

The Gatekeeper Of The Pathogens

by Kevin Army

It was in his teeth. A blackness, a subscription to an outsideness, a painful contraction of burnt out trees scattered there among sand drifts and tidal debris. His face, lightly weathered and troubled, a tightness built into eyes of thought and separation. His arms, strong and lost, hung with a sadness and effortlessness, a body that had given up on grace, that knew better than that.

He walked through the maelstrom, the vagueness and the beauty, tossing it all aside and tearing at it's heart, purging this and then that, marking places and passages, defining losses and gathering, gathering the truths and the trustings lodged in this place, this beach of all things washed ashore and left behind. These things left behind by the giant waves of longing, of storms and of calms, of one side swept to the next and polished and worn down to a newness that looked old yet unfound, waiting for time to catch up and acknowledge the journey up to this point of arrival.

Most days he joined in that wait, the cycle of fog and sun, night and rain, day and reflection. The inner paths of the kelp, the insects jumping around his feet, flitting in and out of holes, wearing at the calm and desperation. The broken shells laying claim to the real estate of death, the searching birds, the culture of predators, and the hidden beauty of the puzzle of this place.

Most days he could not venture out from here. Something more beckoned inside, but he could not go back. It was there it had ended, there in the outside, where there had been tenderness and connection, where that connection was severed and the vanishing of all things kind took place. Where his veins emptied out and were filled with solvents and chemicals, not drugs but pathogens that replaced the inner workings of a heart and soul he had shared and danced in.

M had been his life. A chaotic life, an inconsistent life, but a life nonetheless, and one that would shatter as wildly as it had begun, shattered in waves of liquid and flesh, shattered in illusions and analysis, a searing pain that burnt everything it approached. The thing had happened beyond his control, he reached and there was nothing left there. He prayed but there was no answer, so he ran, he lunged, he collapsed here, as fine a place as any to cut oneself off and mourn. To drown in misery, watching the pacific ocean and counting the days.

It had started so sudden. He had been walking the streets on an unusually warm night, and there was M, rising through and past the desperation, the grown man with the childlike smile, charming and warm, warmer then anything he'd found in the theater of disconnection and longing, the theater of random searchings between cable cars and abandoned piers, between the aisles and the viewing rooms of emptiness. The moment when the emptiness first stopped was such a joyous guidepost, a moment that would last forever, and one he still could not lose now, no matter how fearfully and painfully he tried.

He had tried everything and more. Sleeping and waking, relying on friends and being self sufficient. Therapy and writing, god and random impalations and driving all night to nowhere, seeking anything that might replace what had been, knowing it could not be ever again. Ever.

M had melted down, a victim to a life of victimization, the trauma of more then one too many things that were drawn and forced into his kindness, that made him break his pact with the kindness and implode it, an uncontrollable desire to devastate and destroy any good, because good is not deserved, not for these kinds.

And neither could have foreseen or understood it would lead to here, 1,000 miles apart and asunder, unable to rebuild or protect, unable to do more than poke at life with a mistrustful aperture set at a great distance and haze, where fires burn out and never stop.

And so here he was, walking the greyness, bleaching his mind and soul, waiting for an emptiness to rebuild from. He closed his eyes for

a moment, and could not help but see M, far away and in the same pain and longing, and he knew, there was so much more walking and mourning to do.

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He got himself together. It was time to return. M was flying in from Edmonton to finally move his stuff out. It had been over 2 years, it was a finality both had avoided and delayed. He was worried about M's fragile state, but knew for either of them to move on, it had to happen. So he wrote M, gave him a deadline, and held his breath. It was over a year since they'd seen each other, and he knew the strange power M could still hold for him. Something about M's scratchy voice, some innocent quality of enthusiasms and pain, reached into his soul. And M's smile could melt any coldness he had.

So he made arrangements for M to stay elsewhere, and to have lunches and dinners with friends while M packed. It was remarkable how much M had accumulated. Nearly 1,000 vintage shirts, 200 Starbucks Christmas Ornaments, 100 tins of Altoids. Strange African Art, a taxidermied deer head named Fluffy, somewhere around 35 stuffed hedgehogs. Antique beer signs, folk art, Jack In The Box figures, heavy old furniture. All fit into M's private room in the back. A small cave of hidden comfort and pain. There was something so odd and wonderful about it all, it was hard to live with these years, seeing it abandoned. It also made him long for M, it haunted him in the nights and weakened and weighted him through his days.

This week it would change forever. He knew they could both go through with it. They had to. This was no life for either, this prolonged estrangement, this distance and pain. He looked forward with dread and eagerness.

So M came and he packed. He packed all week, he behaved and he came and went at the agreed upon times. A flat affect from drugs M was on had taken an edge off that he had to admit he missed. And he could not deny that he hadn't felt this good, so at home in the time apart. He knew M was his soul mate, and that they had to continue being torn apart, like a wishbone being split at a holiday meal, or like a bridge blown up in some old war film. And he knew it

would continue to hurt for such a very long, unfiltered and drawn out time.

The movers came, they hugged, they started to cry and they separated. M got on the shuttle to the airport, and he stood there, alone, broken, watching the half of his soul he had long ago surrendered to M leave. They both knew in saying goodbye that it was forever, as neither could bear the pain of seeing each other again. That night would be the first night in a very long time that he would sleep in their apartment, in the bed they had never slept together in.

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He woke early, and was surprised to still be there and living. A bit less then a re-birthing, but something inside said that a start long delayed was finally in place. All he needed to do was rise and do his part. He found himself torn between yearnings for M, the ocean, and something new. He took a lengthy shower, dressed, and went to get coffee down the street.

He passed the frail and wasted away homeless woman doing her crack, the neighbors leaving for work, the shop owners opening up. He looked at the gray sky and the shrouded rising sun. He hadn't really been able to see this place in years. The warmth of the coffee settled in, strengthening and comforting. The blinders and barriers he had built over time were easing up, lifting, allowing that he might live again, sometime soon.

He went back inside, turned on the computer, and emailed some friends a simple email. Thank you for your support this past week. I'm back.

That night B called him. *He's gone?* Yes. *How are you doing?* I'm actually doing pretty well, better then I expected. *Well, you've been hanging on for two years. There's got to be some sense of relief.* Yes, I guess so. I thought I'd be sadder. *You tried your best. He didn't want to get better.* I know, but I couldn't see it. I couldn't see anything really. Thank you for your patience with me. I don't know what I'd do without you. *You'd do the same for me. Are you really*

staying here? For now, yes. Let's have dinner soon. *I'll call you this weekend.*

He'd always had a mild crush on B. Unfortunately, B wasn't capable of more than the quick romance of bathhouses and parks. So they remained good friends, probably a more lasting thing than if they had been lovers.

He sat back at the computer. He opened M's email.

I've made it across the border. My things are still in transit to customs, they'll need to weigh them and take an inventory. It might be a few weeks before they let them through. I miss you already. I know I never took the time to say it while I was there, I'm sorry. For everything. I feel like I left my whole life behind there with you. It's still very cold here. I'll be moving to Vancouver later this summer. Please write if you feel up to it. The hedgehogs say hi.

Love, M

He cried, held his head in his hands. He felt like half a starfish, squirming and severed, aching for a rock to attach to, to feel the ocean waves washing over him again and again. He could not delete the email, but he had the strength to not answer.

He closed his eyes. He remembered their drive through the Nevada desert. Their stay at the garish Nevada Hotel in Ely with its Christmas lights, taxidermy animals and hanging motorcycles decorating the slot machine area. It was not unlike their apartment. The afternoon in Las Vegas at the Boulder Station, swimming in the abandoned pool in the heat, making love that afternoon with the curtains open, overlooking the barren ugliness of a town built where one should never have been.

They had been so in love.

He lay on the couch, covered himself up and spent the rest of the morning weeping. *These waters of pain, of healing and cleansing, are statements of hope.* He felt he was hallucinating. *These pains in your body, they are re-birthing and rebuilding, though the effects may not be evident for years.* He did not understand. He knew he had spent too long alone at the ocean, but this was a new voice he had not yet heard. *These moments are sacred; do not move from this*

couch. This is the ritual of now, and you must choose presence, even if it means severe pain and remorse. Your space has been opened, and you have nothing to fill it with. These things will cause great pain and take time.

He tried to sleep but could not. He tried to get up but could not. A giant massive weight was crushing him, was holding him hostage and he could not escape it's raging grip. *Lean into the struggle my friend. That's all you can do.*

And so he leaned. He leaned with everything possible, he cried for days, he slept, he cried some more. Finally he rose and he prayed. He prayed and he cried and he swam in the grief and the sadness and the hope of rebirth. Slowly, very slowly, something new was growing within, it was growing and bringing a newness that had been vanished and hidden, it was growing but he kept crying. And the prayers and the strange voice became one. But a sickness had lodged within, a resistance to the growth, a desire to self destruct.

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One day he will wake. He will draw on an enigmatic and awkward inner strength. It may even start to resemble something. Maybe not the same level of connection, but maybe not the same level of self destruction either. He became so used to being the ship at sea in a storm, being swayed in all directions, he's not sure how to stand on the solid ground with someone else now.

But he will put on his shoes, say a prayer, find a small spot where the sun is out, and breath in the air. The sacred air of life and living. He will begin his search for a humble life, a faithful steady path, a place to release the toxins and patterns of the illnesses he had been guarding and protecting for some length of time.

Where one door closes, one creaks and cracks slightly open. It just needs the effort of the closing and opening, the opening and looking out. It is a lesson of free will, hard won and bought with the pain of the longing of the ages. The ages of time, compressed and built into now. He has been a careful gatekeeper. It is time to give up the position, he has nothing to guard or protect now.

