

Nights Without Stars

When someone is lost and can't seem to make sense of the path that they're on, others feel the need to share advice and offer help. It would be a blessing to the weary wanderer if the advice would actually work in their situation. However, most advice is all the same. Everyone knows that the North star can help you find your way. Surely the lost soul would benefit from hearing this platitude again and again.

But some nights there are no stars. The clouds are a ceiling—thick and gray like the damp stone of a long-abandoned military fort. Our misguided friend is taken aback by the advice. *If the North star will provide me direction, then why can I not see it?* If everyone else knows this, then there must be something wrong with the one who's lost. Guilt and shame build up like the water droplets collecting in the atmosphere. Soon the whole world is overcast and dark for the tired traveler, but everyone else seems to carry on just fine. Every night for what seems like an eternity seems as though both hope and the North star have abandoned only the one who was lost.

I was once in the same place as the hopeless wanderer. I was the only one lost in a sea of people who knew where they were going. At ten years old I reflected on how people could organize their mind into a room of neatly-stacked boxes. I was sure that my classmates all had separate boxes for classes and recess. Some of my classmates went a step further and split the box labeled “classes” into “teacher is present” and “teacher is out of the room.” But no matter how hard I tried I couldn't manage to organize my mind into a single box. Every thought, every emotion, and every fact I had ever learned was woven into a tangled mess in my mind. There were times where the mess would look like the start of a tapestry—and I was positive that I would eventually finish it—but I never did, and most of the time my memories were in a constant disarray. Braids of ideas and chains of opinions formed before I could begin to comprehend them. At the end of each day I would rest my head on chaotic knot of

various strings and materials. It was confusing and uncomfortable; it was then that I realized that I was lost.

For any hiker or avid explorer, being lost in unfamiliar terrain is a great fear. Not only is there the potential for humiliation from other hikers in your group, but there is also the self-abasement that comes later. It hurts to let down those who have counted on you to guide them. In my young mind, it would help everyone around me if I just stayed quiet and lead others without showing any sign of potential weakness. I counted on the fact that eventually there would be a sign somewhere near the end of the journey that welcomed us to our destination. At that point, I would smile from relief and try to forget about the mental anguish I went through during the expedition. I would finally catch a break. Until then, however, I could not show how much I longed for the journey to end. Eventually I didn't care how the journey ended. Whether I finally saw the sign or the trail abruptly ended or even if I didn't wake up from a starless night, it would all be the same.

So this was my new way of life. The winding trails were beautiful, no doubt about that, but the elusive sign at the end of the trail would be far better looking than any natural landscape. My thoughts continued to blur together, but I often told myself that as long as I remained as poised as before I would turn out alright. After all, no one else around me showed any sign of pain, so I could not be the first to succumb to admittance. No, not when I felt that there was so much at stake.

At twelve years old I panicked when I realized that I could not keep my guard up all the time. In hindsight, no guard—figurative or literal—would want to work in the conditions that I demanded. I ate very little food because I did not want anyone to assume that over-eating was connected to my poor mental state. I slept very little because my mind was straining to behave like how I supposed a normal person would behave. I used very little supplies in general because I didn't want to burden my family or anyone in my close proximity. Thus, my guard was forced to stay up for long hours on tight rations and a tighter budget. It would be enough to make anyone break.

And I did break. I sat on the edge of my bed and cried for hours. Day after day I grew accustomed to the heaviness in my shoulders and the knots in my throat and stomach. The emotional pain had begun to take physical effects on my body. Walking the same trails for weeks had caused my socks to wear away and my feet to collect giant blisters that only I could notice. As long as my blisters were covered by my shoes, I would still be alright. I would not point my injuries out and I would not let anyone else point my injuries out, either. So my hair fell into my face to hide my red eyes with dark trenches dug underneath them. My day-to-day attire resembled that of the walls in the middle school that I attended. There were entire weeks during the school year that I would not breathe a word. All that my teachers needed were my words on a graded assignment. They did not need to know me and neither did the other students. I remember specific moments when my own voice sounded so inexplicably foreign because I didn't use it often enough.

Eventually I began to laugh bitterly about myself, hoping that no one would join in. After all, there is no fun in snapping a glow-stick that was already snapped a week ago. I joked that only I—of all the people I knew—would be the one to remain as silent as a freezing winter morning. It was hilarious that the witty story-writer and avid language-learner could count the number of words that they spoke in the past month. Sometime in between sleeping and waking I would grimace to myself because of the pure inanity of it all. A part of me jeered that there was no sign at the end of the trail and that I was simply leading the people in my life around and around in circles. I'd imagine how aimless that would look like from a distance. A bird in the sky would see me as a stupid, stubborn ant that couldn't escape its own cycle. Yet still, a part of me worried that everyone around me *knew* that I was leading them in circles. I thought that they would probably know, but in order to preserve my pride they let me continue on my way. I began to think that I was hurting everyone else around me. Bitter fits of giggling turned into bitter crying every night until early morning.

Strangely enough, my internal shame led to my eventual decision to seek help. I had already heard every trite saying about finding direction, but moss grows on every side of the tree and there are still nights without stars. There were still options that I was willing to try, such as staying put and making sure that your basic needs are covered, but up until this point I was too proud to stop walking and admit the reality of my situation. Somewhat begrudgingly, I began the treatment I needed to sort out the mental anguish that I was going through. My inner circle came together to comfort me in the process. I am incredibly grateful for all the support during the darkest, coldest nights that made me question if the stars had really abandoned me like how I wanted to abandon myself.

Despite my initial improvements, I am still in recovery. The blisters on my feet are just as painful as before, but they are clean and bandaged now. My hair is pulled from my face to allow me to take in sights with wide eyes. I still feel inadequate and incomplete sometimes, but I know that I have the ability to move forward like all of the other explorers I've known. The gap between the person I am today and the person I want to become motivates me instead of mocks me. Being lost does not frighten me as much as it did before.

During many cloudy nights I look up at the sky with the hope to find stars. I appreciate their quiet guidance when I can see them, but I try other strategies when I can't. When others inevitably offer the same trite advice, I reflect on their empathy rather than blame myself. Nights that they may have been lost or confused were nights that the stars were visible. The stars gave them a faint speck of determination that they believe will assist me when I need it. Their intentions are often pure, and for that I am grateful even if they weren't able to alleviate any burdens. As both friends and near-strangers enter in and out of my life, I feel a greater urge to pay their kindness forward by helping those that are lost. If there ever was a reason for the pain I that I experienced, I hope that it will be when I find a weary traveler whose soul has been broken by the nights without stars.