

Mosquito Hunt

Why bother turning off the light? My husband, Steve, turned his off an hour ago, and he's gone to sleep, somewhere I can't follow. We let our son spend the night in jail last night, and trouble only makes Steve shut down, but not me. And it's not just the family problems. It's that winter end of March in the great gray Northwest before daylight savings time tries to save the daylight. When dirt-crusting berms refuse to melt on streets where sun-deprived working people beat each other home in cars they haven't washed since October.

For me, at fifty-three, this winter has gone brackish, its bruised sky stalled over too much work and worry, depression and anxiety. My only cure is in the bleached-cotton clouds of this summer, scudding over Buffalo Lake like laundry snapping in the wind. But that's months away and fourteen hundred miles from where I lie in this bedroom with the light on.

Buffalo Lake was part of Steve's family before I was. It's one of the glacial lakes near the Minnesota–South Dakota border, shallow with a mud-raunchy, carp-infested bottom and mosquito-haven swamps. Around 1972, Steve's dad and his best beer buddy mowed some grass on rented lakeside property and pulled in a defunct school bus so they could fish and drink beer “without the women” and have a roof if it rained. Well, the women liked it, too. Everybody liked it.

We paid a thousand dollars for a thirty-year-old trailer a quarter mile down the shore in 1984, and that included the sixty-foot dock someone made from a flattened windmill—the old-fashioned kind you still see on farms from the thirties. Carey was only a year old, and it's exactly what we could afford. Eight feet wide and twenty-eight feet long, with a pinewood deck we built ourselves. The only bedroom had a mostly curved back wall where we built in bunks to gain twelve inches of floorspace. A pull-out couch completely filled the living room, converting to our front bedroom. The dining table doubled as our night stand. Most airplanes have bigger bathrooms. And the hallway to the kids' bunks was so narrow that when my son Cavan was about two and fought going to bed, he stuck his arms straight out on both sides, and

we'd have to angle sideways downhall so his arms wouldn't catch and break.

Some summers we'd open the trailer to find the avocado-green shag growing three-inch mushrooms. Cavan collected them to dry, stiff as jerky, and keep in a box with his crayfish tails. Or we'd find pig-pink mice babies writhing in a Kleenex box, Carey mothering and moving them—the whole mouse family intact—to the fallow field. And we tried and failed to repair the screens on the oxidized crank-out windows and saggy screen doors. But we loved that trailer on the rocky lake shore with our dock and our canoe and Grandma and Grandpa an owl's hoot away. We even learned how to battle mosquitoes when they snuck through our best duct-tape patches. So began our summer-strange trailer ritual—the kids called it Mosquito Hunt!

They'd be in bed with their teeth brushed, faces washed, and stories read—*Where the Wild Things Are* for Cavan in the lower bunk and any story with a princess for Carey on top. They'd turn out their lights and pull the sheets up to their eyes. Then Steve and I would arm ourselves with flashlights and fly-swatters and turn out the rest of the lights. We'd creep like armed soldiers from the front end of the trailer to the back. All we could see of the kids were proud eyes shining, excited and pleased at the prospect of blood shed for them.

We slowly scanned the flats of the walls and ceilings, the nooks and crannies, the long straight shadows of the woodwork. Flashlight beams held at right angles magnified the spindly mosquito shadows that stretched, grotesque and unfortunate, against their ill-chosen surface. We knew every insecty hiding place behind the shower curtain, the rounded verticals of chair and table legs, the box corner undersides of our homemade bunk beds. Oh, they knew we knew, and sometimes they'd fly, desperate, but their flight traced even more splendid shadows, and it was only a matter of our cunning over theirs, of our waiting for them to alight.

Of course, sometimes we didn't get them all, and one or the other child would call three musical syllables in the dark, “Mus—KEY—toe!” Then Steve or I would come barefoot with the flashlight and swatter. If it was a chilly night, I'd get right in beside the child under the covers. If Carey called, we'd stack

her stuffed animals along the curved wall to make room for me, and we'd talk in the dusk of the nightlight. She'd ask are there such things as dragons under the moon and armor-plated knights to vanquish them? If Cavan called—he'd have been about three—we'd lie on our backs and play Handy-family puppets on the quilt-covered stage of our chests. Either hand or both, his and mine. Four fingers together tapped on thumb made talking beaks with ostrich eyes on the long necks of our wrists. Mommy Handy-bird scolded and love-pecked and chased her babies to hide 'n' seek in the caves and valleys of the blankets.

And we'd wait together for the mosquito's return, for the tell-tale hush of the shadow against the hymmmmmnnn in our ears. Then, the smack of victory and the satisfaction of the small blood-stained mess first on the wall and then on the tissue between my fingers. Sweet vindication because the blood wasn't all the mosquito's—it was partly the blood of us.



That old trailer lasted us eleven summers. Seven blue tarps layered its moldy roof by the time we finally trashed it and built our cabin next door, a do-it-yourselfer. With the help of every available relative in the summer of '96, we finished the outside, a solid wooden story-and-a-half with a loft for the kids, still using the old trailer's kitchen and bath while we worked. By the end of the summer of '97 we finished the inside. Well, the walls still showed their studs and siding nails, and we simply sanded and polyurethaned the plywood subfloor, but we called it finished. The windows and doors were tight with new fine screens, and our Mosquito Hunts were over.

Now the new cabin is nearly eleven years old, and we're still adding to it: decorative beams and insulated panels to the ceiling, tongue-and-groove knotty pine for the living and dining room walls. And the kids are grown and almost gone from home. Carey's twenty-three and working on her master's in speech therapy. Cavan's still the mushroom hunter at eighteen—we're just happy he graduated. This year we'll have the summer and the lake and the cabin to ourselves for the first time. Carey won't get there until after summer session's done in August, and then only for a visit. Cavan, too, will stay only a short while when he

and his friends take their road trip cross country—he can't, *won't*, say exactly when.

And I've been waking up at night and staying awake. What wakes me is a jolt of adrenalin from a dream or half-remembered thought. A sense of uncertain dread. Of something I should have done, but it's way too late. Of something irreplaceable that's been broken or stolen or lost. It could begin with car lights sliding across the diagonals of the wall and ceiling, reminding me of the night two years ago, the first time the police came to take our son, the beams of their squad lights waving like insect antennae.

Where had we gone wrong? I toss the covers off my night-sweaty legs and lie there until I'm too cold and pull the covers back on. Why didn't we do more when we saw mushroom posters on his wall and the instant messages bragging about Percocet and Vicodin. We threw him the facts and quotes from the online parent helplines, showed him the printouts and warned him of the dangers, and said how disappointed and afraid we were. He accused us of invading his privacy. Reading his instant message histories on the computer, he said, was worse than reading diaries and that was worse than stealing. He managed somehow, dexterous and sharp as a wire, to gain the moral high ground as our points and charges dulled.

Yesterday Carey mentioned on the phone that her therapist suggested antidepressants for her sleeplessness and emotional outbursts. Shawn, her boyfriend of two years, hadn't called for three days—there'd been some misunderstanding—she didn't really want to talk about it. She fled from class the day before to keep from screaming at a guy in her workgroup. She didn't want to start down her Grandma's long trail of prescriptions, but she was getting too tired to do her work. And I ask myself, isn't this all the normal underpinnings of leaving home and choosing a career and having to budget money and manage time and deal with people like a grownup? Weren't we right to tell her the family history of her Grandma's depression and her uncle's panic attacks? Did we let her make too much of everyday problems that would otherwise have passed over on their own?

I get out of bed and tiptoe to the kitchen for a half-glass of milk. Then I stand in the dark by our bedroom window, careful not to disturb my sleeping husband, and listen to the night sounds

of cars on University Avenue, a train blaring toward the city. Cavan's been getting good grades this year, brought his GPA up to 3.57, and won a scholarship to our hometown college, but he's been drawing money out of his account—a hundred at a time, sometimes twice a week. It's his own money he earns from washing dishes at the Palace Cafe, and he likes his job, shows up on time. His boss says he's a good, hard worker. But all that money . . . and weren't his pupils too big and black just last night? And he yells more at the most innocent questions. He's depressed about breaking up with Melissa. It was his idea, but now he regrets it. I got this from his instant message history: she's his life, and he'd do anything to get her back. She's going to California Poly Tech in the fall. He won't get out of bed in the mornings for school without a fight.

I lie back down in bed, shifting my weight gradually so the bed won't creak. I inhale slowly through my nose the way an old yoga book taught me, then exhale through my mouth in a cleansing sigh and imagine my worries released with the held breath. Carey's got a wonderful boyfriend, I should say fiancé, but there's nothing formal yet. We all like Shawn. I count the next breath slowly, one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand, four . . . , hold . . . , five-one-thousand, six-one-thousand, seven, release. He's got a great job. But they're more than a thousand miles apart, and she needs him near. They've both been spending more than they have, more than *we* have, for airfare weekends. Last December he said he'd try to get a closer job. He said it again in January, then February. Now it's mid-March. I regret his hang-dog look when she asks him what she's supposed to do when her lease is up in June. I concentrate on one more cleansing breath.

I don't see Cavan enough even to remind him to buy a decent pair of shoes. His one good pair got walked through the water out at People's Pond, accidentally. Kids—young men really—running in the dark. He didn't see the swamp until he was in it. An ambulance siren repeats itself in the distance. I start over again with the cleansing breath. Breathe in, one-one-thousand, two I tell myself to visualize my muscles as limp rags, my bones like Gumby's. Cavan's hanging out with two guys who graduated last year and joined the National Guard. One is in a unit leaving for Afghanistan the end of July. Their Guard pay along with fast-food jobs almost paid for the apartment they got kicked out of anyway because of their partying.

Those two don't seem to know there *is* a future. Breathe out, five-one-thousand, six-one-thousand, seven. The last time we spoke to Cavan about his school absences, he said he couldn't stand high school, couldn't wait to get out of there, and out of here, and for us to *leave him alone*.

It's no use. I turn on the light, position my reading glasses, try a Sudoku puzzle, and wonder if there's some of my husband's Lorazepam to help me relax. I try to think of something good. Carey's so much like Steve's mother. We have a photo of Grandma as a young career woman in the forties, with high cheekbones and great hazel-gray eyes laughing into the camera. It could be Carey today in a forties costume. She's got the dark-haired good looks and tall slim body, and her grandmother's quick wit, too, and easy laugh. Carey said something the other day to Cavan about hoping he has kids—my grandchildren!—the same time she does so they can spend summers at Buffalo Lake, like *they* did with their cousins. And I think of her Grandma's miscarriages, perhaps the root of her depression—two dead babies for each live birth, she told me. That's *eight* miscarriages for four living children. And I worry that Carey may be like Grandma in that way, too.

I get up again and walk this time to Cavan's room. It's 3:18, and he's actually in bed and sleeping for once. Maybe the night in jail did some good, but I doubt it. He confided that one of the National Guard friends, the one he calls his *soulmate*, has attempted suicide because he doesn't like the way his life is going. I try a Hail Mary . . . *and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus*. But the trouble Mary's son got into seems worlds away. My son's long arm extends straight out over the side of the bed, and I lightly touch his perfect fingers.

Back in bed again, I try another relaxation technique, the one I learned in Lamaze class preparing for childbirth. Scanning my body from toenails to feet to ankles to knees, thighs, and pelvis, on up to the scalp and the ends of my hair, asking each part to release its tension, to let the bad energy flow out and the good flow in. But now this close attention only makes me notice the age in my body. The ache of hip and arthritic knee. The knowing that sleeplessness is a fact of middle age and that relief may not, will probably not, come tonight. I'll have gray-green bags beneath my

eyes tomorrow and the drag of another day without enough sleep. Hopeless and déjà vu.

Once, way back when my own mother was still living and my children were little, I remember asking her to tell me the happiest time of her life. Taking no time to think, she answered, “When you children were small and all still home and safe in your beds.” And now I think that my happiest times, like hers when she spoke of them, are already over. And what I have before me is a Sisyphean struggle in the night with the empty dark, with the formless, red-eyed thing—a thing closer to the life-loss of the dead than the sleep-loss of the living—a thing that senses and taunts me with all I should have said to my children. With all I should have done to make their world a worthier place. With all I should have known about the night world of dreams where I run, eternally too late and always in my underwear—or worse, caught naked, to a door that’s closed.

I could hunt it out, this thing of the night, with my flashlight and my fly-swatter, but if I found its demented shadow and smacked its spidery frame and splattered its sticky-thick blood, I’d only wake to find the blood was all my own.



When I get up in the morning, I’ll eat my instant oatmeal with banana. I’ll cool my English Breakfast tea with half and half. I’ll check my email and online accounts: home, classwork, and office. Then, maybe, I’ll begin a list of what to bring to Buffalo Lake. Because the time for retreat is coming. Just thinking about it helps. Time to gather my scattered, ragged forces. Pick up what’s retrievable from the night-to-night skirmishes and retreat. Step back, physically and spiritually, to a time and place where my fly-swatter was an amazing weapon, where all my world was within the calm control of Mommy Handy’s beak. I know, sure, I can’t keep my children under the covers of their bunkbeds at Buffalo Lake—I wouldn’t if I could. I just need to go back to where I once held their love, safe, if only for a little while.

We won’t be leaving yet for two-and-a-half months. But it’s not too early for putting pencil to paper. We’ll be packing lighter this year, just the two of us. We’ll each tote the stack of books we failed to read over winter. Steve will bring his song books and guitar. Then I’ll add sundry items:

My new swimsuit with the flatten-your-stomach panel.
The patch kit we bought for the canoe.
The sweater I can’t quite yet give to Goodwill.
Extra batteries for the flashlight.