



DOES IT EVER GET DARK HERE

by elaine corden

IN the summer, busloads of American tourists arrive in the Yukon. Invariably awed by the midnight sun, they shuffle up to locals, ice cream cones in one hand and guidebooks in the other, asking, “Does it ever get dark here?” Most residents will make some reference to the near-sunless days of winter and then cheerfully advise the visitors where they can best see the sun briefly dip behind the horizon that evening.

Inwardly, however, many Yukoners wince at the mere mention at the return of the dark, making mental notes to soak up more of the light before it’s in short supply. Whether it’s their first winter or their fifty-first, no one who plans to stay North for the entirety of the cold months will come out the other side unchanged.

In the depths of a northern winter, the sun comes up at half past ten and skulks back into the dark by 3:30, but during my first winter in the Yukon I hardly even noticed. I spent those seemingly endless months holed up in a drafty two-bedroom shitbox in Whitehorse, horrifically and catastrophically mired in a dark made for one.

I had moved North from Vancouver in April of 2009, in what can only be described as a fit of profound delusion. I'd come up on assignment as a journalist a year before and been absolutely taken with the rough and salty nature of this place seemingly perched at the edge of the world. I became convinced that if I quit my life in the city I could magically transform from a socially awkward jangle of nerves to an independent bushwoman who fashioned her self-worth from timber, felled by hand from her backyard.

My initial months in the Yukon were spent in smug reverie. I had found a seemingly perfect job as a magazine editor in Whitehorse that allowed me an easy introduction to this new world—access to competent, interesting people who could do just about anything. People with clear, well-scrubbed faces who knew who they were; who spent their free time cross-country skiing across the bone-bare silence of frozen lakes or kayaking to the edge of the Beaufort Sea. The sickening levels of irony and cynicism I'd found in larger cities were absent here, as was the fetishistic

devotion to smartphones that had begun to take root throughout the entirety of southern Canada.

Yukoners were as kind and steady as the climate was harsh and untamed, and in spite the fact that I'd spent my 30 previous years as an anxious, dark, and deeply timid person, I started to believe that I could achieve their salt-of-the-earth serenity and near-blinding earnestness if I could just do exactly as they did.

I won't discount this as a viable strategy. It is absolutely true that the challenges presented by life in the North can change a person entirely, especially if that person labours under the impression that they are an irrevocable and irredeemable fuck-up incapable of even the most basic of tasks. Simple geographic isolation and limited access to resources turns minor calamities and inconveniences into sink-or-swim opportunities to do for oneself—to change your flat tire on the side of an empty highway or unfreeze your pipes at -50 is to give yourself a tiny hit of intoxicating confidence. All things being equal, I would say fixing your own furnace for the first time affords approximately the same feelings of innate cool as consuming two glasses of wine.

During my first summer in the North, I fell in love. The kind of obnoxious, drooling complete asshole love where a person forgets about the legion of disappointments littering their past and tells themselves that perhaps their days of staring lonely at a 3:00 a.m. ceiling are at an end. It

was the kind that requires a great act of shared and willful naiveté by both parties, and likewise the kind that is all but guaranteed to end in spectacular wreckage. By October 20 of the same year—my 31st birthday—he was already gone.

Unwilling to admit defeat in the Yukon, I set about performing the northern winter I'd dreamed of while I'd packed my life up in Vancouver. I buried myself in work, composing articles extolling the life-affirming virtues of dog-mushing and the romance of being alone under the swirling northern lights, omitting the fact that these adventures were rare breaks from hiding under the covers in my house. I sent pictures of the ice-bound landscape view from my window to friends back home in Vancouver, carefully cropping out the car dealership and sex shop visible at the end of my street. As far as anyone knew, I was thriving.

A lot of things freeze at -40, but self-pity isn't one of them. By the end of the year, I had come completely unglued. It was bigger than a break-up. Bigger than a job that didn't pay the bills or the fact that I had no friends and was terribly homesick. It was that the fat, clumsy thumb of depression had found me once again, as it had since as long as I could remember. There was nowhere, I realized, for me to hide when it came to pin me down.

By mid-January, I was subsisting on Diet Cokes and Kit Kats, sleeping 18 hours a day and suffering from a crippling addiction to celebrity gossip

websites. On January 15th, I realized I had not properly left my house in two weeks. On January 17th, I wrote a truly shitty piece of short fiction called *The Facebook of Dorian Grey*, about a man whose online profile gets progressively happier while he descends into misery. On January 18th, the news that minor celebrity Nicole Richie was newly-engaged somehow sent me into two hours of heaving, furious sobs.

Days too awful to recall passed, days that are ugly even through the lens of distance and time and my compulsive need to find something retroactively funny in all of the dark stuff.



There is one last night in January.

I can tell weeks of insomnia have almost certainly crippled my critical faculties, as I finally decide that I will fix myself with a cure for depression that could only come from the mind of a Vancouverite: yoga class. I peel off seven-day old pajamas and force myself into sweatpants and enough winter gear for the four-block walk to the yoga studio, grateful for the fact that I can hide my filthy hair under a toque. An hour elapses as I stand in the threshold of my porch, fully dressed for the cold but too anxious to move, only able to make it to the next class by throwing all morality to the wind and electing to *drive the goddamn car*, reasoning that since I am so

irreparably screwed up, I will never have kids, so what the fuck do I care about the environment?

In the short drive to the studio, I manage to work up an incredible amount of anger towards people with children. *Who the hell are they to make me feel guilty for driving four lousy blocks?* Heading upstairs, I notice that the bakery adjoining the yoga studio is vegan, and I am suddenly furious at people who don't eat cheese. *Those self-righteous motherfuckers.* I hate the raven painting on the studio wall, I hate raven art in general and *why is there so much of it in the fucking North?* I hate the woman who takes my five bucks for yoga class, because she is drinking green tea and not Diet Coke, and I hate the lady in the change room who has six-pack abs, because I imagine anyone who exercises that much to be some sort of self-worshiping freak who compulsively weighs their food and talks obsessively about "healthy bowel movements." I hate the two ladies in the corner who I am convinced are exchanging recipes for some sort of nightmarishly healthy dessert made with carob and quinoa. I hate the older lady in the corner stretching down to the floor, mostly because I have never in my life been able to touch my toes even though one time I stretched every day for three months, and *couldn't you be a little more sensitive to people like me before you goes showing off, Grandma Bendy?* I find myself consumed with rage flying in all directions, and I only stay because Green Tea Lady has my five bucks, and I fear that asking for it back will just about kill me.

The next 90 minutes are almost certainly some of the most angry in yoga's history. I invent new names for poses that bend my very capacity for foul language. I cannot and will not look at myself in the mirror, and it's only by some small mercy that the instructor does not mention it.

I wait after class outside the door, chain-smoking in the cold. I don't want to smoke three cigarettes, I just want to communicate my contempt to all the other yoga ladies as they leave. I want them to know how utterly pointless it is to take care of your health when your mind can attack you from within, and I want to ruin the view of their sparkling, organic world and force them to look at the ugly, indisputable fact of myself. Two of them stop at their cars, Grandma Bendy and Six Pack Abs pausing to discuss a fitness boot camp offered at the studio, Six Pack Abs singing the virtues of strengthening "the core." I walk between them toward my car, then turn around to remark that as far as I'm concerned, "the core is like the soul. I don't think it really exists." They look horrified, and I feel victorious for having ruined their conversation.

At home, I crawl into bed with my winter clothes still on. The effort to get myself out of the house and all the anger has worn me out, and though it's only 8:00, I fall asleep immediately.

When I wake up, it's 9:30 in the morning. This has become an uncharacteristically early hour for me, but I can't sleep another minute, even though the sun won't be up for an hour. Anger yoga has both

emboldened me and made me ravenous, so when I realize I have no food in the house, and that there is still time to get a Tim Hortons breakfast sandwich—a fatty bacon, egg, and lard concoction that, even in the depths of self-loathing I avoid for reasons of health—I decide I am going to treat myself. Conveniently, I have rolled out of bed wearing full winter clothes, so I only have to get in the car and drive right up to the front door.

On the short trip, I find a whole new set of things to be angry at. I hate that the head shop next to the sex store on my street is called “The Northern Hemisphere,” and I hate the imaginary wasteoids that named it. I hate the awful country station where every other song is about a guy who seemingly wants to fuck his truck, and I hate the new, hip, CBC Radio One even more, especially when smarmy Jian Ghomeshi says “*Happy Friday*.” I hate people who park too far away from the curb almost as much as people who park too close to the curb. I hate that everyone brushes the snow off the roof of their car. obeying the rules like the worst kind of teacher’s pets.

The line inside the Tim Hortons is mercifully short, and before I’ve even found something inside the shop to hate, I am called to the counter by a soft-eyed cashier whose voice betrays a weariness I am certain only I can relate to.

“I would like a breakfast bacon sandwich and two hash browns, please.” I tell the smiling woman behind the counter.

“Ooooh. Sorry,” she says, in accented English, a note of genuine regret in her voice. “Breakfast from six to ten only.”

I look at the clock behind the counter. It is 9:55. I don’t want to argue but I don’t understand why she won’t give me the sandwich.

“It’s 9:55,” I say, meekly. I figure we might be encountering a language barrier and repeat my request slowly, trying not to sound like one of those assholes who think speaking English louder will somehow make them understood in a foreign country. “Break-fast Bay-con Sand-wich, please.”

She looks at me with a mixture of pity and confusion, and I think she is trying to silently telegraph to me that she is being forced to uphold some crooked system that closes breakfast five minutes early to reward those who already want lunch, to satisfy those who are so happy with the world that they sprang out of bed at 5:30 for a 6:00 a.m. breakfast.

It’s more than I can take. Some unseen son-of-a-bitch franchisee is forcing this poor woman to rob the underdogs and the late-risers of the world of their rightful breakfast, the people who stay up nights consumed with fear and lay in mornings plagued by self-doubt. She’s trapped propping up a system that rewards people who already have *everything*. It’s gamed for people who don’t even *need* or *appreciate* breakfast bacon sandwiches, and there’s nothing she or I can do about it.

My face is wet with tears, and I’m so overwhelmed by the unbearable injustice of it all that I can’t even look her in the eye.

“Hash browns, then?” I sniffle.

“Breakfast only six to ten in the morning,” she repeats, solemnly. Under her visor, her eyes are bottomless pools of compassion.

Wiping my snotty nose, I take a deep breath and decide not to push the issue further.

I look up at the menu, set for daytime offerings, and around to the horrified onlookers collecting behind me in line, and finally I realize that it is 9:57 *p.m.* I’ve only slept for an hour and a half. It’s gotten so dark I can no longer tell day from night.

I get a bagel and a chocolate milk and decide to walk along the river. Remarkably, I don’t hate being outside, I don’t hate the public art in the park, and I don’t even hate the group of teenagers I can hear partying on the opposite shore. I have spent all of my anger on a breakfast bacon sandwich. I am exhausted, and it occurs to me that I have become faintly ridiculous. There is something freeing about hitting rock bottom, something vaguely comical about falling apart in a Tim Hortons. The bagel is actually not so bad, all things considered.

That night, I keep walking through the dark, because I don’t feel like running back home just yet. For the first time in months, I see something of the North I had fallen in love with, out there on the Yukon River. Up in the sky, the moon hangs full and low, and below, the ice-and-water jumble of the river holds a thousand mini-moons, dim and flickering. I watch them

grow brighter as the moon ascends, and eventually there's enough light out there to cut right through the dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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