

What's the Point?

I guess it was just too many long winters, with too many short days. Maybe it was the cold and monotony and silence. Or maybe it was the lugubrious Norwegians, a quiet folk who rarely talk because even they find Norwegian difficult to speak. Or maybe it was the food, which is either flat and crusty (with the flavor cardboard) or some sheep organ boiled to a jellyfish glob (with no flavor at all). Whatever, after fifteen years, life in the North had taken a toll. I felt like Norway's poster child, that wide-eyed character in *The Scream*, which was painted by Norway's legendary Edvard Munch, who was battier than a bell tower. You wonder about a land that takes pride in insanity.

Anyway, I'd reached a point where I couldn't see one any more. At first it was minor depression, a seasonal emotion called SAD (seasonal affected disorder). I bought one of those light therapy lamps, hoping it would brighten up my life. It was like looking into a film projector, without the film. It helped... as long as I stared into it. But you can't spend the rest of your life like a deer caught in the headlights. Every day, after nine hours of light therapy, I'd rise from my chair squinting as if I'd just witnessed a nuclear explosion, and inevitably bark a shin on the coffee table or walk into a door. I did that for four years then said, "What's the point?"

Then it starting getting worse. I went from depression to recession. That's just what happened in 1929 when the stock market crashed and Roosevelt didn't want to alarm the country so he called the recession a "depression", which explains why we use the misnomer today. It used to be little facts like that that kept me from sinking. I'd find relief in knowing that President McKinley was assassinated in 1901 by an anarchist named Czolgosz, (though I never knew how to pronounce his name). But how often can you smuggle that into a conversation? And it's not the kind of thing you like to keep reminding yourself of or you'll think you're crazy. So I sunk to monumentally banal facts, like correcting people when they'd say "buffalo" instead of "bison". And as to be expected, they responded as they should have: they ignored me. When I realized I'd gone from SAD to MAD (monotonously applied derangement) I sighed, "What's the point?"

MAD went to BAD (bliss after death). I started taking walks through the winter woods with a revolver in my pocket, looking for the security of solitude... and the resolve. Then one day I finally withdraw it with slow deliberation, stuck the muzzle in my mouth, then began the litany of reciting my failures. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand what I was saying. It was like talking with mouth full of marbles, or speaking Norwegian (they're much the same). I got so annoyed that I shoved the muzzle deep in my mouth with the clear intention of blowing off my head without a final word. But I pushed it in too far and ended up gagging, then throwing up. (I can tell you, there aren't many things worse than holding a revolver covered in vomit.) I placed it in the snow and toed it around – gently of course, 'cause (being the jerk I am) I'd left the hammer cocked! As soon as it was reasonably clean I picked it up and thought I'd give it another go, but this time I'd decided to keep my mouth shut (literally and figuratively).

I laid the barrel on my tongue and sealed it with my lips. It doesn't take much imagination to realize just how cold a steel barrel can get at fourteen below. Just imagine licking a cyclone fence in the dead of winter. My icy resolve thawed quickly and I pulled the gun out of my mouth – taking a quarter-inch of my lower lip with it. As I padded my padded my lip – was it tender! – I noticed a little piece of pink flesh hanging on the muzzle tip. It gave the revolver a life of its own, as if it were sticking its tongue at me.

Suddenly, without warning, a man came walking his dog. To avoid being noticed I stepped off the path and acted like I was peeing in the snow. In Norway, peeing in public is as common as rain and a sure way of diverting eyes. (They're a private and respectful people.) So I stood there casually with one hand on my hip, the other pointing the revolver from my crotch, whistling the Norwegian national anthem through tender lips. I'm not sure if it was my whistling or what I was holding that made the dog bark like a yapping sled team, but it forced the man to yank hard on the leash. The dog stopped then instinctively lifted its leg to a tree. The man probably didn't give a hoot that my six inches of blue steel hadn't produced a drop, but I became acutely self-conscious of yet another failure in life. Just as he passed by I threw a glance over my shoulder and said, "Prostate." Being over fifty himself, he nodded.

I decided it was best to get off the path and began to walk deep into the woods, keeping the revolver close to my mouth, but not in it. After a dozen paces I'd synchronized clumsy foot steps with a swaying arm and bobbing head. Actually I got pretty good at it. I could hold the muzzle three inches inch from my mouth and bump along at a fairly good pace. I guess I got over confident. I inched the muzzle closer... and then tripped on a limb buried in the snow. Damn if I didn't chip a tooth – an incisor! When I sucked in that cold air it was like a nightmare in the dentist's chair.

I'd notched enough failures on that revolver and hurled it into the woods seething with fury. Now tossing around a loaded gun is a half-cocked thing to do. But throwing one that's cocked deserves merit for a Darwin Award. My wild-arm pitch went about fifteen feet. The trajectory was good... until a tree jumped in the way. It hit hard. I don't know where the bullet landed, but its path was clearly marked by snapping branches, exploding clots of snow, and in the distance a barking dog... that sounded somewhat like a yelping. The report echoed through the woods with an embarrassing resonance. I could have killed someone!

So, I've given up suicide walks in the woods. They're just too dangerous. Now I stroll along a park path of a nearby fjord, with a harpoon on my shoulder. Admittedly, it's more difficult to kill yourself with a harpoon, but the walking is easier than plodding through the woods, the scenery is better, and it's not nearly as lonely. Passing strollers are always slowing down, frequently feigning a polite smile. Often those walking alone – especially older folk – make some innocuous comment, like, "Is that a harpoon?" Or at least I think that's what they're saying, because I don't know what "harpoon" is in Norwegian.

One guy, an old geezer with watery blue eyes and nicest smile, stopped and began to chat. It was like listening to *Finnegans Wake* in Norwegian. I hadn't the slightest idea what he was saying, but I like to think he was saying he was a whaler himself, and how much he missed the sea-life, standing at the prow of the ship as it cleaved the waves, clutching the rigging as it whistled in the wind, and crying out, "Thar she blows!" as the arching leviathan surfaced in a yeasty foam... and all that blubber. He wiped a teary eye, then held out a hand and said, "Jeg heter Hans Hansensensen." (Translation: My name is Hans Son of the son of the son of the son of Hans.) I said, "Call me, Ishmael."

Hans and I meet ever Tuesday around noon on the pier where they sell shrimp. It's not planned, it's just become a nice habit. Either he's waiting for me (sitting on a bench, peeling shrimp with his dirty thumb nail) or I'm waiting for him (sitting on the bench, cleaning my nails with the harpoon).

Hans does most of the talking... and pointing. He points a lot. I guess that's what whalers do, or did. Point and scream, or point and throw, or maybe just practice their pointing. I think a good whaler has got to be a good pointer, cause looking for whale is like looking for fly shit in pepper. What's the point of looking for whales if you can't point? If Ahab had been missing an arm instead of a leg, Melville would have written a short poem instead of a long novel.

Before meeting Hans I didn't point much. I mostly nodded. I guess that's because of my background. People from the Mid-West nod; pointing is considered rude. My mother used to scold me, "Don't point." Then she'd whisper, "Just nod." But now I point a lot. I think it looks manly, almost heroic. Can you imagine St. George nodding at the dragon or Ahab nodding at Moby Dick? Nodding is what you do when someone tells you they have a prostate problem. It's the sign of resignation or accepting defeat. Pointing displays confidence, and under the right circumstances suggests a challenging quest, which often leads to sacrifice and reward, and tragedy.

Whether it's a finger, or a harpoon, or a revolver... there's something tragic about pointing. But there no point in asking why.