

Last Night

by Ken Martin

A few years ago, I arrive back in Vermont from a post-divorce road trip and inherit a friend's house and buy his car, a slant-six Dodge held together with bumper stickers and duct tape ("Twenty-five? It's worth more than that; I'll give you thirty-five.").

The house is a pagoda of 2x4s and insulation board, squatting on the edge of Lewis Creek by permission of the landowner, a dear but boozy trust funder. But my friend has disappeared to California, and I have landed here, where I leave the car on the dirt road and commute by foot through a swamp to reach the little shelter.

I shouldn't call it a swamp, since no trees yet grow in this low, wet area. But "marsh" sounds too genteel to describe the soggy meadow, where the last stab at land management, an occasional bout of haying, has been abandoned, and the botanical kingdom, left to its devices, is indulging in a free-for-all of succession.

As autumn approaches, the patches of weeds and the swirling tufts of grasses they are usurping form a living tapestry of subtle colors that change throughout the hours and dwindling days. The poor little shelter has become my home of transcendent simplicity, with a Coleman stove, an Aladdin lantern, a chair facing the burbling creek, and a broom for housekeeping. One Indian Summer day I watch colored leaves cover up the deck, and realize I have never been so free, or so rich.

One should pay attention to the moon's habits if one lives in a swamp.

This occurs to me on black nights such as this one, when my neglected and disdained flashlight lies uselessly in the cabin, to which I am returning after cavorting with the Emersons (I made that part up). I've lost track of the moon's journey, and here it is third quarter, when it lags unhelpfully below the Eastern horizon, scurrying to rise by midnight, and losing ground each night, perpetually being lapped by the Sun.

I'm naked except for my hiking boots, having left my clothes in the Tapemobile after I noticed a heavy dew has fallen. It's a clear night in September, not too cold, and the giant cow parsleys tower above my head, showering cold droplets on me as I brush my way through the slot-like path winding through wet goldenrod and boneset.

And how dark it is! There are no neighbor's lights, even in the distances. The Milky Way looks positively garish, draped behind the near bright stars. But none of them can spare enough

photons to guide my cautious steps through the inky depths before my blank eyes. Trying to feel the path, I lose it over and over, sinking into water-filled holes within the phalanxes of weeds.

I pause in my confusion and I look up from the maze. I've been learning the stars. They are all there is to see at night. I recognize the Great Square. I follow one of pale Andromeda's kicking legs, then over a bit, and there it is, M31, a faint smudge of light that is just completing its couple of million year journey to bounce against a rod or two of my retina. Distant it is, but being propelled this way by faint gravity, destined to merge with our own galaxy in a stately celestial collision someday. I look for meaning in all this, but falter and just feel tiny. Oh well, the Milky Way and its stars will always be there, every dark night.

Some time later, another month, another year. By now I've chopped holes through the creek ice to reach the cold water that splashed against me with every swing of the axe, I've had a black mass of carpenter ants boil from my bed in lantern-light, I've had every liquid except kerosene and Scotch freeze solid as I tried to sleep, and I've stumbled through the swamp in the darkness of the moon's third quarter through both mosquitoes and snow.

But tonight, when I park the Tapemobile on the side of the road and turn off the headlights, darkness does not clap shut around me. The car hood glows. The road is bathed in light. I'm dumbfounded, even after I look up and blink against the blinding rays of an alien mercury-vapor security light that has materialized on a roadside power pole. I can't comprehend it; some terrible mistake has been made, a misdirected work order, something, something. I won't need a flashlight to find the path tonight.

In the morning I wake from restless sleep. Glistening white pine branches brush the window, mist rises from the rippling surface of the creek, white clouds float in the sky above the distant road, where no light shines. Perhaps it was a dream, a scurrilous one.

But no, as I learn from my only swamp neighbor, Les, a photographer and artist whose own cabin hides under tall pines upstream. The guy who lives on the hill on the other side of the road ordered the light from the electric company, which is advertising them as a cheap and trouble-free way to banish the dark and expose possible miscreants and naked neighbors.

Les and I commiserate, conferring on what to do. Of course this environmental outrage cannot stand. How is it possible for one person to stick a dirty thumb into the eyes of those who love this little valley for the unspoiled gem it is? It is an unthinking mistake, easy to set right by a small grassroots campaign enlisting the neighboring landowners.

An art project! Of course—correct blight with beauty, an appeal to sensitivity and aesthetics! Within a week we produce fliers, individual paintings by Les illustrating our polite essays and appeals to the neighborhood. We visit the neighbors. Though there are only a handful near enough to be affected, we discover that Ed, the potter in the silo on the next road, is appalled by the spoliation of his favorite vista.

Eventually we climb the illuminated driveway to confront Walter, Mr. Killowatt himself, and find ourselves sitting in floral armchairs in his trailer, sipping coffee and politely expressing our concerns.

“Well, one night last month a carload of people came up our driveway, turned around, and left. It really worried Mabel. So I figured I’d have a light put in for her.”

“But you can’t even see it from up here,” I manage to croak.

He is sympathetic to our professed love of the land. “We’re nature lovers ourselves. That’s why we live here. We feed the birds.”

Les and I shuffle and our cups rattle gently on their saucers.

“I tell you what-- I’ll call the company and see if they can put some kind of shield on it so it won’t bother you so much.”

We call the company ourselves. The light continues to blink on every day at dusk, and blink off every dawn, sparing not one minute of the night from its dazzle. Workers eventually come in an orange crane truck and spray a little black paint on one side of the streetlight, dimming it as much a sunspot on the surface of the Sun.

I hate getting home after sunset these days. I hate the light. I hate the shadow of my body walking away from it, and my Inquisitional dread when walking towards it.

“I’ll lend you my deer rifle” declares a friend to whom I bring my grievance. “You can borrow my chain saw,” offers another. I consider these and other unlikely thoughts that occupy my dreams with other dark figures shuffling incessantly under a phantom light.

But were I to embark on this course of violence, it would probably have to be repeated, again and again, at what cost, and with how much stoking of paranoia in Walter and Mabel, the gentle bird lovers?

The electric company gives up trying to accommodate my claim. The old-timers of the neighborhood are unimpressed by my crusade. “I don’t recall he has a building permit for that cabin, anyway.”

Life goes on. If I turn my back to the light on clear nights I can still see distant parts of our galaxy above the formerly dark landscape. I see Les once in a while, and he tells me that he has gotten used to the light, and actually finds it convenient for getting to his cabin. Et tu?

This day the light went in, although thirty years past, still seems oddly like the present. Although my cabin disappeared just as suddenly, in an ice-dam flood while I was at work, and

the huge twin oak trees on the hill were felled in a storm, and the Tapemobile was towed away, it is that theft of night that still rankles.

I happened to see Ed the potter a few days ago, and mentioned that I was thinking of writing something about the light. He knew immediately what light I meant, and his eyes were distant as he described having felt that half of his favorite view had been taken from him, a grief vivid to this day, long after giving up his country home to move to the suburbs, where there are streetlights on every corner.

I went on to a career of taking roving bands of school kids beyond reach of the hallway bells, where my unspoken lesson plan was just to give them the opportunity to appreciate the simplest things-- sunshine and clouds, wind and stillness, small things eating each other, and whatever slippery creatures they could joyfully extract from the pond.

I never revisited my old valley. Perhaps the light was taken down years ago, and the Milky Way still glows forth on moonless nights, above some earnest country child patiently learning the names of the stars. It had been a shock to discover, as the Indians did, that just loving something does not confer standing. I was just squatting, after all.

Now, as even more of us humans huddle together on the Commons, good intentions and different loves collide. Wind power is opposed by people who love their views, or bear habitat, or silence, or absence of blinking lights. Solar power arrays are bemoaned by those who love the land they will blanket. Everything comes at a cost, too often paid with what someone else thought was theirs.

I love dark night, silence, open spaces, and uncorrected nature. These may turn out to be necessary sacrifices to the progress of humanity. But I'm reminding myself to be a witness for these things, just as others will stand up for what they value most.

Some of us, inevitably, are going to be disappointed.

Ken Martin is a retired science teacher and currently a potter living in Bristol, Vermont.