

A

SMALL

CUP

OF

LIGHT



A DRINK IN THE DESERT

BEN PALPANT

*The story of one man's encounter
with God in the wilderness of despair.*



*“So short a time
To teach my life its transposition to
This difficult and unaccustomed key!”*

Edna St. Vincent Millay
from “Interim”

Born To Trouble and Blindness

“Affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it.”¹

So wrote John Donne.

I suppose he should have known. After sending five of his children and his wife into eternity and suffering under the wrack of stomach cancer, he preached his own funeral and posed in a death shroud for his final painting. I imagine him as the legend describes, wrapped in a sheet while the painter pretended the poet was dead and waited for him to stop itching. If Death had strode through the dog-violets and peeked in at the window just then, he might have laughed outright to see Donne placidly posing.

Affliction is a treasure, he claimed.

He should know. But still. No child in the history of mankind, when asked what he would like to do when he grows up, has ever responded, “I want to suffer.”

I, for one, did not.

I take it upon reliable testimony that I was born on the 23rd of November, in the year of our Lord, 1974. No historians took note. My birth remains superseded on that year’s wall of fame by more notable events like Richard Nixon’s resignation, the invention of the Rubik’s Cube, the night when news anchor Christine Chubbuck put a bullet in her brain on live television, and of course, the premier of Dr. Who. They say that amongst my infant companions were an Irish Setter, a horned toad, and a backyard of

1 John Donne, “Meditation XVII”

dirt.

Born in the Arizona desert, beneath the shadow of the Santa Catalina mountains, I spent the first five years of my life like the four-legged critters of that arid landscape, shyly. Or so they say. I have almost no recollection, only scattered film clippings in the pocket of my memory—a bunk bed, a tire swing, a tile floor, and then there's the short film of my dad teaching me to tie my shoes by the front door.

Some people say the first five years are the most foundational, setting the grooves of one's habits and grinding the lens of one's imagination. What a pity, then, that I have no recollection worth boasting about from those most influential years.

Without my knowledge, God started crafting the poem of my life in those early days. That poem took an unexpected twist when my dad accepted a medical missionary post overseas. At the age of five, my family pulled up roots and re-planted ourselves in Kenya, Africa.

Located at the base of Mt. Elgon, the rural hospital where my father served the medical needs of the local people offered a view wide as the sky above. I could scamper a few houses down and gaze over an enormous valley that spread its agrarian patchwork quilt towards the distant Ugandan border.

My imagination ripened in tropical climes so remote that even seeing airplanes cross the pale heavens in that part of the world was a rare and distant event. I used to scramble up the guava tree and onto the tin roof of our house at the slightest sound of an airplane: a sound as thin and far off as an extended exhale of breath from pursed lips. I would lie down on my back and search the azure sky, learning early to look well past the sound itself for any

shimmer of light, usually microscopic, that might betray the gravity-defying object hurtling through the heavens.

Speed intoxicated me. Unfortunately, my father's blue Ford Escort and the hospital's ambulance, a Land Rover, never even threatened to break forty miles per hour. So my friends and I experienced speed vicariously: race cars.

Officially, the Safari Rally covered 2,550 miles of unpaved East African roads in one weekend. Unofficially, it was a nirvana greater than anything else on the earth for fans like me. The route climbed in and out of the Great Rift Valley, and drivers faced unpredictable conditions because of sudden weather and terrain changes.

Of one hundred entrants, fewer than twenty usually finished the race. For my friends and me, the vehicles splashed with dried mud and emblazoned with a thousand bright decals were chariots for the gods and each driver worth deifying. Inside a photo album, I neatly pasted all my collected bubblegum wrappers with drawings of the famous rally cars. We begged, borrowed, or stole—emptying the piggy-bank if necessary—to get another gum wrapper. The gum offered nothing more than a minute of sweetness and three minutes of chewability, but the pictures were priceless because they were the closest we would ever get to real happiness. Or so we thought.

Then one day, for reasons still inexplicable, Dad drove us out into the hinterlands where we flocked roadside with a few hundred other race enthusiasts. Standing in the tall weeds and huddled beneath the spreading eucalyptus trees, we waited to hear the distant whine of strained engines for what seemed like hours.

While the restless crowd waited, one particular goat decided to take a brief nap. It staggered across the dirt road like a drunk and then, as though utterly exhausted, it settled down for long rest right in the middle of the road. The boys found the goat amusing, but one conscientious man tried fervently to coax it off the road.

Pushing and prodding did no good. He finally reverted to beating its backside with a stick. The goat remained determinedly planted. The man's useless efforts became a kind of diversion for the rest of us until a dread stirred the crowd. The distant roar of engines carried over the plains. I realized, probably much later than the rest, that the goat would soon be at the center of an epic collision.

The goat had no idea of the impending doom, of course, and remained fixed. I joined the crowd in shouting at the goat. Several men battled to get it out of the way. Perhaps growing tired of the abuse or the unwanted attention, it finally rose unsteadily and staggered to the other side of the road before any of the rally cars skidded around the corner.

We could hear the cars a mile away. The roar of their engines carried easily over the African plain. When they hurtled around the corner, one car every twenty minutes or so, I had ten seconds to glimpse their mud speckled bodies, the decals, the mounted fog lights, and the two drivers leaning into the curve.

Those cars were everything I had dreamed but the picture of that goat has remained with me all these years as an illustration of naivety and belligerent blindness. He was cluelessly self-assured. Like that goat, I nurtured an unwarranted confidence for a long time. For much of my life, I woke

up every morning wearing the same imaginative lens. One colored by false confidence. Failure was for other people and weakness to be avoided completely.

Though I claimed Christ as Lord and I knew that his power is “made perfect in weakness,”² I feared weakness more than almost anything else. I convinced myself that I could avoid weakness. I manufactured a thousand excuses for this misconception, of course, but none of them removed the final fact that much of what I assumed in life as reliable was not, in fact, reality.

I was the goat whose confidence was built on a misconception. Until that moment in my classroom, when the words on the page lost their meaning in mass, I was self-reliant. I believed that if I were sufficiently strong enough, good enough, and smart enough, then I could overcome any obstacle. My zeal effectively held weakness at bay until weakness slipped through the back door and crawled through my mind’s web of neurons, cutting the power. I felt the suburbs of my mind go dark right in front of my students that January day and I was terrified.

One week after my first mental collapse in the classroom, one week spent denying the reality of my situation, I tried returning to class. Again, I discovered the deep instability of my self-reliance and the discovery came in an unexpected way.

I taught two classes that day, navigating the dynamic exchanges cautiously, and then claimed an air of nonchalant confidence in my visit to the

school office. I had every intention of informing my boss that I could manage teaching again. Not yet healed, but well enough to do my job, I thought, and I certainly didn't plan on telling him the extent to which my mind had eroded. It was a good, old-fashioned, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps moment. What actually happened came as a complete surprise to both of us.

I sat down. He looked me straight in the eyes and asked, "How are you?" Suddenly, I broke down like a child again, deep; racking sobs shook my whole body. He took my hands, waited for a few minutes, and then asked the million dollar question, "Why are you crying?"

And I knew why. I knew that something terrified me at a molecular level. Failure, any sign that I lacked self-sufficiency horrified me. All signs, however, pointed to a growing fissure in the substratum of my preconceptions. What really terrified me was that divine hands, against which I was simply powerless, had created that fissure into which I felt myself sliding.

I remember seeing Pablo Picasso's painting, "The Blind Man's Meal." It depicts a lanky and gaunt man sitting at a table. A bright blue scarf encircles his neck and a moody beret covers his young head. An empty dish and a pitcher rest on the wooden table. A cloth seems to be slipping off the table and into the man's lap, but his elbow keeps it pinned to the table. In his left hand, he holds a small loaf of bread with several bites taken out of it. His head inclines toward the pitcher, and the muscles of his neck stretch as though participating in the herculean task of grasping it in his right hand.

The composition of the piece, with its varied blues and the stiff figure

at its center, arrests the imagination. The eyes—vacuous, hollow, and dark sockets—hopelessly press toward their object. Even the loaf depicts futility since the teeth bites are on the far side of the bread, as though someone besides this blind mendicant has been nibbling at the loaf without his knowing it.

I find this painting a powerful expression of our human condition, certainly mine. I was born dependent, born needy and frail and half-blind. Blind, even to my blindness, I aped God. I would be sovereign. I would be the conqueror. I would be the redeemer of my own regret.

Thus, the water of life remained out of reach to me just as it did for Picasso's "Blind Man", and though I spent every waking moment straining toward it, satisfaction eluded me. Although I marshaled my troops and utilized every tool at my disposal in one enormous effort to reach the top of the mountain of self-sufficiency, I found no life-water there. Neither productivity nor pleasure, even healthy pleasure, could quench the dryness of my soul.

All the while, God called me into the wilderness where he had prepared a spring brimming with water cool enough to quench any man's thirst for a substantive life. I should have known better; instead of fleeing frailty, I should have recognized that I had inherited frailty.

When my boss suggested that I take an indeterminate time off from work, I felt a blanket of shame smother me. I tried to argue. I tried to beg. With deep, fatherly compassion he said, "Ben, I don't think you're listening to God."

“What?” I thought indignantly. I took pride in listening to God, but I felt my soul lurch and shiver like a boat striking suddenly against some mass in the darkness.

“I think you need to stay at home for however long it takes. You don’t need to worry about your job, but you do need to stop fighting. You need to sit down and listen.”

The truth? I feared stopping. I feared what I would hear in the inevitable stillness. Faced, alarmingly, with the realization that I lived in a house of cards, its collapse terrified me. The inescapable voice of God wormed through my mind, “The LORD said to him, ‘Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’”³ What if the God I loved, the God whom I knew was a good God, full of grace and compassion⁴ initiated my collapse?

If so, what to do? How to embrace calamity?

3 Exodus 4:11 NIV

4 Psalm 116:5

