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Twilight

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by *Matias Travieso-Diaz*

*Around the valleys' slopes the sky is already darkening;
Alone, two larks still soar, rapt in the twilight's perfume.
Come here and let them flutter; soon it will be their time for rest.
Would that we not lose ourselves in this solitude.
O, utter, silent peace! So deep in the sun's afterglow!
How weary we are of wandering: can this, perchance, be death?
– Joseph von Eichendorff – Im Abendrot (At Sunset)*

Living had become difficult for Felix. He was feeble, arthritic, with an erratic heart and almost deaf. Many activities he had enjoyed in earlier years were now beyond his reach. Driving long distances was too tiring, and his daily runs had needed to be scaled down to strolls. Soon he would be relegated to one of those mausoleums where the elderly are stored awaiting the inevitable.

Having surpassed the eighty year milestone, he measured time by the number of friends, relatives and public figures he once knew who were now deceased. Staring at the pictures in his electronic photo album, he would be saddened by the realization that most, or even all, of the people in a family portrait were already gone. And it was not just his ancestors. Many people in his generation, and even younger, had also exited the stage, leaving him increasingly isolated.

Some of the losses had been quite painful. Above all, the death of his wife of four decades had left a hole in his heart that he could never mend. He often wondered what the point was of becoming attached to others, since they would be taken away sooner or later.

These disquieting thoughts kept circling inside his head one afternoon, as he consumed a fast food meal accompanied with a generous intake of whiskey. As was his custom, he would now sit on the back porch and – weather permitting – watch the sun set on yet another unremarkable day.

He sat on his rattan recliner and filled and lit a pipe. As he puffed on it, he fixed his gaze on the leafless trees that surrounded his cabin and on the ridge behind them. It was a late winter day, too chilly for just the light sweater he wore, but he did not mind. In half an hour, when the pipe was exhausted, he would get back inside for another night of mindless TV watching.

As he took one puff after another, new thoughts (perhaps alcohol driven) began occurring to him. Yes, he had made very little money but what he had left should be sufficient to last a few more years. So, why regret the lost opportunities, the fame that never accompanied him, the obscurity that would follow his death? He had to account to nobody for his actions and there were no explanations or apologies he needed to give.

And the deaths of the ones he had lost along the way had often been preceded by what became fond memories – the kisses and caresses, the tender words he had exchanged with his wife, the lifetime of small and big pleasures and emotions they had shared. The affection of his relatives, the sparring and drinking with his friends, the games played or watched in the company of others. The memories were too numerous to be summoned individually, but all of a sudden a burst of pleasurable recollections started to stream back into his consciousness. Yes, he had loved and been loved, and had fun as well as pain. Perhaps not as much fun as he would have wanted, but enough to fill his head with remembered joys.

And then there were all the natural and man-made sights and sounds and tastes – all the experiences that lay dormant, but were very real to him and could be evoked with little effort, like the splendor of the parks in the Canadian Rockies, the joyful sight of cardinals and goldfinches at his feeder, the taste of just caught grilled fish at a pierside restaurant in the Italian Riviera, the multicolored light streaming through stained glass windows of the Sainte-Chapelle, the....

It was too much to absorb. Overwhelmed, Felix fell into a trance of sorts and shut his eyes.

In his dream, he saw himself swaying in the sea current, taking in the creatures that swarmed around him. He was a coral polyp and knew his life would be brief, yet he enjoyed the sensations of catching plankton and small fish using the stinging cells on his head tentacles and drawing nutrients released from photosynthesis by the tiny algae that lived within his tissues. He was particularly fond of spawning on warm dark nights, when he would release his eggs and sperm into the water and have them fertilize the gametes being released simultaneously by other polyps.

He had excreted an exoskeleton near the base of its body, which was attached to the skeletons of other members of the colony that lived next to him. When he died, his skeleton would join the myriad other shells built by his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, to become part of a community that would continue to grow and endure for many centuries. He would be gone, but his contribution to the species would last as long as the species itself continued to thrive. And thus, a modest but essential path to immortality was granted to him regardless of whether his short existence had been filled with joy or sorrow.

When Felix reopened his eyes, it was past sunset. He drew another puff on his pipe and watched with familiar awe as the Orion's Belt stars pointed the way to another extravagant display in the limitless skies above. Soon he would go, but these stars and the other marvels of the universe would continue to exist for others to enjoy, and mankind's accomplishments would likewise endure if human folly did not bring an end to them.

He had the opportunity to experience and share many wonders in his life, even if for too brief a time. For these gifts he was grateful, and the gratitude made him feel at peace with himself. He would go, but like the polyp that appeared in his dream, he would continue to exist anonymously as a small but essential part of the species.

He took a last puff on his pipe and went inside, hoping to live through another night but prepared to move on if fate decreed otherwise.

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Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "*The Satchel and Other Terrors*" is available through Amazon and other retailers.

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