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Inside Nature's Clarinet

by Jim Norton

Sometimes when the raw power of nature is at its most brutal state, our senses can be so overwhelmed as to transcend an ordinary experience into something almost mystical. The effect can be exhilarating, especially when all that separates us from this vast amount of energy is a thin sheet of fabric. I once found myself hunkered down in a tent on the shoulder of a mountain with a storm raging all around. While seemingly stuck in a miserable situation, I had such an incredible night that the memory of it remains in vivid detail.

Mid September is the ideal time to journey into the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The legendary New England foliage is just beginning to burst into patches of red, orange, gold and yellow interspersed with granite outcroppings and framed in the lush green of the rain forest. It's relatively quiet. The summer vacationers have dispersed and the autumn leaf peepers have yet to blow in. The weather is often mild and yet unpredictable as the seasons are in a state of flux with summer not yet willing to recede and autumn striving to take its place. You may find yourself witness to a massive struggle as they vie for dominance. This is home to the highest wind speeds ever recorded in the world. My buddy Scott and I grew up around here and were as prepared as our finances would allow for the full climatological spectrum. When you spend several days on top of the Presidential Range, anything can happen.

As we ascended through the foothills, our anticipation was being replaced with foreboding. What had begun as a somewhat sunny morning on the coast was deteriorating into a damp and chilly afternoon with thick moisture laden clouds which began to spit on us in warning

upon our arrival at the trailhead. Had it been possible to postpone the trip, we would have remained in the car and retreated. Instead, wrapping ourselves in our shells and our determination, we made our way up an increasingly darkening trail.

The first day's mission was straightforward: get some altitude and distance behind us, and set up camp before the impending cloudburst. Neither of us wanted to deal with Scott's oversized tent with its assortment of poles in the rain and as we hurried along we offered up all manners of prayer that we wouldn't have to. Although I can't quite dredge up enough vanity to think that God altered an entire weather pattern to accommodate us, we made it to the only campsite on that spur that would allow us to survive the night in relative comfort. It was tucked into a nice little nook amongst a copse of stunted firs. We just finished getting everything in order as the downpour began. Dinner would be cold and there would be no hanging around the campfire tonight, but at least we were dry.

One of the benefits of backpacking up a mountain, is that if for some reason you find yourselves stuck inside, you're usually tired enough to not really mind. We figured on getting a good night's sleep and an early start the next day. I never slept. Scott snores louder than anyone on the planet and I now know not to share the same campsite, never mind the same tent. He can also sleep through anything. The commencement of his ripping snorts coincided with the storm being notched up several levels of intensity. The ferocity of this gale was beyond all of my previous experience and I knew then that I was in for a long miserable night.

The tent was not made to withstand wind speeds of anything near what was going on around us and before long a certain design flaw became apparent. We had a window that wasn't quite protected by the rain fly and the water would slowly collect here. Each time the wind slammed into it in a certain way it would cause the fabric to snap and rudely propel the cold water directly into my face. This process would repeat itself about every twenty minutes or so.

Somewhere between the bouts of snoring, the buffeting of the tent and being smacked in the face with ice water, I began to notice something unusual. As the air flow poured through the various mountain passes and valleys, it would sound a different musical note, depending on the corridor it took. This entire mountain range was transforming into a massive wind instrument. We were camped out in Nature's clarinet and she was having one hell of a jam session. All else became nothing more than an occasional irritant as I settled in for what would be the virtuoso performance of a lifetime.

As I lay cocooned in my sleeping bag, the music of this tempest opened a canvas in my mind. Each note was being painted in hues of intensity matching the volume of the notes in such a way that the storm became a dynamic panorama in constant motion: each passageway silhouetted in the color of the corresponding note. Some were urgent and loud and represented by bright bursts of neon. Others would begin softly, and slowly build in intensity before fading away in a distant plaintive wail leaving a faint vaporous trail. There were deep drawn out tones accompanied by short sprays of highs as the current of air pouring through a valley would suddenly be split and diverted through several smaller channels. The ebb and flow of the music followed closely the tidal pattern of the gale as it washed through the Whites. At times there seemed to be a discernible pattern as if a chorus was being played. Then it would switch to some broken beat jazz arrangement too complex for me to follow. All the while, I know Scott continued to snore and I was still getting slapped in the face with ice water, but I have no recollection that now.

As the dawn approached, the concert slowed and the notes came with less frequency and urgency. The music eased to an end and I lay there exhausted. My world suddenly collapsed back to the confines of the tent and Scott was still snoring loudly. I had to get out.

I stumbled out in a daze and was treated to the sight of a smattering of huge snowflakes falling gently from the clouds that enveloped us. As I squatted in the trail collecting the finger numbing trickle of rain water, I began seeing patches of blue as the curtain above me was being torn apart. By the time we broke camp, we were watching the last of some wispy billows being sucked out of the pass just below us. The sky was open and bright as these remnants whisked by almost within reach, a reminder of a musical night that would burn itself into my memory.
