

Ad Astra Per Aspera

by

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originally published in the 2009 edition of

“Mind’s Eye”

the Johnson County Community College

student literary magazine

A voice echoed through his memory, vibrating like a rung bell, a distant drone dryly reciting the facts: “Blood supplies nerve cells with oxygen, sugar and other vital nutrients. Any loss of blood to the brain deprives the nerve cells of these nutrients. This causes a brief, random firing of neurons, which is interpreted by the brain’s visual cortex as quick pulses of light, or ‘stars’. This phenomenon can be caused by stimulating the eye electronically or simply standing up too quickly, among other things.” In Liam’s case it was a blow to the head.

This information hummed in the back of Liam’s consciousness, but what played through the forefront when he got hit in the alley outside of the bar was Daffy Duck, smiling stupidly at a halo of stars in an old Warner Brothers cartoon. He pictured such a halo of stars encircling his own head, and the sudden absurdity caused him to giggle maniacally while he successfully, though just barely, fought to remain standing.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” the man, a college student Liam didn’t recognize, asked. They all looked the same to Liam every night around closing time in Westport, the run down entertainment and bar district in midtown Kansas City. Liam regained his focus on the young man who had just slammed a fist into the side of his head, meeting him eye to eye, square footed and firm now. He saw the flicker of doubt in the other man’s eyes and slowly spread his lips into a toothy grin. It never failed to work; Liam knew that the leering display of his perfect, pearly white teeth in his haggard, unshaven face got under the skin in these situations. He relished the chaotic doubt he saw and felt while baring his teeth, inviting aggressors to have a go at them, to be the first to mar their bizarrely contrasting perfection. This kid was no different, and Liam tasted his sudden self doubt and savored it.

“Dude, just let it go,” another man said, cautiously eyeballing the scarred and swollen knuckles as Liam clenched and unclenched his fists in casual anticipation. They were a small group of young men and women, ‘twenty-somethings’ taking a break from building their futures to carouse alongside Liam and his kind. They stood in an alley in

the bar district, a milling group of strangers and friends stopping to watch the spectacle. The spectacle of Liam, a fine example of his bulldog breed, who could not remember what exactly had happened for this kid to hit him.

“Luke, ket’s just go,” a pretty blonde tugged on the hitter’s sleeve, striking blue eyes, brows knit with worry. “It’s not worth it.”

Liam fished in his flannel shirt’s breast pocket and pulled out a rumpled pack of cigarettes, his eyes not betraying his delayed recognition of the girl. He couldn’t remember what he had said to her, but he made an unflattering guess. He watched the two as the young man let himself be pulled way, and waggled his eyebrows with a rakish grin when the girl turned to have a last look. He was rewarded with a look of disgust and snorted a brief laugh.

Liam stood in the alley and watched the people walking by for a few moments. Some averted their gaze while others gawked back, if only for a moment. Liam gave a cold eye to a lingerer who seemed disappointed there was no further circus to be entertained by. Liam felt for him the detached disdain one might have for a bug who has rendered food inedible by treading upon it. Liam triumphed in the unspoken challenge and the yoith jerked his gaze away, slouching off.

Liam swayed in place, blood trickling from his slowly swelling left temple, threatening to fall but hanging on to his balance in a way that chronic drunks spend their lives perfecting. He placed a cigarette from his wrinkled pack between his lips, not noticing he had placed the wrong end in, and spent a good minute trying to get his lighter to flame. When it finally did the sharp smell of burning filter cut his nose.

“Shit.” Liam took it out of his mouth and let one of his swaying motions transform into a controlled stumble down the alley toward his car.

“Hey brother, can I get one of those?” an old, homeless man called from his curbside perch at the next corner, eyeballing Liam’s cigarette longingly.

“Here ya go, brother.” Liam handed the ruined cigarette to the grasping homeless man and ignored his request for a light. A moment later Liam had forgotten the incident, the homeless man’s irritated discovery of the burnt filter falling on deaf ears. He rooted in the pack to withdraw the last cigarette, only to toss it into the street without comment when it came out broken in half.

At his car, a bear up Honda CRX with the original paint long ago faded to a pink and rust two-tone, Liam tugged on the sticking door so hard that its sudden release sent it snapping out, denting the door of the car next to his. He flopped into his seat and sorted through the pile of cassette tapes on the passenger side until he found one he felt like listening to. Music to drive drunk by, Liam had owned both the tape and the car since high school. Like Liam, they remained little changed over the past decade or so, only older and shabbier, stubborn anachronisms in the new century.

Liam left Westport and avoided the main streets, winding westward through town. The fall semester was in full swing at the local colleges and the police would be mobbing the bar districts and the routes between them and the dorms and student ghettos like sharks. He took familiar but low traffic streets, driving mostly by habit, his brain swaddled in an alcohol blanket. Across the border in Kansas, 87th Street snaked through the suburban refuges and turned into Old Highway 10, a free and open path into the backside of Lawrence, Kansas, an hour or so through sparsely populated hills and valleys. Liam hoped that it would take him safely past the State Troopers and Sheriff’s Deputies that were sure to be haunting the newer, bigger Highway 10 to the south.

He felt around the pile of tapes on the seat when he grew tired of the first. He had drifted across the center line when a pin-prick of green light flashed into his consciousness. He felt a shot of adrenaline and sat straight up in his seat, swerving

back into his lane as a deer, eyes glowing in the headlights, flicked its ears back and jerked its startled head at his car, turning to disappear back into the trees lining the road.

Liam tightened both of hands on the steering wheel and focused down the highway. Old Highway 10 was lonely and wild, deserted but for the odd driver like Liam and a host of wildlife. Liam came around a curve and spotted a pair of red dots up ahead, the taillights of another vehicle. He worried for a moment if this other vehicle was a cop, then furrowed his brow in confusion when the two dots of light jogged first one way and then the other, and then one rose above the other and stayed there. Liam wasn't sure what this oddity meant and slowed out of caution.

After a few moments of uncertain approach the red dots grew larger, and an old, white Ford pick-up truck came into view, lying on its side in the ditch off the road. In the pool light from his headlights was a deer, back legs splayed out behind her broken hips, fighting her way to the other side of the road. Blood painted the road; Liam saw the animal's ragged breaths in the chill night air. Further ahead Liam spotted a cowboy hat in the middle of the road.

"Oh shit." Liam's world came into sharp, crystal focus as he stopped the car. He shouldered open the reluctant door and tumbled onto the road. He didn't bother to stand erect, but scrambled on his hands and knees toward the upset truck. His car lurched and choked out; he had not bothered to put it in neutral or turn off the engine.

"Oh shit!" Liam tumbled into a kneeling position next to the owner of the cowboy hat. The man looked to be anywhere from in his sixties to a hard-living forties and smelled of Old Spice and Old Crow, but what was most important was that he was pinned at his waist between the truck's cab and the far embankment. Liam raised up on his knees and looked around. There were no houses on this stretch of the highway, and Liam knew the closest public place was the tax free convenience store the Indians from the reservation ran. That was still miles away, and it was closed at this hour anyway.

“Hang on, dude,” Liam said to the man when he rasped out a groan. He wrung his hands for a moment, looking on as the man lolled his head back and forth and whispered incoherent gasps. “Shit, shit, shit. Hang on, dude.”

Liam furiously dug at the ground with his hands, chanting this frantic mantra. He scratched at the ground with his fingertips like an animal, his fingernails cracking and splitting, bleeding. He dug until he could pull the man toward the front of the cab and out from under it. The man yelped as Liam dragged him into the glow of the truck’s headlights. “Sorry dude, oh shit, I’m sorry, dude!”

Liam took another desperate look up the road. He had chosen this highway for its lack of traffic, but now desperately wished someone would come along, anyone who could help. When Liam looked back at the man he began to dry-heave.

“Oh shit, man, oh hell no!” Liam said, aghast at the condition of the man’s mid section. The wound was bad, and the smell of blood was overpowering. “Hang on! Just, hang on!”

Liam’s hands began to work, drilled into non-thinking action by his brief hitch in the Army. There were many things he had never paid attention to or cared about, but he had been made to earn a Combat Life Saver qualification, and now he went through the hurried motions as he had countless times before. The intervening years of booze, drugs and blows to the head had not taken away his knowledge of first aid routine.

“I have you, dude, hang on,” Liam pleaded with the broken man. He tore strips off the man’s Country and Western shirt, applying them as bandages and compresses. He recognized the signs of shock as the man struggled to say something, and tried to control for them. He did everything he knew how, and rebelled against his growing certainty that it was not working. “Don’t, dude. Don’t. I have you. Don’t go, it’ll be alright, man.”

It was almost three in the morning. There was a brisk chill in the air and away from the glow of Kansas City the stars shone brightly in the country sky for Liam. He heard the first autumn leaves rustle across the pavement, and from across the road in the other ditch he heard the injured deer rattle out its last, plaintive breath. Having nothing left to do but apply pressure to his makeshift bandages, Liam looked at the man's face. He was unsuccessfully trying to raise his head, mouth struggling to form the shape of a word. As Liam watched, the light reflecting in the man's eyes faded, and then was gone. He felt the tenseness leave the man's body, and the last word he had struggled so hard to say appeared on his lips as a pink bubble that popped without a sound the moment after it appeared.

"No!" Liam launched into CPR, though he knew it would do no good. Liam knew what it looked like to die, but was driven to continue. He performed CPR furiously, and after a while, when he had to admit defeat, beat on the hood of his car and raged at the impartial night sky and the coldly glittering stars just as furiously.

Liam sat on the pavement between his car and the wrecked truck. He stared at the sky, not thinking, not feeling. He wished he had something to smoke, wondering what he had done with his cigarettes; he knew he had left the bar with a couple for the road. He wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans, the sticky grit a distant discomfort, and blew out a long breath. His gaze fell upon the cowboy hat, sitting perfectly in the middle of the road as if it had been carefully placed there, the owner to return and claim it at any moment.

But the owner could not retrieve his hat, not ever again, and nothing Liam had done had been able to change that. What had the man tried so hard to say? What had he realized was so important it couldn't be left unsaid at that, the last moment of his life? Liam stared at the hat, and came to a decision.

He stoof and walked to the hat, gingerly picking it up, trying not to let the filth from his hands stain the hat's naive perfection. The body remained where the hat's owner had died, and Liam placed the hat over the old man's face, tried to arrange the limbs into a dignified repose. It was all he had left he could do.

Liam looked up at the night sky and noticed the black had turned a deep purple, pink soon to follow, and the further stars were fading out of sight. He knew it would do him no favors to be found at a car wreck after he had spent the whole evening before drinking. There were a multitude of prior offenses on his record, and the Douglas County Sheriff's Office had little sympathy for him. What was he still doing here, anyway?

"Just let it go," Liam said aloud. "It's not worth it."

He didn't look back at the dead man, but he did stop when he spotted a can of Skoal among the detritus that had been from the truck when it overturned. He scooped it up and wedged a dip behind his lip, instantly relieved by the injection of tobacco as he flopped back into his car and coaxed it back to life with a few clicks of the weak starter.

A couple of miles down the road he passed the reservation's convenience store. A tractor with bright lights idled in the gravel parking lot, a plump old man in ratty Carharts and an Elmer Fudd hat raised an arm in absent minded greeting as Liam drove by. Liam raised a finger from the steering wheel, lost in thought.

Tomorrow he was going to clean up, get his shit together and go look for a better job. He liked the thought of that. He was going to wash the blood and dirt off of himself, shave his ugly face and get a haircut. Maybe even go see his mother, tell her how much he loved her. It had been so long since he had told her, and he regretted that he found the words so difficult to say lately.

First, though, he needed a drink. Just to calm his nerves so he could go to sleep.