

Word count: 1455

100 Yards Back

I got up late that morning—about 7:30. The view west was glorious. Rising sun staining receding clouds orange and red. Everything wet and fresh. Cleansed by an early-morning cloudburst. Remembered smells of remembered mornings started embarrassing tears. The windows didn't open. Memories only.

I have been here seven days. Can't remember a day I haven't been outside. At least for a time. Now it has been seven days. And counting. The tears continue. Self-pity?

How did I come to take this turn in the road? And when? Hard to tell. Most decisions or direction changes are not like light switches—on or off. More of a process of osmosis. Bits and pieces of information seep into the subconscious until enough has gathered to cause movement.

Thinking back, I realized my life course had been charted early. Some genetics. Some learned behavior. Some advice ignored. Choices made because they existed. Life appeared infinite. Promising. Hopeful. Plenty of time to make adjustments or corrections. Indestructible? Immortal? You bet!

Seven days before. Showered. Shaved. Getting dressed. Left arm numb. Must have slept funny. Neck and jaw painful. Hard to breathe. Can't get enough air. Right arm numb. Pressure on chest. Fear. Godamnit! Don't have time to die. Terror coming. NO! Stop it! Get a grip! Cold sweat. Not much pain. Strange. Finish dressing. You can beat this. Dad died. Same thing. Kids have to eat. Sorry, honey. I love you. Stand up. Why me? Comb your hair. Be a man. All right, come and get me. Better bring help. Tough! Yeah? Shoes. Don't cry. Heart attack. Take me to the hospital, please.

Emergency. No waiting for you. Bed. Needles. Panic. Stay calm. Morphine. Sorry for the inconvenience. Call work. Damn tears. Pathetic. Going away now. Want to come back. Please. Please. Pray. Won't be a hypocrite. Refuse to accept. Hold on. Call Mom. Panic. Go, drugs, go. Something heavy on chest. Can't move it to breathe. Insurance paid. Let there be another morning.

Another day? Maybe. Wife. Kids. Don't deserve. Stupid. Needles. Oxygen. Can't think. No loss. Breathing is good. Thank you. Babbling. Fat. Naked. Move fingers, toes. Damn tears. More people. Go away. Be selfish. Live. Why?

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The wounded little man scabbled painfully, slowly, fearfully into the shelter. His pitifully small fire had shrunk to a dull glow. But he opted to wall up the opening first. Torn and bleeding fingers carefully repositioned the barricade while he worried about the fire. It couldn't die, but he had to keep them out. He had been hurt badly. The energy sucked from his very being. Only the blind instinct to keep going, to never quit, to make them work for it, drove him to continue.

Finally, to the terrifyingly dull coals. He had found only a meager amount of fuel. Add a couple of twigs. Blow softly. Please burn. Gently, steadily, lovingly build it up. Keep it going. Become a small flame.

The little man huddled close to his flame. Not for warmth, but to protect it. He sensed them near, searching. Eager to extinguish his fire. A grim shudder of fear and pain convulsed his injured frame. He needed time. If he could heal, the contest would be more even. Although losing seemed inevitable, he would keep fighting. They had hurt him too early in the game, but maybe if his small flame kept burning, he could continue to play. With a sad, fearful look at his woefully small supply of fuel, he added a bit to the tiny flame.

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Intensive care should be renamed Intensive Equipment. All those tubes, bags, beepers. Only time someone came in was to take blood, change bags, hook something up. Arms looked like they had been pounded with a bat. Black, purple, brown, yellow, saffron. Had to check the Heparin levels every four hours. Blood taken from arteries deep inside arms. Can't get too much or organs begin bleeding. Same ingredient as rat poison. Bleed to death internally. Stupid thing to remember now.

Those first three days were really hazy. I remember my wife being there a few times. The children about once each. They must have been cutting back on the drugs by the time I got up to pee. Nurse wanted to come with me. Hold it, maybe? Finally got some privacy by threatening to go right there on the floor. For the first time, I wondered how I had gone before. Didn't remember any bodily functions. Hoped I hadn't embarrassed myself too much.

Was the MRI before or after Intensive Care? Did it really matter? Arrival in the room on the ward had been a relief. Except for the shower. I was filthy, sticky, matted. Mouth tasted as if I had eaten those dead rats. And the nurse was determined to give me a shower.

"You can't be alone. You need help," she insisted.

"We have been arguing about this for ten minutes. I just had a Goddamned heart attack and you are determined to give me another."

"I'm only trying to do what is best for my patient."

"Just put a fucking chair in the shower and stay the hell out. I will either shower alone or continue to smell and look like elephant shit. Or die arguing about it."

"We have standing rules for patients in your condition. We are here to help."

"Please, please, just leave me alone. If I don't make it back out, at least I made the decision. I have no freedom here. No choices. No life. Please let me shower alone. I promise not to tell anyone. I promise not to die. I promise . . . anything. Please."

“OK. But sit. Don’t stand. Don’t raise your arms. Take your time. And have the emergency cord in there with you. And use it if you need help. Don’t hesitate. Don’t wait. Just pull.”

“I will. I promise. Thank you.”

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The little man twitched awake. His fire? Was still going. A bit fitful, but alive. He couldn’t afford to sleep. They were still prowling out there. Maybe further away. He hoped. They hadn’t come for his fire. He could build it a little bigger. Not too much. Just enough to become steady, strong.

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“Get me out of here. I can’t take any more of this. If I’m not going to make it, I’m not going to make it out there.”

“You are not stabilized,” my wife said. “They can’t do any tests on you.”

“I can come back if I’m alive. And if I’m not, it won’t matter a damn.”

It required all the persuasive powers we possessed, but They finally relented and released me. Wheeled me all the way to the front door, then gave it the “fly, be free, but” routine.

“You are making a big mistake. You would be better off here.”

“Sure. Lying in a bed I can’t sleep in. Looking at food I can’t eat. Walking in halls with no sun. Amongst the sick and dying. Breathing regurgitated air. Not living. Existing in fear. Thank you. No.”

Are hospital parking lots built so far away to punish independence? They wheel each ex-patient to the door and eject him like so much trash. Only the green bag is missing. Are body bags green?

We started for the car, a mere hundred yards away. My wife supporting me. Adjusting her stride to my staggering shuffle. Ten yards. Thirty short, hesitant steps. Sweat oozing. Breath rasping. Grunts of exertion.

Twenty more steps. Have to stop.

“Don’t let me fall, please.”

“I’ll take you back.”

“No. Please, no. Don’t take me back. They are still watching. Like vultures. I’ll make it with you. Just you and me.”

“OK, just you and me.”

Thirty yards. Tears again. Can’t quit. Won’t go back. Die right here instead. Weak. Useless. Love me still. Please. Move. Breathe. Sunshine. Can’t sit. Couldn’t get up. Shuffle. Stagger. Birdsong. Hold me up. Oxygen. Stand up straight. Breathe. Move.

Ninety yards. Last stop. Might make it. Breathe. In and out, stupid. Shaking. Love you. I’ll make it. We’ll make it. Ugly old car. Beauty. Can’t work. Might beat this. Won’t, can’t quit. Still weeping. No pain. No air either. Can’t open the God-damned door.

“Can you please put my legs in? Sorry, I just can’t do it. And roll down the window, please.”

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The little man prodded his small fire. Soon, he would get more fuel. First, a little more rest. His flame was stronger now—small, but with promise of a future. Maybe not bright—just steady. They would come again, he knew. The old man with his scythe. The dark angel. All the rest. To extinguish his flame. He must be better prepared next time.

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“Please take me home, my love.”