

Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese

a short story

by Nicola Griffith

I sat by the side of the road in the afternoon sun and watched the crane fly struggle. A breeze, hot and heavy as a tired dog's breath, coated the web and fly with dust. I shaded my eyes and squinted down the road. Empty. As usual. It was almost two years since I'd seen anything but Jud's truck on Peachtree.

Like last month, and the month before that, and the third day of every month since I'd been out here alone, I squashed the fear that maybe this time he wouldn't come. But he always did come, rolling up in the cloud of dust he'd collected on the twenty mile drive from Atlanta.

I turned my attention back to the fly. It kept right on struggling. I wondered how it felt, fighting something that didn't resist but just drained the life from it. It would take a long time to die. Like humankind.

The fly had stopped fighting by the time I heard Jud's truck. I didn't get up and brush myself off, he'd be few minutes yet; sound travels a long way when there's nothing filling the air but bird song.

He had someone with him. I sighed. Usually, Jud would give me a ride back down to the apartment. Looked like I'd have to walk this time: the truck was only a two-seater. It pulled up and Jud and another man, about twenty-eight I'd guess, maybe a couple of years younger than me, swung open their doors.

"How are you, Molly?" He climbed down, economical as always with his movements.

"Same as usual, Jud. Glad to see you." I nodded at the supplies and the huge gasoline drums in the back of the truck. "A day later and the generator would've been sucking air."

He grinned. "You're welcome." His partner walked around the front of the truck. Jud gestured. "This is Henry." Henry nodded. Like Jud, like me, he wore shorts, sneakers and t-shirt.

Jud didn't say why Henry was along for the ride but I could guess: a relapse could hit anybody, anytime, leave you too exhausted even to keep the gas pedal down. I hoped Henry was just Jud's insurance, and not another piece in the chess game he and I played from time to time.

"Step up if you want a ride," Jud said.

I looked questioningly at Henry.

"I can climb up into the back," he said. I watched him haul himself over the tailgate and hunker down by a case of tuna. Showing off. He'd pay for the exertion later. I shrugged, his problem, and climbed up into the hot vinyl seat.

Jud handled the truck gently, turning into the apartment complex as carefully as though five hundred people still lived here. The engine noise startled the nuthatches nesting in the postal center into a flurry of feathers; they perched on the roof and watched us pull up ten yards in, at what had been the clubhouse. I remember when the brass Westwater Terraces sign had been shined up every week: only three years ago. Six months after I'd first moved in people had begun to slow down and die off, and the management had added a few things, like the ramps and generator, to try and keep those who were left. It felt like a lifetime ago. I was the only one still here.

"Tiger lilies are looking good," Jud said. They were, straggling big and busy and orange all around the

clubhouse; a feast for birds and bees.

The gasoline drums were lashed down, to stop them moving around the flatbed during the drive to Duluth. Henry untied the first and trundled it forward on its casters until it rested by the tailgate.

Inside the clubhouse the dark was hot and moist; a roach whirred when I uncoiled the hose. Back out in the sun I blew through it to clear any other insects, and spat into the dust. I put one end in the first drum.

I always hated the first suck but this time I was lucky and avoided a mouthful of gas. We didn't speak while the drums drained. It was an unseasonable May: over ninety degrees and humid as hell. Just standing was tiring.

"I don't mind walking the rest," I said to Henry.

"No need." He pulled himself back up into the flatbed. More slowly this time. I didn't bother wasting my energy telling him not to use up his trying to impress a woman who was not in the least bit interested.

Jud started up the truck then let it coast the twenty yards down the slope to the apartment building I was using. When he cut the engine, we just sat there, listening to it tick, unwilling to step down and start the hauling around of cases that would leave us aching and tired for a week. Jud and I had worked out a routine long ago: I would go and get the trolley; he would unbolt the tailgate and slide out the ramp; he'd lift cases onto the trolley; I'd trundle them into the apartment. About halfway through we'd stop for iced tea, then swap chores and finish up.

This time, when I went to get the trolley, it was Henry who rattled the bolts on the tailgate and manhandled the ramp down from the flatbed in a squeal of metal. I did my third of the lifting and carrying, but it felt all wrong.

When we were done, and the cans of tuna and tomato and cat food, the sacks of flour and beans, the packets and cases and bottles and tins were all heaped in the middle of the living room floor and we'd bolted the tailgate back up, I invited them both into the cool apartment for iced tea. We sat. Henry wiped his face with a bandanna and sipped.

"That's good on a dusty throat, Ms. O'Connell."

"Molly."

He nodded acknowledgement. I felt Jud watching, and waited for the inevitable. "Nice place you have here, Molly. Jud tells me you've stayed here on your own for almost three years." It was closer to two since Helen died, but I let that pass. "You ever had any accidents?"

"One or two, nothing I couldn't handle."

"Bet they gave you a scare. Imagine if you broke your leg or something: no phone, nobody for twenty miles around to help. A person could die out here." His tanned face looked earnest, concerned, and his eyes were very blue. I looked at Jud, who shrugged: he hadn't put him up to this.

"I'm safe enough," I said to Henry.

He caught my tone and didn't say anything more right away. He looked around again, searching for a neutral subject, nodded at the computer. "You use that a lot?"

"Yes."

Jud decided to take pity on him. "Molly's writing a book. About how all this happened, and what we know about the disease so far."

"Syndrome," I corrected.

Jud's mouth crooked in a half smile. "See how knowledgeable she is?" He drained his glass, hauled himself off the couch and refilled it in the kitchen. Henry and I did not speak until he got back to the couch.

In the past, Jud had tried everything: teasing me about being a misanthrope; trying to make me feel guilty about how the city had to waste valuable resources sending me supplies every month; raging at my selfishness. This time he just tilted his head to one side and looked sad.

"We need you, Molly."

I said nothing. We'd been through this before: he thought I might be able to find a way to cure the syndrome; I told him I hadn't much chance of succeeding where a decade of intense research had failed. I didn't blame him for trying--I was probably one of the last immunologists alive--it's just that I didn't think I could do anything to help: I and the world's best had already beaten our heads bloody against that particular brick wall and gotten nowhere. I'd done everything I could, and I'd had a very good reason to try achieve the impossible.

I had tried everything I knew, followed every avenue of enquiry, run down every lead. Working with support and good health, with international cooperation and resources, I got nowhere: my promising leads led to nothing, my time ran out, and Helen died. What did they think I could achieve now, on my own?

They'd told me, once, that they would take me into Atlanta forcibly. I said: fine, do that, see how far it gets you. Coercion might make me go through the motions, but that's all. Good research demanded commitment. Stalemate. But the way they saw it, I was their only hope, and maybe I would change my mind.

"Why do you stay?" Henry said into the silence.

I shrugged. "I like it here."

"No," Jud said slowly, "you stay because you still like to pretend that the rest of the world is getting on fine, that if you don't see that Atlanta is a ghost town you won't have to believe it, believe any of this is real."

"Maybe you're right," I said lightly, "but I'm still not leaving."

I stood, and went to rinse my glass. If the people of Atlanta wanted to bring me food and precious gasoline in an attempt to keep me alive until I changed my mind, I wasn't going to feel guilty. I wasn't going to change my mind either. Humanity might be dying, but I saw no reason why we should struggle, just for the sake of struggling, when it would do no good. I am not a crane-fly.

I woke up briefly in the middle of the night to the soft sound of rain and eerie chorus of bullfrogs. Even after two years I still slept curled up on one side of the bed; I still woke expecting to see her silhouette.

My arms and hips ached. I ran a hot bath and soaked for a while, until I got too hot, then went back to bed where I lay on my back and did chi kung breathing. It helped. The song of bullfrogs steadied into a

ratchety rhythm. I slept.

When I woke the sky was still red in the east. The bedroom window no longer opened so I padded stiffly through into the living room and slid open the door onto the deck. The air was cool enough for spring. I leaned on my elbows and looked out across the creek; the blind-eyed buildings on the other side of the gully were hidden by white swamp oaks that stretched their narrow trunks up into a sky the same powder blue as a bluebird's wing. To the right, sun gleamed on the lake. Birds sang, too many to identify. A cardinal flashed through the trees.

My world. I didn't want anything else. Jud was partially right: why should I want to live in Atlanta among people as sick as myself, listen to them groan when they woke up in the morning with stiff knees and stomach cramps, watch them walk slowly, like geriatrics, when I had all this? The birds weren't sick; the trees did not droop; every spring there were thousands of tadpoles in the pond. And none of them depended on me, none of them looked at me with hope in their eyes. Here, I was just me, just Molly, part of a world that offered no pain, no impossible challenge.

I went inside, but left the door open to the air and bird song. I moved jerkily, because my hips still hurt, and because I was angry with all those like Jud who wanted to fight and fight to their last breath. Humankind was dying. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out: if women had so little strength that they died not long after childbirth, then the population would inevitably dwindle. Only five or six generations before humanity reached vanishing point.

I wanted to enjoy what I could of it; I wanted to write this book so that those who were born, if they survived the guilt of their mothers' death, would at least understand their doom. We might not understand the passing of the dinosaurs, but we should understand our own.

After breakfast I put on some Bach harpsichord music and sat down at the keyboard. I pulled up chapter three, full of grim statistics, and looked it over. Not today. I exited, called up Chapter One: How It All Began. I wrote about Helen.

We'd been living here at Westwater Terraces for two months. I remember the brutal heat of the August move. We swore that next time we had to carry desks and packing cases, we'd make sure it was in March, or October. Helen loved it here. I'd get home from the lab after a twenty minute drive and she'd bring me iced tea and tell me all about how the fish in the lake--she called it the pond, too small for a lake, she said--were growing, or about the turtle she saw on her lunchtime walk and the way a squirrel had filled its mouth with nuts, and she'd ease away all the heat and snarl of a hard day's work and the Mad Max commute. The pond was her inspiration--all those wonderful studies of light and shadow that hang on people's walls--her comfort when a show went badly or a gallery refused to exhibit. I rarely bothered to walk by the pond myself, content to see it through her eyes.

Then she won the competition, and we flew to Bali--for the green and the seelight, she said--on the proceeds. I was grateful for those precious weeks we had in Bali.

When we got home, she was tired. The tiredness got worse. Then she began to hurt, her arms, her knees, her elbows. We assumed it was some kind of flu, and I pampered her for a while. But instead of getting better, she got worse: headaches, nausea, rashes on her face and arms. Moving too fast made her lower body go numb. When I realized she hadn't been around the pond for nine days, I knew she was very sick.

We went to the doctor who had diagnosed my gastro-enteritis last year. She suggested Helen had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. We did some reading. The diagnosis was a blow, and a relief. The

Syndrome had many names--Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Chronic Epstein-Barr, Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome, Chronic Immune Dysfunction, Yuppie Flu--but no clear pattern, no cure. Doctors scratched their heads over it, but then said not to worry: it was self-limiting, and there had been no known deaths.

We saw four different doctors, who prescribed everything from amino-acid supplements to antibiotics to breathing and meditation. The uncertain leading the ignorant. Most agreed that she would be well again, somehow, in two or three years.

There were weeks when Helen could not get out of bed, or even feed herself. Then there were weeks when we argued, taking turns to alternately complain that she did too much, or not enough. In one three month period, we did not make love once. Then Helen found out about a support group, and for a while we felt positive, on top of things.

Then people with CFS began to die.

No one knew why. They just got worse over a period of weeks until they were too weak to breathe. Then others became infected with a variation of the syndrome: the course of the disease was identical, but the process accelerated. Death usually occurred a month or so after the first symptom.

Helen died here, the day the Canada geese came. She was lying on the couch, one hand in mine, the other curled loosely around Jessica, who was purring by her hip. It was Jessica who heard the geese first. She stopped purring and lifted her head, ears pricked. Then I heard them too, honking to each other like they owned the world. They arrowed past, necks straining, wings going like the northwind and white cheeks orangy yellow in the evening sun. Helen tried to sit up to look.

They circled the lake a couple of times before skimming in to land. Their wake was still slapping up against the bridge posts when Helen died. I sat there a long time, holding her hand, glad that she'd heard the geese.

They woke me at dawn the next day, honking and crying to each other through the trees on their way to wherever. I lay and listened to the silence they left behind, realized it would always be silent now: I would never hear Helen breathe beside me again. Jessica mewed and jumped up onto the bed; I stroked her, grateful for her mindless warmth and affection.

I came home tired from the funeral, with that bone-deep weariness that only comes from grief. Or so I thought. It took me almost a week to realize I was sick too.

The disease spread. No one knew the vector, because still no one was sure what the agent was: viral, bacterial, environmental, genetic? The spread was slow. There was plenty of time for planning by local and national bodies. It was around this time that we got the generator at the complex: the management were still thinking in terms of weathering the crisis, persuading occupants that it was safe for them to stay, that even if the city power failed, and the water systems, they'd be fine here.

There's something about the human race: as it slowly died, those that were left became more needy of each other. It seemed that we all became a little kinder, too. Everyone pulled inward, to the big cities where there was food, and power, and sewage systems. I stayed where I was. I figured I'd die soon, anyway, and I had this irrational urge to get to know the pond.

So I stayed, but I didn't die. And gradually it became clear that not everyone did. The latest count indicated that almost five percent of the world's population has survived. The deaths have been slow and inevitable enough that those of us who are still here have been able to train ourselves to do whatever it takes to stay alive. It wasn't so hard to keep things going: when the population is so small, it's surprising

how many occupations become redundant. Insurance clerks now work in the power stations; company executives check sewage lines; police officers drive threshing machines. No one works more than four hours a day; we don't have the strength. None of us shows any signs of recovering. None but the most foolish still believe we will.

Westwater Terraces is built around a small lake and creek. Behind the water, to the west, are deciduous woods; other trees on the complex are a mix of conifers and hardwoods: white pine and oak, birch and yellow poplar. The apartment buildings are connected by gravel paths; three white-painted bridges span a rivulet, the creek, and the western end of the lake.

I stood on the bridge over the rivulet, the one Helen and I had always called the Billy Goats' Gruff bridge, and called for Jessica. Weeds and sycamore saplings pushed through the gravel path to my left; a dead oak straddled the path further up. Strong sun made the cat food in the dish by my feet smell unpleasantly.

The paint on the bridge was peeling. While I waited, I picked at it and wondered idly why paint always weathered in a pattern resembling a cross-section of epithelial cells, and why the wood always turned silvery gray.

Today I missed Jessica fiercely, missed the warmth of her on my lap and her fur tickling my nose when I tried to read. I hadn't seen her for over a week; sometimes the cat food I put out was eaten, sometimes it wasn't. A warbler landed on the bridge and cocked its head, close enough for me to see the gleam of its bright eye and the fine wrinkles on the joints of its feet.

I waited longer than usual, but she didn't come. I scrunched over the gravel feeling annoyed with myself for needing to hold another warm living creature.

Late morning was edging towards noon and the sun was hot on my shoulders. I was thirsty, too, but didn't want to go back to the beige walls of my apartment just yet.

The lake used to have three fountains. One still works, which I regard as a minor miracle. A breeze pulled cool, moist air off the surface of the water and through my hair. A frog plopped out of sight, warned of my approach by the vibration of my footsteps. The ripple of its passing disturbed the duckweed and the water lilies. They were open to the light: white, pink, yellow. A bee hummed over the rich yellow anthers and I wondered if any ever got trapped when the lilies closed in the afternoon.

The bridge spanning the thinner, western end of the lake was roofed, a kind of watery gazebo reigned over by spiders. I crossed carefully, watchful of their webs. Helen used to call it running the gauntlet; some of the webs stretched five feet in diameter, and very few were empty.

For me, the bridge was a divide between two worlds. The lake lay on the left, the east, a wide open expanse reflecting the blue sky, rippling with fountain water, surrounded by white pine and yellow iris. The right, the western end, was the pond: green and secret, shrouded by frogbit and lily pads. Stickleback and carp hung in the shadow of cattails and reeds, finning cool water over their scales.

There are almost a dozen ducks here, mallards mostly. And their ducklings. Careful of webs, I leaned on the rail to watch. The one with the right wing sticking up at a painful angle was paddling slowly toward a weeping willow on the left bank. Two of her three ducklings hurried after her. I wondered where the other one was.

It was getting too hot to be out.

Walking around the other side of the lake to get back to the roadway was hard work. The ground sloped steeply and the heat was getting fierce. Storms brought heavy rains in the summer and they were gradually washing away the dirt path, making it unsafe in places. The lake was twenty five, maybe thirty, feet below me now and to my left, partially screened by the trees and undergrowth on the sloping bank. I heard a peeping noise from the water, just behind a clump of arrowhead. Maybe it was the missing duckling. I stepped near to the edge to get a closer look.

I felt the bucket-size clump of dirt give and slide from under my left foot but my leg muscles, already tired from the heat and the climb, couldn't adapt to the sudden shift. My body weight dropped to one side with nothing to hold it but bone and ligament. I felt the ligament tear and pop and bones grind together. Then I fell, rolling and sliding down the slope, pain like a hot rock in my stomach.

I crashed into the knobbed bark of an oak; it took the skin off my back and shoulder. I saw the mossy rock clearly just before I hit it.

I woke to heat thick enough to stand on. My mouth was very dry and my cheek hurt. My face was pressed against a tree root. I blinked and tried to sit up. The world swooped sickeningly. This time my face fell on grass. It felt better at first, not so hard.

I was hurt. Concussion at least. Something crawled down my cheek and into my ear. It took me a moment to realize it was a tear; it felt like someone else was crying, not me. I closed my eyes and began my testing with the left leg, moving it just an inch or so. More tears squeezed out from under my eyelids: the ankle and knee felt like they were being cut into with a rusty rip saw. I moved my right leg. That was fine. My left arm seemed all in one piece, but moving the right hurt my ribs. I remembered hitting the tree. Probably just bruising.

I opened my eyes. The tree root my face had been resting on belonged to a smooth-barked birch. If I was sitting up I might be able to think.

I pulled my right leg under me and pulled myself forward with my left elbow. My moan startled a lizard sunning itself behind a leafy clump of purple loosestrife; its belly flashed blue as it skittered through the undergrowth and disappeared into a rotting tree stump. Sweat wormed over my scraped ribs, stinging. I dragged myself forward again.

I had to lift my head, bring my right elbow down to hip level and twist to roll over onto my back. The pain and the dizziness pulled thick, stringy nausea up over my skin. I thought I was going to pass out. After a moment, I sat up, shuffled back a couple of feet, and leaned against the tree.

The sun shone almost directly into my eyes. The floating sunlotus were open now, damselflies flashing metallic blues and greens against the rich yellow cups: must be about three o'clock in the afternoon. The air was still and quiet; the frogs silent and the birds sleepy. Fountain water pattered and splashed. I was very thirsty, and the air felt too hot and big in my lungs.

The slope stretched more than twenty feet upward to the path. I could do it if I moved in a zig-zag and used every tree for support, and if I started soon: I was dehydrated and every moment I spent out here in the sun made it worse. The water was about ten feet away, downslope, almost hidden by the tangle of ivy, undergrowth and dead wood.

I edged myself around the bole of the birch and shuffled backwards. The next closest tree was a white pine, about five feet away to the right. I had to stop four times before I got to within touching distance of the pine. I rested against its trunk, panting. The bark was rough and smelled of sun-warmed resin.

It was taking too long: at this rate, the sun would have leached away all my strength before I got even halfway up the slope. I had to risk moving faster. That meant standing up.

I wrapped my arms around the trunk and got myself onto my right knee. The soil was cool and damp on my bare skin. I hauled myself up. The ridged trunk glided in and out of focus.

The next tree was close, only two feet directly up-slope. Trying not to think how easy this would be if both legs worked, I took a deep breath and hopped.

The world came crashing down around my head.

I opened my eyes. The pool was slicked with sunset, hot and dark and mysterious. Whirligigs and waterboatmen dimpled the surface. My hand hung in the water. I pulled my face forward a few inches and lapped. Some went up my nose and dribbled down my chin, but enough went into my mouth to swallow a couple of times.

I drank again. It tasted odd, thin and green, but I could feel the good it was doing me. My cheeks felt hot and tight: sunburn. I dipped one side of my face in the water, then the other, then rested my forehead on my arm. Cicadas filled the evening with their chitinous song.

It looked like I'd been out four hours or more. No point beating myself over the head with my stupidity. The best thing I could do for myself right now was rest, wait for the coolth of night, rehydrate. Then think.

Swallows dipped and skimmed over the center of the lake, drinking in flight, snipping up unwary insects with wing-flicking grace. A cotton mouse nosed her way out from under a pile of leaves and scampered from the shelter of a log to a tree root. She sat up and gnawed on a seed.

I tried not to think about the green peppers ripening on the slope behind my apartment, of the fish in the freezer and fruit in the refrigerator.

About two feet away, a big spider sat on a lily pad, perfectly still but for one of its back legs that hung in the water, twitching. I thought maybe the leg was trapped by something, some hidden weed, but the rhythm was too deliberate; the spider was using the surface of the water as a drum. A mosquito fish came to investigate. It was tiny, no longer than a fingernail. The spider shot out its front legs and hauled the fish onto the lily pad, into its mouth.

The sunset had turned to purple and I could see stars. Tonight I couldn't recognize any of them; they looked cold and alien. It was cooling rapidly now, but I made no attempt to sit up.

My concussion and exhaustion had prompted a poor decision earlier: heading upslope was not the only way. If I could see a route along the lake shore that was relatively clear of undergrowth, I could walk or crawl around it until I reached the eastern end where the bank was only four or five feet high. That route would also bring me closer to the roadway that led to the apartment.

I blinked. I'd been asleep: the moon was up. This time, I could dip my hand into the water and bring it to my mouth to drink. I felt less like a wounded animal, more like a thinking, reasoning human being.

All around the pond, bullfrogs were singing. The moon was bright enough to reflect the flutter of trapped wings four feet from where I lay: perfectly still, a frog sat half hidden by cattails, a caddisfly in its mouth. The fly stopped struggling; they only lived a few hours anyway. Born without mouths, they reproduced then died. The frog's eyes glittered cold in the moonlight, watching me. Bullfrogs lived fifteen years.

They sang louder, following each other's lead, altering duration, pitch and rhythm until the water boomed and echoed with their song. Tree frogs buzzed in the higher registers. I felt surrounded and menaced by sound.

Leaves rustled; a shadow eased through the undergrowth behind me. I turned my head slowly, faced two green eyes like headlights. Jessica. A friendly face.

"Jess. Here baby." She sniffed at my hip. I patted my chest, an invitation for her to snuggle. She froze. "Come on Jess. Come here baby." She sniffed my hand, and purred. I laughed. "Yes, you wild thing. It's me." Your friend.

She licked my hand. I lifted it to stroke her. She hissed. "It's me, Jess. Me." She regarded me with cold emerald eyes; in the moonlight, her teeth looked like old ivory.

A small creature, maybe the cotton mouse, scuttled somewhere close to the water. Jessica crouched, bellied forward.

I remembered how she had looked as a seven-week old kitten, the way she had comforted me when Helen died.

Now I saw her as she had always been: a hunter, a wildcat who only licked my hand for the salt. I was not part of her world. I was not any part of anything's world. What I saw when I looked into the eyes of a frog or a mouse was nothing: not fear, not affection, not even contempt.

But I stayed. For Helen. To be part of the world Helen had loved. But staying here did not make me part of Helen's world: Helen was dead. Gone. She'd gone and left me with nothing. No one. It wasn't fair. I didn't want to be alone.

I beat on the dirt with my fist. Why had she died and left me alone? Why? Why, Helen?

"Tell me why!"

My scream was raw, too hot, too human for this place. Tears rolled down my cheeks, big tears, big enough to reflect the world a new way. Helen was gone, and the geese were gone; I could stay here forever and she would never come back. I shouldn't be here.

The realization made me feel remote, very calm.

I sat up, ignoring the pain. Getting my t-shirt off was difficult; stretching for the branch two feet away, even worse. The t-shirt was already ripped; it made it easier for me to tear it into strips. I had to try several times before I could tie secure knots around the makeshift splint. Whenever the pain got too much, I rested.

An owl hooted, hunting.

I levered myself up onto knee and elbows, left leg stuck out behind me, stiff in its splint. Pain was just pain.

I dragged myself forward through a monochrome world: water sleek and black; trumpet honeysuckle leached lithium gray; moonlight lying like pools of mercury on leaves the color of graphite. Nature, thinking there was no one there to observe, let slide the greens and purples, the honey yellows, and showed her other face: flat, indifferent, anonymous.

I imagined making my pain as impersonal as nature's night face, putting it in a pouch at the small of my

back, zipping the pouch shut. Out of sight, out of mind. Somewhere, I knew, there was a place where all the colors and scents of the day waited for morning, and then I would smell iris and pine resin, rich red dirt and green pond scum. And feel the hot orange jags of pain. In the morning.

Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag. I focused on the tree forty yards away on the eastern bank, the tree I would use to haul myself upright and up onto the road. Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag.

Behind me, I heard the squeak of a small animal. The cotton mouse. Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag. The night stretched on.

The tree bark was rough on hands and arms already red raw. No pain until morning. I pulled myself up the incline. The road felt marvelously smooth. I lay my cheek on the asphalt and breathed in the smell of dust and artificial things. Below, the pond glimmered, obsidian. The bullfrogs sang.

My ankle was not broken. I suspected that several ligaments were torn, in my ankle and knee, but distalgesics and support bandages kept me able to manage until, eight days later, I could get around using a heavy branch as a cane. It was hard to hold the cane: the bandages wrapped around my hands and forearms were thick and clumsy.

I limped out to the deck and lowered myself into the hammock: the sky was thick with churning clouds. Usually, I loved watching the sheer power of a storm, the way it could boom and slash and drive over a hot and parched world, cooling and soaking. This time it was different. This time, when the wind tore through the stand of swamp white oak, it seemed to me that it was killing things, flattening them, exposing them: turning the oak leaves silvery side up, ripping off branches, bending the trees almost to breaking point, pressing the grasses flat to the earth and snapping the heads off the marsh marigold. It was brutal.

I swung myself off the hammock. The show could go on without me. Inside, I made myself hot tea, put on Vivaldi--human music to drown the sound of the storm--and retired to the couch with a book, facing away from the glass doors. Let it do what it wanted. I refused to watch the rain swell the creek until it rose high enough to fill the burrows of voles and mice and drown their young.

My ankle and knee improved and I could walk slowly without the cane. I took the bandages off my arms. I did not go near the pond, and walked only on the black artificial surfaces of the road.

Tonight was soft and warm, there was a quarter moon. I walked over the Billy Goats' Gruff bridge and listened to the frogs singing around the pond. I turned and walked up to the clubhouse. It took me a while to find the red switch handle. I threw it; the floodlight still worked.

I stood on the road overlooking the pond. Sodium light heaved greasily on the water next to the silver ripple of the moon. The water looked mysterious, unknowable, like an ancient harbour lit by naphtha flaming in a great bronze bowl.

I looked at it a long time. Helen was not here, she was in my heart. The pond belonged to the past.

I waited by the side of the road for Jud. There were more flowers, and it was just as hot and dusty, but this time there was no spider web, no crane fly. Just the birds singing, and me sitting on my suitcase. Three of Helen's paintings, wrapped in our sheets, leaned against the gate.

Jud was on his own. He coasted the truck to a stop and climbed down. I stood. He saw the suitcase.

"This mean what I think it means?"

"Yes."

And that's all we said. He always did know when to speak and when to keep quiet. He helped me push the case and the paintings up into the back, in among all the cans and bottles and sacks I wouldn't be needing.

"You want to drive?" he asked. I shook my head. We climbed up. I put the seatbelt on; my life had suddenly become more precious. Jud noticed, but said nothing. He made a U-turn and we set off back along the road to Atlanta.

I leaned my head against the window and watched the dog violets nodding at the side of the road. I had nearly died out here, believing struggling was for fools and craneflies. Perhaps those who struggled were fools, but they were fools with hope. They were human. Helen was dead. I was not. I was sick, yes, but I still had intelligence, direction, purpose. And time. Something craneflies did not have. If I personally could not finish the research I intended, then those who came after me would. I could teach them what I learned; they would build on it. If I struggled and failed, that was not the end. I am not a cranefly.

Story notes

In 1989, in England, I became very ill: lost twenty pounds, couldn't sit up straight, couldn't walk half a block. I had strange, swarming prickles shooting up my back. I got dizzy. I was diagnosed with myalgic encephalomyelitis (it wasn't until 1993 that I found out I had multiple sclerosis). I had to leave my job and go on disability. Six months later, in December, I moved from Hull, England, to Duluth, Georgia, to be with Kelley.

We lived in an apartment complex called Northwoods Lake Court. In December it was a place of greys and browns, bare tree trunks and gravel. It had a lake, with a fountain, that I assumed was artificial and ornamental and empty of life. It mirrored how I felt.

On good days, when Kelley was at work, I would wrap up in hat and scarf and gloves and walk as far as I could around the lake: there were benches every fifteen yards, so if that was as far as I could go, it didn't matter; I could sit and watch the play of rain on water, or sunshine, or the movement of clouds.

Winter turned to spring, and Northwoods Lake greened, delicately at first. I saw the beginnings of cattails and, one day, a fish. After that, new discoveries came almost daily: frogs, a snapping turtle, mosquito fish, damsel flies and dragon flies, lilies and duckweed. I began to feel better.

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