

Under Arrest

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The sea bubbles, froths, rises in great crescendos, only to fall crashing down in great columns of dense foam. The water is jet black, as glassy as asphalt slicked with ice in the dead of winter. The tops of the waves glint metallicly, reflecting the moon's light like the edge of a knife blade. The moon itself hangs suspended between the horizon and the apex of the star-speckled night sky, large, full, and perfectly round. It is of such a deep, steely silver that it seems almost cobalt, reflecting a bluish light over the rolling sea beneath it.

The blue is strange, unexpected, hypnotizing. The moon seems to increase in size the longer one focuses on it—a crystal ball among tiny pin-pricks of light. There are innumerable futures reflected in its depths. It beckons, and I follow.

Joan Didion once wrote that she had a “predilection for the extreme” (133). And it was true: she dwelt on suburban murders, societal hemorrhaging, grand failed dreams. She wrote with such a sense of impending doom that every interruption of quotidian life seemed to herald the approach of some total end. And she was not alone in feeling that way. The extreme, the almost apocalyptic, is what catches our attention and holds it captive. It jolts us from the mundane and brings us to the miraculous. The extreme is what is worthy of remembrance, what carries significance, because it proves that in all our modern self-assurance we can still be caught off guard. It is possible for our comatose lives to be punctuated by flashes of lucid awakening.

I am 15 years old. I can't sleep. I toss and turn in my sleeping bag, sweating under the weight of a heavy sweatshirt and the stale air of the tent. I turn and am faced by the wide open eyes of my sister, partially obscured by strands of her long dark hair. She nods, and that is all it takes for us to get ourselves up, quietly unzip the tent door, and step into the cool July night.

I am now thankful for my sweatshirt because the wind tears at my hair and jabs at my eyes. It presses firmly against my back, as if hurrying me

through the campground towards something that awaits beyond. The moon is full and blue, immediately seizing my imagination; it is the kind of moon under which a diviner performs her strange rites to open a seam in the fabric of nature. We follow that moon. We run across the torn-up gravel of the old parking lot, which is strewn with so much sand that it chafes my bare feet. A combination of the wind's urging and the adrenaline rush that comes with being at the beach in the wee hours of the morning—knowing that at any moment a police cruiser with sweeping headlights could come barreling up the road—propels us forward.

The sound is distinct and terrible. The crashes can be heard from as far back as the fields; closer to the shore, they begin to sound more like thunderclaps coming from the ground. I imagine this is what an earthquake would sound like, if earthquakes made sounds of their own. It is magnetic. We are drawn to follow that sound toward the swollen moon. The beating in my eardrums becomes unbearable as we cross the sand dunes to reach the shore. I look out in the direction of the water, which should be separated from me by a sandy expanse that warns, "you're about to go deeper," but the usual graded landscape has disappeared. Instead I see a sliver of sky, a round moon, and a wall of water. The sea is rolling, creating wide gaps between the breaking edge and the back of the swelling waves. The edge of the water laps the wooden beams of the towering lifeguard stands where we sit as camera-equipped sentinels at every sunset. I timidly approach the edge of the boardwalk and stand fixated by the waves that peak two feet above my head.

Adrenaline moves my feet toward a promontory before I can pause to think about the danger. It projects some eighty feet out into the ocean, composed of square blocks of stone designed to protect the marshes. The marshes, however, are no more. The waves break on the rocks with a booming sound and deadly force, spraying columns of water into the air.

I tread carefully, picking over gaps in the stone that are beginning to fill with water. My body shivers, and my teeth chatter. I draw closer to the point of the promontory and realize that I'm cold because I'm soaked by spray and mist. I stand a few feet from the violent clash of water and stone at the edge. I wonder if the water is fighting for its ancient claim to the shoreline, trying to take down the stone structure erected to contain it. The sea is rising to overflow its basin, and in the midst of it all, I wonder what it would feel like to be swept away. For a brief second I wonder if drowning would hurt.

A wave's spray smacks me square in the face. My eyes sting, and I taste salt and brine as my throat is racked by coughs. I hear a voice screaming for me from the edge of the boardwalk. I see a small figure jumping and waving

maniacally back on the beach. My sister was too afraid to follow my insane longing, and now she is calling me back to safety. I realize I'm not welcome at the spectacle anymore.

That moment on the point was one of utter stillness. It profoundly isolated my being from the rest of the world. Things moved around me, of course—waves rolled and my frightened sister jumped and waved as a spectator—but I was removed from that sphere, somehow existing outside it. I was not necessarily on a higher plane, but I felt separated from the plane I inhabit from day to day. I was centrally aware of the fact that I was alone. I was centrally aware that I stood under the influence of some force vastly more powerful than myself. Somewhere between my navel and breastbone I felt an inward twisting of the organs and experienced shortness of breath; my very cells knew I was in danger. But what is most significant to me now is that stillness. Despite the feeling in my stomach, the perception of an unfathomable threat, I was immobile. My feet only carried me so far until the force of the moment seized me and carried my mind forward instead. My feet, my breathing, my heartbeat may have stopped in that moment, but my mind did not. I experienced an eerie clarity.

I don't know what was inhibiting my sleep that night, or why I felt that a walk would cure the insomnia, or why I ventured out into a raging and dangerous sea. It was a progression of events that simply and seamlessly unfolded. But I'll never forget how the moon looked, how the waves sounded, how forceful the wind was against my back, or how bitter and briny the water was against my face. A power of some kind rushed me toward danger and struck me with paralysis when I got there. Yet while my body stood immobile on the misty promontory, my mind was wondrously open. I wasn't afraid of slipping into the depths of the rising sea. I sensed the immense power of all that was all around me—how satisfying it would be to become a part of that saturating mist. I was still, and free.

If I don't get some shelter, oh I'm gonna fade away, Mick Jagger sings on the Rolling Stones classic "Gimme Shelter." The whine of the harmonica, the urgency of the keyboard, the deliberate strum of the guitar chord one, two, three, four times—all suggest a flight from some peril. And the threat is imminent. *War, children, is just a shot away*, he sings. As the pitch of the harmonica rises, the danger comes closer. Merry Clayton, the female vocalist, screams it over and over: *Rape, murder, is just a shot away, just a shot away*. Her voice cracks ever so slightly on "shot"; "murder" becomes a high-pitched

screech. But the screech conveys no fear, no weakness; her voice breaks under the sheer force of its own strength, triumphant in its failure to hit the impossibly high note. The screech, a sound beyond the song, is limitless; it belongs to her.

Her cry marks an interstitial moment—the instant between remaining whole and being torn asunder. The listener gets lost in Clayton’s shattered voice because it is destruction and creation all at once. It sounds as if she is ripping herself apart on that note, but she is utterly composed. Clayton’s voice is simultaneously perilous and secure, a thing of everlasting, brief unity. Her freedom, our freedom, lies in the paradox: only through experiencing the strength of destruction can we tap into the universe’s creative power. Who wouldn’t try for that note or walk out into the mist in an attempt to make the impossible possible? Danger is perhaps the only thing that gives us strength.

My family has gathered for a weekend of bonding at my grandfather’s hunting cottage. I find myself awake, uneven lumps of furniture stuffing digging into my back as early morning light floods the window above the couch. The light saturates my closed eyelids, and I know any efforts to fall back asleep will be futile.

My aunt’s dog, Otis, needs to go out, so I set out with him down an unpaved road. He pads along at a gentle speed, never pulling me forward as I hold the leather leash coiled in my palm. The dog is in no hurry; nor am I, for that matter. He is content to stay at my side. I take my time, observing the way the sun’s light slants through a prism of leafy treetops. The odd moss-colored light bathes everything in the shade of the trees, turning the road into a dirty aquarium tank. This is a true wood, the kind that contains boulders beneath the trees that have lain unmoved since the beginning of time, and small thundering waterfalls that are the source of mountain streams. There are wolves, bear, elk. My grandfather would hunt them. He had come face-to-face with many a dangerous animal alone in the woods but had always returned without making the kill. He left alive anything with the confidence to stare him down.

I had forgotten how long the gravel road was. It runs from the one main road in the small hill town, past a few houses and cottages, and goes on for over a mile into the woods. Sometimes a truck passes through, but the road is usually devoid of life other than insects and rabbits. It is a mile of pure solitude. As I walk, lost in my thoughts, Otis begins to slow his pace. I look around to see what has piqued his curiosity, but there is nothing of interest on the road or in the neighboring trees. Suddenly, the dog is still. His ears are

flattened against his skull; his luxuriously thick black fur stands on end in a ridge across his back. I wonder if he senses some animal in the trees that my human senses can't pick up through the kaleidoscopic play of light and green—a fox, perhaps, or even a coyote, though I think those are nocturnal creatures and it's not yet 9 a.m. I expect him to bark and challenge whatever he senses approaching, but he makes no sound except a muted whimpering in the back of his throat. I stare at him in that slow way, anticipating something monumental. My head, eyes unblinking, slowly turns to face what triggered the instinct.

It lumbers out of the trees, a bulk of shiny ebony fur. It is as massive as one of the forest's ancient boulders. I stop breathing and my stomach clenches. The dog is staring at it, still whimpering almost inaudibly. I grip the leash tighter and realize that my nails are cutting into the flesh of my palm. But I can't look at the torn skin; I can only look at the bear who has stopped in the middle of the road to look back at me. I can't run back or continue on the road without provoking it. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, but I can't move. The bear continues to stare, as if evaluating my worth—as a meal? As an adversary? Everything stops—heartbeat, breathing, the sensation of the wind, of my own body, in anticipation of what might happen next.

The bear breaks the gaze. It continues to cross the road with its slow, lazy gait, disappearing into the trees on the other side. My lungs seem to collapse as I struggle for breath. Otis finally relieves himself.

Like that night at the beach, I was borne on the tide of the ordinary until a wave of the extraordinary, the almost supernatural, came to sweep me up. It was like rising up to a superior plane and then coming back down to customary, inferior existence—disappointing, but still somehow validating. As Loren Eiseley wrote, “We [are] creatures of many different dimensions passing through each other's lives like ghosts through doors” (118). We occasionally pass through lives—indeed, through entire realms of terrifying possibility—that seem too opportune to be pure chance. Danger comes when we need it.

This possibility is what arrested me. The improbability of the odds, the strangeness of the circumstances, the tension of the not-yet-realized and the promise that it was all happening for a *purpose*, gave these moments weight. There was no storm that night at the beach, yet the sea was almost alive in its furious vendetta against the shoreline, beckoning me with its intensity. A bear intersected my path as I was traversing a road through the woods in the early morning. I exercised no influence over these events, and there could have

been any number of different outcomes, but they happened as they did, and I emerged, as I think I was meant to emerge, unscathed.

And though I didn't influence the situations, I did participate actively in them. I was never the hapless victim. I willingly followed the moon to that beach and the curves of that road to the bear's crossing. In leaving the cottage, in leaving the tent, I entered into a contract; I committed myself to seeing where my feet would take me next. So these incidents were not quite pure chance. There were warning signs—the earsplitting crashing sounds, the eerie forest light—and I ignored them.

These scenes contained an appeal. They contained a seductive sensation of power, of the possibility to be destroyed in order to become part of something greater. I desired that power. But this claim seems slightly insane in retrospect. These are the words of the manic-depressive who throws herself into the sea at midnight in the middle of a storm for an escape through symbolism. These are the words of the brash young man who burns all his possessions in an anti-capitalist protest, strikes out into the wilderness with no defense and no tools but his own bare hands, and attempts to commune with nature before meeting an ironic end at the mercy of a grizzly. I'm not eschewing symbolism altogether; to do so would be to deny that these moments are rich in it. But any symbolism, any transcendent meaning, is a construct conceived after the fact. It is only incidental to the experience itself, pinpointed after reflection. Those moments were too perfect to ruin with such selfish ruminations. My active mind did not mar their purity. Instead of thought, my mind was filled with a vast awareness. I didn't try to rationalize or quantify the power. I simply acknowledged that it existed without limits.

In Andreas Achenbach's *Sunset After A Storm on the Coast of Sicily*, four men sit in a rowboat tossed by choppy waves. Dark clouds crowd the edges of the frame—evidence of a violent storm. They are interrupted, however, by the sun, which shines brightly from behind a high cliff. This light is the center of the painting; all else within the frame exists in relation to it. One man standing on the shoreline is pulling the rowboat up onto the sand.

Achenbach's man has it all wrong.

If I were in that frame, I wouldn't be straining to climb the rocks to the safety of the sun. I would stand my ground. I would feel the potential in such a drastic contrast. I would straddle the space between the storm and the sun, because such a moment has arrived for me to embrace and endure. The tension is a challenge to human potential that Achenbach's man can either shrink from, running for the shelter of the sunny cliff top, or meet, rising above

nature itself. Like Merry Clayton, he could *own* the moment by taking a risk. When we walk into danger, we transcend limitation.

Potential was infinite in the water that subsumed me, at the tip of the waves that crashed and dissolved into a million diamond droplets clinging to my cheeks. It was infinite in the distance between myself and the black bear, and the urge to traverse that impossible space. What kept me rooted to the ground, paradoxically, was that window of opportunity. Knowing that at any moment a wave could wash over me and pull me down, or that I could shortly be overpowered by 350 pounds of raw territorial animal instinct, was liberating. I felt, somehow, if I could be obliterated to nothing, I would be just atoms in the universal pool. I would at least be part of something bigger. I could be significant.

Yet later my rational self would ask at what cost such power, such transcendence, ultimately comes. Doubt follows as I weigh and measure. Then, fear. But in the rapture of such a moment, before any recognition, it's just me, the elements, and the raw force of life. When my mind grasps this, it makes the leap so that my body doesn't have to. The moment is pure risk, pure primitive instinct, and that's the thrill. In those moments I could have ridden a rip-tide across the Atlantic or hopped on the back of a black bear bound for the river. For a precious few seconds, time stopped; both common sense and the laws of physics were obliterated. Nothing was linear. Everything radiated promise.

Then the window of opportunity closed, and the reverie was interrupted by the fearful play of my rational mind. I thought, and was, and could not be.

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