

Standing Watch Until The Dawn

by Len Gutmann

I don't get there nearly enough. But I made it there one cool evening, after one of those gray late-winter days in Michigan that can sink moods and raise tempers. I couldn't remember when we last saw some sunshine. Since before Lent started, it seemed. I should have offered up those "blahs" and the cruddy day I had. But I was selfish, and was taking them out on my family. After dinner my wife figured it might be a good time for her and the kids to have a break from my grumpiness. "Why don't you go for a drive?" she suggested "You look like you need to get out for a while."

"You sure?" I asked. She nodded. How clever she is, I thought, convincing me that it was I who deserved the break from them.

"Thanks," I said, meaning it. Then I grabbed my coat and hat and the valuable things that go in my pockets, and headed out the door for a place where I could be alone. She knew where I might be going. "Take your time," she said. "And leave your phone off."

The drive was short. When I pulled up, the place seemed lifeless. Our spot was just off the driveway of a strip mall, across a small parking lot, about ninety feet from the clinic. Legally, this was as close as I could stand. Our 40 Days for Life group was unable to fill all of the time slots with round-the-clock participation. Most of the hours were covered by enough dedicated volunteers who could commit to being there when the place was open for business. But it was almost 7:00, and my guess was right. I'd be there by myself. So I parked, and exchanged my keys for the beads I had pocketed. They gave me something to fidget with as I strolled, nervously, to my spot. There, I folded my arms with my back to the street, and tried to settle myself so I could spend some time praying. Arriving is always the hardest.

I was facing south toward the clinic. Above was that gloomy sky, but in the west it was breaking up some. Lit by a hiding sun that had dipped below the horizon, the undersides of the separating clouds went from bright gold on my far right to a sad purple overhead. A hundred reddish shades blended in between, and kept me gazing up.

A familiar voice from my past repeated an old seafarer's saying just then. "Red sky at night, sailor's delight." My father would say that whenever we fished at dusk under skies like this. I'd rather be fishing right now, I realized. Standing out in public on cold concrete... not the most delightful sort of getaway for a Thursday night in early March. If only I could be trolling on a lake, and enjoying some solitude with him.

Looking upward (and remembering back), my eyes were avoiding the structure right in front of me. It's difficult to face a place like that for very long without realizing you have death in your sight. Seeing the dark brown wall out the bottom of my periphery, I zipped the collar of my coat all the way up to my chin. "Women's Care," the sign said. The letters were old and fading, just like the deceit it advertised.

Such a contrast, this man-made brick and mortar barrier, to the true beauty revealed above. Beneath the name and behind the lies, fragile new life is hidden before it is ended. This foreboding place where unheard, unborn children die in secret (or was it the chilly March wind?) sent a shiver of unease down my neck. It's better to look towards heaven, I decided, than to conjure up a glimpse of the gruesome, frightening images that I knew were hiding beyond the façade.

'I'm simply here to pray,' I reminded myself, 'and not to get into a staring contest with death.'

Call me a coward. Or tell me that I don't pray with enough faith or hope. If I did, then maybe I wouldn't have to look away when the evil of abortion is standing right before me. But then, all of us do it. All of us turn our heads. If it wasn't for life's distractions, the dark reality of abortion would be too much to bear.

'I would rather not stand here by myself,' I thought, sending the hint skyward, hoping it would pass through the magnificent colors and reach the Artist above. The dazzling hues meant the day was still alive--though they would soon be fading to black. Maybe He would come closer than the darkening clouds, and comfort me in this cold. Then a doubt arose. With what goes on here, does He ever come near this place?

I was alone with that question for less than a minute, humming a hymn I'd learned long ago. ...*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens, Lord with me abide....* As I hummed the poem, He answered my hint. No, not a miracle or some mystical thing. Just a gift of nature from across the eventide sky.

This time of year the Canadian geese that headed south for the winter are starting to return. He was sending me some of His delegates. A flock of about fifty was making the most of the last bit of light to get their day's journey in. They were heading due north; it looked like their path would cross directly over.

"Thanks for the company," I told Him. I watched as they approached and wondered how far they had flown this day. The evening traffic wasn't too heavy or loud behind me. After watching a short while, I could hear them--honking as they cheered their leader on.

They flew in a perfectly pointed group, angling away from the hero goose, making a triangle drawn neat and symmetrical but without a base. I wondered if

I'd get to see a lead change. If you happen to catch them on their voyages, and you know how they fly, you sometimes catch the changing-of-the-guard move that geese make when the first one falls back to rest from his job. He works the hardest while he's up there. But he can't do it forever. Just long enough to earn the thanks of the birds behind him who fly with less effort in the draft he creates.

I remember as a boy my father explaining this method of flight--which is rather sophisticated, for a bunch of birds anyhow. Even humans see the genius of traveling their way.

"When I was in the Navy, our ships used to line up like they do," he'd recall, pointing his long arm past my ear while he knelt behind me. He liked to take me back with stories of his service in the North Atlantic where his fleet protected convoys of unarmed merchant mariners on their way to supply the Allies. "The lead ship would break the waves, so our sailing wasn't so rough while we rode in the wake. Our engines didn't have to work as hard when we were tagging along." I can still hear the waves. And still feel his chin on my shoulder. His breath warmed my neck.

I superimposed the formation that was getting closer overhead with the warships I pictured from the memory he once shared. My "now" traced over his "then."

"How time flies," I whispered to him. I miss those times when I'd cheer him up with silly puns he had to think about. He liked when I distracted him from his sadness. The past thirty years had been heavy for him--ever since he was told of a grandchild he lost in a building like this one.

"Seems like only yesterday you were telling me about the evil sea creatures that tried to sink your ship." The German submarines were cunning and deadly, hiding until it came time to kill. Each sailor had to take a turn on deck looking out for a periscope or a torpedo's trail. I imagined him close by, the two of us manning the lookout.

"How cold was it when you were out there standing watch?" I asked. A gust stirred up some litter nearby. He talked less after he was told of how his daughter's child was taken. A small cyclone spun some leaves and papers along the pavement. His way of answering, now doubt. It was really cold.

His watch is done now. He left us last June after 83 years of journeying upon this ocean we all have to cross. By the time he pulled into port, he had changed much from those days when he first sailed out on his own. The early part of his life, he was (like many young men of his time) someone who drifted along in life, waiting for his time--his moment in history when it would be his turn to take the lead. For the guard must change, and new leaders must move to the front.

He took it--as many men take on their heroic roles--when he married my mother

and later became a father of four. Breaking headfirst through the difficulties and challenges that fathers confront for their children, he did his job as captain of his family as best he knew how. His kids (three girls and myself) all did the usual drifting along that kids do in youth's easy sailing. We would never know the meaning of self-sacrifice the way he learned it in the war. But we saw him up there, in front, facing the headwinds the world blows at people--especially at men who love their children. And we learned about sacrifice through his deeds and words, especially from the memories he shared.

I miss him these days. Crazy as it sounds, I usually feel his presence now when I come to pray at a clinic. He knows I come here, but that's not why he's present. He knows I can leave. I think he's here for those who can't.

"It seems like only yesterday," I said again, thinking of the time when places like this weren't allowed. But now they are, and fifty million grandchildren are missing.

...Change and decay in all around I see; oh Thou who changest not, abide with me....

The song was stuck in my head, so I hummed to him a little as the geese approached us.

"Tomorrow is Friday," I told him, as if he didn't know. He knew.

He knows what next morning means for the building in front of me. After eight, it will open--and become an evil sea creature rising up from the deep to devour more children and grandchildren. Suddenly I recalled the rest of the fisherman's saying. "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning."

"Can you ask for some geese to fly over when the doors open up?" I asked him. "Or angels?" Anything to fly the little ones home.

In less than twelve hours, the sky would be brightening to my left. I looked to the east, and said a silly prayer, asking heaven to stop the sun from rising. The darkness would keep the clinic from opening, I mused. Plus, in the dark, you can't see the red. "Can't we just wish this place into a black pit far below?" I asked him .

These pretend thoughts--they divert our minds from the unbearable scenes that jump out from behind the brick walls. Those pretending to be blind can't look at them. I could...but barely. Sad visions of the next day's horror, I could see them through the water that my bottom eyelids could no longer contain. I had taken my eyes off of the geese.

They were getting louder.

And so were my prayers.

“Be here tomorrow, dear Father, when the little ones enter those doors I’m trying not look at.” I listened to the honking. Is that some coded communication from God, I wondered, telling me He’ll be ready and waiting--and bringing His own mother with Him to hold and heal and mend and kiss the tiny babies whose little frames will be torn from the place where they sleep now in their final night.

I closed my eyes and turned my mind to the dawn. It wasn’t darkness that I had really meant to ask of the heavens. Musing again, and hearing the honking, I squinted my imagination towards that one breaking day when horns and trumpets will sound with the sunrise. A gloriously painted sky will start out purple on that morning, tricking us into believing that it’s just another day of dying for innocent, hidden babes. But then. Then it will flash to a fiery orange and a brilliant yellow and--in a startling instant--a blinding white.

“Does He tell you when the end will come, Dad?” I whispered upward. The honking was nearly at its loudest as he answered.

“I know,” I laughed back. “That’s a silly question.”

But this place, and me standing here, and the birds flying overhead, and my father whispering to my heart--it’s all so silly. It will cause us to go insane, unless we tell Heaven how confusing it all looks to us. And for half a minute more, I pointed my face straight up, in the direction of the living wonders that were sent--perhaps--to point my thoughts toward Heaven, and I continued to tell it my mind. I mentioned how so many of us have had enough of standing here in front of buildings like this and are longing for that unimaginable morning when an explosion of pure light will instantly tell us the battle is won and the little ones are safe forevermore. Silently I told Heaven, and the One who made the geese and all living creatures great and small, that I believe--in spite of my doubts--that the day will indeed come.

*...Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sunshine,
Lord, abide with me....*

Then I listened to the geese, and to Him--directly above. And in those moments, while I was looking silly on the sidewalk, the hideous building had completely disappeared. As I stood before it, witnessing for the little ones, my profession of faith had been rewarded. My prayers had made it vanish.

My head was thrown way back. Passing over, half the geese were behind me, and soon would be my father. I saw the ocean, and imagined that the last bird in the convoy was his ship. Frozen for a moment, I hesitated--afraid to watch them depart. He couldn’t stick around, and neither could the flock. Like all living things,

they fly away with time. Soon I'd be alone again. Nothing to fear, I tried to tell myself. All's we have to do is show reverence to life as it passes along. I wanted to acknowledge this gift of life--one of the million that come our way when we look up. If only we could all turn our backs on this beast--this Leviathan that is devouring our world's children--we could spend our time searching for eternal Life, and its Giver who said He'd never leave us.

The sounds were fading. I dared to be bold, to turn my back on the building. I did a casual about-face, ready to salute the convoy as it headed for the horizon. How silly this must look to those driving by, I thought.

Then it happened again. Another surprise from above. But this one made me gasp. Just when I was about to say thanks and so-long to some geese, a sign appeared in the sky. How stupid I was to let it shock me. Time and distance had flipped it around. The shape took on its deeper meaning. "Does that mean victory, or peace?" I asked the last of them--now just dots at the top of the letter that was scrolling away. Victory. Or peace.

The honking was faint--a parting whisper. I strained my ear and listened to hear which it stood for.

Peace? Or victory?

Nothing. Then sensing the dark presence behind me, and the cold wind chilling my hands, I unfolded my arms and buried my hands in my pockets. The right one warmed the rosary. It's the chain of my anchor, and it keeps me from drifting. Stationed here, while the fleet left me alone, I held the beads and felt for the answer.

Ah! There it was. I'd found it.

"The Virgin!" I said to the north, finally getting it. "Victory and peace." I watched the letter disappear, knowing that She remained.

Then a calm--the deep, warm, motherly kind--made my fears seem so puny. I turned back around, facing Her enemy--humming at it. The Leviathan does not know the power this Woman has. "You are waging war against Her offspring," I informed it. "But you cannot hide in there forever."

And with that, I started a long and powerful prayer, reminding the monster repeatedly and slowly (fifty times and more, pausing on purpose when I got to the word "womb") of the Woman, the Mother, the Virgin who will crush its head on that day when she comes to bring her children home.

"These are Her babes whom you kill in the morning," I said to the clinic, finishing the rosary--and my watch.

Leviathan, take warning.