and blue walls to let in the Serengeti itself, and he watched as the antelope and the lion and the wildebeest and the giraffe romped through the plains, dark silhouettes against a blood-red setting sun. It brought to him the joy of running through whirlwinds of burning leaves in fall, warm with the knowledge that home was awaiting with crackling fires and steaming mugs of shiveringly sweet chocolate. It brought to him life exalted and as it ought to be lived, now that he had chosen to end his watch, to uncurl his fist from a paradoxical lifeline and grasp those cold others. For after all, it was in the celebration of the life in dying, that death enters with barely a whisper.

—

Frasier was still playing in the background when they found him. He had not moved, wrapped up as he was in his too-thin sheets, his head on his too-thin pillow. And they heard, as they covered his body, the faintest murmurs of an ethereal note shimmering in the clouds, as pure and clear as the morning chill.