

## The Nature of Death

I remember the feeling of death over take me as the final trace of oxygen seeped from my lungs and escaped into the cold, murky waters of Lake Creek. I wrote, as I revisited the bend in the river that was both the birthplace of and inspiration for these words. I stared pensively at the graveled embankment where Josiah and I played tag and picked rocks to skip in the calmer section of the river. It was always a treat for us to hike up Lake Creek when our work at a remote fishing lodge in Alaska was done for the day. We would float down a little ways, go exploring, run from bears and beavers, etc. That particular day Josiah wanted to go back to the lodge early and I wanted to stay. So, getting my way as I always did, I stayed and watched him disappear into the brush. I remember wishing I hadn't been so stubborn and wanting him to come back and reconcile. It was soon after, as the sun was dipping lower in the sky, that I decided to leave as well.

I could see it happening all over again as I stared up at the river crossing where I lost my footing and was swept away. The river had risen and the waters at the crossing had become stronger and more foreboding. I had only three steps more to take when I slipped on an algae-covered rock and reluctantly allowed the river to cushion my fall. The few moments of floating allowed my heart to slow and my body to relax. I knew this section of the river very well and I waited, for the shallow portion that I knew was coming, to put my feet down so that I could continue my journey on shore. I put one foot down to see if I could touch and was immediately pulled under; not even enough time to take a breath. I tried to feel what was pinning me and, to my horror, it was a massive Cottonwood that had fallen into the river and whose body had been

warped but not yet waterlogged. My foot was caught between a split in the tree and only my nose and mouth were above the roaring rapids. I gagged, coughed, and kicked at the tree but all of these actions did little to neither help me nor calm me. I knew the river was still rising and soon my sky would become cold and wet.

I looked down at the spot where my life had taken a turn for the worst. The tree was still there and so were the memories. The memory of the two vultures that had left their salmon buffet to follow us up the river that day still remains. It was as if they knew what was coming and didn't want to miss out. As I recall, they were still there waiting for me at the end. Some believe that vultures are guides, of sorts, to the other side and some also believe that, like eagles, vultures are honorable and powerful creatures that can tell the future. I bent down, staring into the water, trying to once again feel what it was to have the hand of death on my shoulder leading me to an unavoidable end. I thought for sure that I could still see myself trapped under that tree, gasping for breath, and clawing at that which ensnared me. I shivered, closed my eyes, and focused on what I had so long ago felt. With this vision also came the overload of sensory information and unadulterated emotion that I had experienced throughout this ordeal.

I remember the sunlight breaking through the turbulence of the rushing water; its' rays shining like strands of golden rope to which I tried desperately to cling. I grasped at the apparent hope that perhaps, under the right circumstances, something intangible could indeed become useful. In my delirious state, I thought for certain that I had actually felt the sharpness of a beam as it pierced the tip of my finger. My reach increased, as did my distress, as I felt something heavy curling around my arms and pulling me down further below the raging surface of Lake Creek. Drifting vegetation and debris had sought me out and willfully clung to me; perhaps hoping that I could save them too from a soggy grave. Another kick; another meaningless blow to the hollowed trunk. Three bubbles followed my gaze upwards. It seemed,

during my struggle, that I had acquired an audience of trees. The wind had begun to blow harder as it was nearing evening. To my dismay, the further down I was pulled the further they seemed to bend towards me. Waiting; waiting impatiently to see what would happen next in the performance. A skit, a play, a show, my battle- although a classic one- was not to be displayed in this manner. My story was possibly going to end under their watchful gaze. This was not how I was going to exit the “Grand Stage” of existence! I struck the wooded torso once again, then two more times. Even the branches at the end of the Cottonwood that forbade me passage to the surface seemed to clap their skinny, bare limbs at my attempts.

My mind churned as I tried to think of other ways in which to free myself. It was not as if I could move the tree simply by lifting it or that I could cut my foot off with the knife that was nestled in my right pocket. I could, however, try and take my boot off. I pushed against the tree and made one last effort to take a final deep breath. The water had risen just over the tip of my nose but I managed to inhale a little bit of both liquid and gas. I could feel the profile of the knife in my hand as I unsheathed its’ blade and proceeded to feel for my laces. I pulled myself closer to the tree and the vegetation released its’ grip on me and continued its’ expedition downriver; habitually stretching out an arm or tentacle as if saying farewell. I cut my shoelaces and urgently thrashed my foot about in frustration. I couldn’t remove my foot from my boot nor the boot from the tree. I stabbed at the tree and tried to gouge a nook to which I could slip my foot from. Four bubbles and then three more trickled from my mouth as I cursed my lack of cleverness. If Josiah had stayed then he could have helped me. As much as I didn’t want to admit it to myself, it wasn’t his fault, it was my own.

Everything seemed to slow down now, as if time had suffered some lapse or malfunction in the mechanism that moved it forward. Even my frantic attacks to the body of my capture seemed to slow in both speed and pace. I began to pay attention to what I could see above,

below, and to the sides of me. I eagerly searched, straining my eyes as much as they would allow, for a floating log or a piece of sturdy debris that I could grab on to and pull myself towards the surface. Oxygen was all I craved and I was running on short supply! Large, shadowy figures appeared and then vanished on all sides, conceivably trying to ease my passage by making me consider possible psychosis as to the reason I was seeing what may not have even been there; furthering my delusion that this was just a nightmare that I would wake up from at any moment! Alas, I had forgotten it was spawning season for the salmon in the area. They were making their way upriver to procreate and then to expire; only their bodies would remain behind to decay and to be devoured by wild creatures that, during life, they had out smarted and fled from. I remember the feeling of the salmon bumping against my back, raising me only slightly, perhaps to prevent me from waylaying their ritual suicide; to foil my unintentional plans to partake in their evolutionary burdens.

I felt myself slipping away and I finally allowed my eyes to retreat behind their soft, fleshy shields. There was no white light. No white light with which to slip peacefully away; no white light beyond the blackened abyss that had swallowed me. Perhaps, this was a sign that it was not my time. Not time for the river to take me, to own me, to kill me. Not time for my own body, like the salmons before, to be ravaged and bloated, and when found, gobbled or covered with particle darkness. Whether it was supposed to have been my time or not, in that moment I gave up. I accepted my intended fate and I no longer tried; I didn't have the strength or the oxygen to. Despite everything I had done to free myself nothing had worked. It seemed, that when I finally gave into the idea of death... that I was freed.

I didn't feel the movement of the boat in the water or the heat of the searchlight on my face. I didn't feel them pull me into the boat nor did I feel them revive me. But, I did feel the shaking and exhaustion, my body trembling under the pile of coats now on top of me. Trembling,

not from the fear of how close I had come to death, but from the coldness of the wind against my wet, limp body. I didn't hear them praising God for finding me or the loud murmur of the boat's engine as it raced towards the lodge. But, I did hear the sound of the river and the absence of sound below it. I didn't taste the fresh air that I was now taking in for only the unsavory tang of river lingered on my palate. I didn't smell the gas from the engine or the flowery aroma that the wind brought with it. But, I did smell the stench of my soggy clothes and the remnants of flora and fauna stuck to them. I didn't see their worried faces or their relinquishing of clothing for my benefit. But, I do remember opening my eyes and seeing that the sun was gone, once again locked away behind the bars of its' intangible prison. Only the stars, twinkling like remnants of broken glass tangled in strings of blackened webs, remained in the sky.

I later learned that the only way they found me was because I was floating on the surface just downriver from the bend. They had passed that spot two times before without a trace of my whereabouts. They concluded, as well as I did, that it was the commotion of the boat going up and down through that bend that disturbed the water and the tree enough to somehow release me. To this day, I don't see how that was possible but it happened just the same!

Remembering, feeling first the panic and then the stillness, had lulled me into a pensive state. Unaware that I had begun to lean too far forward, my body jerked back as I opened my eyes. I sighed as a solitary tear ran down the side of my face. It had been a year since this event had occurred but I vividly remember the feeling of just letting go; giving permission to let whatever was to happen, simply to happen. There was no life flashing before my eyes, no last thought to who and what I was leaving behind, no regrets of what I didn't get to do....there was just calmness and tranquility. When I look back on what happened, I realize, even more than before, how close I was to the end. It was as if the Fates themselves were waiting, blade poised and sharpened, to cut the fabled string that would stop my heart and end my physical journey.

What was to be the final count down on the metaphorical clock that is inevitably ticking towards death, proved to be a teaching tool in the lesson-plan of mortality! Death is not to be feared nor is it to be succumbed to easily. The struggle for survival, for self-preservation, is as old as the planet and as widespread as the animals that inhabit it. Perhaps, it is a primal, evolutionary disposition that we, like those who came before and those who will come after, possess to ensure our species survival. Perhaps, simply put, living is our function and dying is our obligation. Cherish life, embrace life, savor the cotton-candy-colored sunsets, breath in the aromas of fresh flowers, hug tightly the ones you hold dear, taste the sweet flavors of your favorite foods, and hear the chirping of the evening crickets or the soft flutter of a hummingbird's wings. Don't let anything hold you back from what you love because, ultimately, you don't know when **your** time will be up!

