

Isolation

May we forever live in interesting times



I found myself in a place of true frustration. Where the relationships of friends, family, and lovers began to dissolve into the distance as a once strong connection with reality seemed less and less real to me. Out of the desire for a new connection, I drove myself and a good ol' pup named Buddy to a nearby hiking trail in hopes of reconnecting with nature. The air was noticeably cleaner stepping out of the truck that morning and not because we were far from town. In fact, we might have only been five or six minutes out. The air was cleaner because factories all across the world have shut down in response to the global pandemic, COVID-19. Little did we know that the virus had already mutated several times over by then, planting the seeds for greater chaos. It didn't help that few people knew how to properly respond to social distancing or quarantine, including myself. At first, doing anything beyond washing my hand seemed ridiculous, something like the flu would only affect me for a couple of days and is far from deadly. Regardless, I understood how diseases could spread and didn't want to bother anyone just for wanting to protect themselves. So a hike with Buddy seemed like a good compromise, being that both of us couldn't care less about any viruses floating around.

The sky was overcast, along with a heavy fog that ever so gently blotted out the rest of the sun. Looking up to the mountain trail, the incline was covered with many little snow blankets

and had more flakes coming to sow up the seams. I stopped to admire the scene for a while before grabbing the rest of my gear. When I eventually opened the passenger door for Buddy, he zoomed out towards the park entrance only to be stopped by my call, “Buddy come! Stay by me,” and just as quickly, he zoomed back. No doubt he was ready for a day of running and sniffing, and I don’t think anyone had the heart to tell him otherwise. I was just as ready as him, so we didn’t waste any time getting on the trail. I kept his leash in my backpack just in case, along with some other things like water, jacket, and homemade peanut butter cookies from Mom. I also had my walking stick, which became quite useful when gaining footing on the icy slopes. It was engraved by my father to look as if the top was turning into a snake, it also had a bible verse on the side, *Signs for Moses- the Lord said throw down your staff and it became a snake. - Exodus 4:2*. For obvious reasons, we called it the Moses staff. In addition to the engraving, several pins from national parks such as Glacier National and the Mississippi Headwaters were tacked on to the side. The trail Buddy and I set out on that morning was called the M, just outside Bozeman, Montana. A commonly crowded trail that leads up to a large M of painted rocks where one could look over the entire Gallatin valley from the mountainside. Lately, it has been less crowded and on that particularly cloudy day, even fewer people wanted to hike the trail. I was even a little disappointed in the lack of sun, though the fog rolling down the slopes was just as satisfying. Enjoying my misty solitude on the trail, I saw a woman making her way down with an awestruck smile on her face.

She saw me and let out a cheerful “Good Morning.”

Which I returned along with a bit of irony. “Beautiful Weather we’re having.”

She laughed and pointed up the trail. “I was just up top, right above the clouds, it’s absolutely beautiful!”

“Oh, really?” I step aside to let her plenty of space to pass.

“Yes, I could see the fog rolling around the trees on the other side of the valley.”

“That’s incredible, I ought to go see it for myself.”

“Yes, please do. Have a good rest of your hike!”

“I will, you too!”

Buddy followed her down a bit to say hello and perhaps ask for a treat. She gave him some loving pets, which is a close second in Buddy's book. "Go back up now, I got no treats," she set him back towards me. Buddy zoomed back to me only to fly past and serpentine for new smells to investigate. I chuckled to myself and thought how I would like to see what it's like above the clouds, to gaze from majestic sights upon the beauty of nature would be the perfect thing to take my mind off the current craziness of the world. Nearly to the M already, I quickened my pace to get there before the clouds could consume the hillside once again. Though as I feared, the clouds did seal a tight perimeter around the range and when I finally reached my destination, all I could see around me was about 20 yards of rocks and trees. Looking out to where one would typically see downtown Bozeman and MSU campus just beyond, was nothing but a swaying gray canvas of water droplets. I was tired by then, so I sat and opened up my backpack. Buddy heard the baggy of cookies crinkle in my hands and yet again zoomed over to investigate the possibility of treats. Realizing he was probably just as hungry as me, I broke off a piece for him to chow down on.

"Quite underwhelming, isn't Buddy?" I looked to the good ol' dog, who munched away, not taking his eyes off the rest of the cookies. I turned to look up the slope again but now could see the slightest bit of a blue halo around the peak. "What do ya think, Buddy, do you want to hike all the way up?" I asked the wagging pup, who looked at me with a big smile, ready to do anything that involved treats and sniffing. "Alrighty then, let's be on our way!"

I hoisted my bag over my shoulders, and with my staff in hand, we traveled to the next trail to go further up the mountain. The snow was practically untouched even by the sun except for a couple pairs of tracks, one I assume from the woman before and another from someone I saw pass us at the trailhead. Even with proper hiking boots, the ice and snow made it challenging to keep my footing, forcing me to rely heavily on my staff. Buddy, however, found no difficulty in scaling the slope; even on the ice his four little paws made easy work of that trail. This made him bold enough to scamper out of my sight every now and then, in which I would beckon him back to me and scold him for running off.

We eventually came to an impressive part of the trail. Where the rock outcroppings seemed to have a bit more of a personality and the trees wore cristal curtains, prideful in the

place they have taken root. Even the mist held a sense of confidence in its dance, never wanting to stay still until the sun pushed it down into the valley, exposing the blue sky before us. Now I was awestruck and could not help but take out my phone for a picture. As if the icicles shared my same passion, they too grabbed at the light and pulled all the grand blue into themselves. Buddy was excited to get some warm sun as well and ran off again, where I could no longer see him. I called him back but instead of him completely returning, he popped back on the trail and sat in the sun. With my phone camera already out, I took a picture of that happy old mutt and because it was a good picture, I didn't have it in me to scold him for running off.



Though to my grief, the sun went as quickly as it came, pulling the mist back up the mountain. "I guess we gotta go further up, don't we, Buddy?" I said to the panting pup, who looked at me as if ready for another cookie. Even though he was eating a lot of snow while climbing, I decided he probably needed water more. So I poured some from my water bottle into my hand for him to lap up. "You will get some more treats when we reach the top, sound good, Buddy?" I asked that happy pooch while he finished his water, which he responded by licking my face. Buddy is a dog of few words, mostly because he has none, though he always knows

what to say in any given situation. Without hesitation, we continued our adventure up the trail and it wasn't too long before we came across a mighty teepee. I was fascinated by how well it was built as it brought me back to some fond memories of slapping tree forts together as a kid and having good times with friends I haven't talked to in years.



Still motivated to get above the blue halo, I didn't stay long. That is until I came across a second teepee, in which I had to laugh because two teepees are better than one. I walked inside to admire its wooden structure and entertained myself by pretending it was my little home on the mountainside. Buddy seemed to like it too, for he felt it was an excellent spot to drop a drizzle, even while I was still in it. Quickly I scampered out and back on to the trail as Buddy followed just as excitedly, wondering what my commotion could possibly be. "You know what, Buddy, you can keep that Teepee! Even with the shortage."

We continued further up to finally pass where fog met the clouds and the blue halo became an open wispy sky. I still could only see about twenty-to-thirty yards around me, but now could make out where the sun sat. I walked out to a clearing that one could assume

overlooked the Gallatin valley, then glanced to my right to see another hiker sitting on a rock. He looked toward me with that same gaze of awe I previously observed in the woman coming down the mountain.

“Good morning,” I said while also checking to see if it was, in fact, still morning (11:05 am).

“Morning,” he replied, looking back out to the foggy sea before us.

“It was really beautiful when the sun came out a bit ago,” I continued.

“It was, especially from right here. The clouds just rolled back in when you walked up.”

“Yeah, it made the trees real pretty though! Got some good pictures, though I was hoping to catch a good view of the valley before the clouds could roll back in.”

“Well, they’ll probably move out again in a few minutes.”

When Buddy eventually got back from another sniffing detour, he ran over to the hiker to yet again roll the dice for some treats. Alas, like most he had no treats but plenty of pets for that greedy doggo, which Buddy humbly accepted and continued his business of sniffing.

I shook my head. “Poor Buddy has been looking for someone to give him treats all day. Sometimes I wonder if that dog’s only ambition is finding his next treat.”

The hiker chuckled. “Yeah, dogs can really be like that sometimes.”

“Yep, sometimes you gotta let dogs do as they do.”

After a couple more minutes of waiting for the sun to resurge and chatting about what other trails are like in the summer versus the winter, the hiker decided it was time for him to return down the mountain. Buddy and I bid farewell to our fellow hiker, then we too found a rock to sit on and wait for the sun. I pulled out my extra jacket to make a proper seat on a snow covered stone and grabbed the cookies for the two of us to snack on while we pondered on which gust of wind would be the one to pull the clouds back down. Oddly enough, I didn’t think I would have enjoyed the silence as much as I did. The idea of being the only one on the majestic hillside besides Buddy was an incredible feeling, as if I could truly take in and reflect on every

thought that passed through my mind. It was absolutely peaceful and far away from any of the world's conceivable problems. It felt far from isolation.

Then the breeze in question fluttered down from the heavens and brought all of its promised glory. I felt as if I could see the entire earth and longed to sail across that gaseous sea of translucency, to swim to each mountain peak as if it were another island in a vast ocean. I could imagine the water droplets collecting on my skin as I passed through the waves, being rocked back and forth by its currents just to be pushed back to the mountains by the sky's beckoning tides. The sun resonated a warmth that made me feel at home, like a campfire fighting the cold darkness from my soul, I felt as if everyone I ever cared about was there with me.



Buddy was a great companion to share that moment with as he sat, ears perked, but looking more with his nose as I imagined the breeze thoroughly mixing and wafting various scents to his snout. Eventually, he found a scent intriguing enough to get up and sniff around for its source. I tried to split my attention between keeping track of him and taking in more of the view, but it was nearly too late when I saw him approaching the edge of the drop-off.

I cried out, "Buddy! Get back!" Just before a chunk of snow broke away, exposing the cliff's true edge. I lunged out of my seat to grab him, Buddy back-petalled and let out a silent

yelp as I pulled him to safety by his collar. “Buddy, sit, stay!” I commanded as I grabbed for his leash, “Can’t be going over there, Buddy, you got to stay close to me.”

With Buddy tied up, we sat before the cloudy sea for a bit longer until my heart rate finally settled. Soon after the clouds started rolling in again, presenting a new blank canvas for us to ponder on. By then, I was more than satisfied with our hike and was ready to return home. Though before heading back down the trail, I unhooked Buddy’s leash and had him practice some of the commands he’s been learning, such as shaking hands, rolling over, staying put while I walked away, and of course “Buddy, come!” Surely that smart mutt was soon smiling big again when I reminded him that he is, in fact, a good boy and earned lots of treats.

Heading down, the slickness of the ice was all the more challenging and a heavy backpack made it look as if I was on a broken pair of skis. Occasionally, a hidden patch of ice would catch me by surprise, flinging me on my back as I starfished into the snow and rolled into the hillside. I jammed my elbow and bruised my leg on two of those falls, which made me realize just how dangerous it can be in the wilderness if a simple slip could leave you that sore. To my relief, Buddy was very quick to assist me any time I fell, giving loving kisses to make it feel better. Yet it made me think about how that old pooch could have been seriously hurt falling off that cliff, not killed, but a high chance of a fractured rib or leg if he tried to brace the landing. Without a doubt, there were other cliffs around there that could be deadly and the thought of losing or having to carry an injured Buddy all the way down was enough to make sure he never left my sight again. Since I too did not want to hurt myself any further, I developed a new strategy using my staff. Instead of trying to find a solid foothold every step down, I would lightly jog the steeper parts of the trail, keeping my momentum forward so there was no opportunity for my feet to slip out from under me. When I approached a turn in the trail or wanted to slow down, I would firmly plant my staff in front of me, similar to a pole vaulter, except not trying to fling myself over, only change the direction of my momentum. Soon, we were making good time and eventually broke through a clearing in the trees to see the all familiar M right below us. So relieved and filled with energy, we continued down the last stretch standing tall with memories of awe still on our faces.

From the fog I saw another hiker making his way up. An old man with two walking sticks to help him up the rocky steps, yet again, confirming that two is always better than one.

“Good Morning,” I called down to him, in which he looked up with a friendly smile.

“Good Morning! A beautiful day for a hike.”

“It sure is! I was just above clouds, absolutely beautiful,” I replied, keeping the recommended social distance of six feet between us.

“Oh I bet. I’m sure he had fun up there too, running around,” he pointed to Buddy.

“Oh yeah! One would say too much fun.”

The old man laughed. “Don’t they always. Have a good rest of your day.”

“Yeah, you too!”

We were beat by the time we got back to the truck, for all I could do was turn on my music and sit for a while. Buddy was a muddy pup by the end and usually I put muddy pups in the back, but once again I didn’t have it in me. I let him curl up on the passenger seat by me and rest as we made our way home listening to *Carry On* by *Fun*.

I’ve once heard the phrase ‘may you forever live in interesting times’ said as an insult, I now understand their intention. For as much as I have always wanted to experience what it was like to live in the great stories of history books, I could just as easily pass it up. The challenge of today is one of patience and communication. Where many of our failings in this pandemic arose from false or inadequate education of the topic, yet our greatest success was people coming together on a global level to resist against Coronavirus. Hospitals are finding new ways of collaborating and developing resources. Citizens are taking proper actions and finding new ways to enjoy each other's company, while also developing a greater appreciation for genuine connection.

Human advancement comes from challenges, for even in this time of easily accessible knowledge, most people already know or have access to how to overcome most of their problems, but what they lack is a real reason of why to act, why actually believe something. We have always known about the changing climate, but because of this pandemic we have evidence that you can taste and feel, showing how much humans affect their environment. We have always historically known about the dangers of having no vaccinations for diseases, but because of this pandemic we now personally understand how one person's choice can affect everyone on a global scale. Because of this pandemic, I know that I can always find peace amongst the craziness of the world and that most people are right there with me. Life is a lot like hiking a mountain trail, it's full of challenges and beauty. We will always come across promises of better, though those promises usually forget to mention how long it takes to get there. You can plan for the future as much as you want as long as you plan for them to change. It's difficult to control the world and people around you, sometimes all you can do is stop and appreciate the things in your life. And even though two is always better than one, don't let that logic go any further in times of crises, for at the end of the day we are here for each other and no set of challenges can break true friendships made on a mountain.



A Buddy Inspired Story by Anthony C. Johnson

