

Creative Non-fiction Workshop

04/25//2024

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Totality

"What's the difference between 93% and 100%?" It wasn't a math inquiry; I wasn't crunching percentages. I was challenging the notion of a three-hour drive to Vermont just to witness a mere 7% increase in the solar eclipse experience.

Vermont, where even the cows were said to wear sunglasses to avoid the glare off its lack of scenic, suddenly took center stage as it found itself in the path of totality for the 2024 eclipse. Dennis, my beloved fellow writer from Burlington (Vermont) Writer's Workshop, proclaimed on New Year's Day of 2024 that "For any given spot on Earth, a total solar eclipse occurs less often than once in 300 years: rarer than a 'once in a lifetime' event, unless you happen to be one of the hardier Greenland sharks."

I was no Greenland shark. I was a single mom with an 11th grader attending a demanding high school near the great meadow where the first gunshot of the American Revolution was heard. All these qualifications serve to justify the fact that the principal of Lexington High School proudly announced that only students with the last block free on Monday, April 8th, would be permitted to step out of the classroom and witness a 93% solar eclipse, touted as the event of their lifetime.

I, the dutiful mom, was supposed to pick up my daughter promptly at 3:12 p.m. when school ended, right in the middle of the eclipse. Plus, I worked full time and Monday was supposedly a workday, even though I was allowed to work from home.

"No way I drive to Vermont for a mere 7%." I swore. "I am staying in Lexington for a perfect 93%."

But I could not stay away from the buzz of excitement surrounding the eclipse, fueled by news reports, social media updates, and the enthusiastic chatter of my friends. "I've booked a hotel in Burlington, Vermont." "We're heading to Niagara Falls to witness it." "I'm catching a flight to Texas."

"They are insane! I pride myself on resisting peer pressure," I affirmed. My weekend routine remained unchanged, shuttling my daughter Lily to various extracurricular activities, adhering to our meticulously planned schedule.

My friend Wei called Sunday afternoon. She and her husband had checked into the inn they'd booked near Dartmouth College, where both their daughter Daisy and my son Kevin attended, only to discover that the hefty \$270-per-night price tag was for the last available suite.

"It's a suite. You can sleep on the pullout sofa bed in the living room," Wei urged. "Both Daisy and Kevin can come to visit us."

"Oh, right, I'm Kevin's mom too. Should I visit him as well?" I mused aloud.

"Mom, you should go," Lily chimed in, overhearing Wei's suggestion on the phone and seemingly reading my mind.

"The next total eclipse won't happen for another 40 years. We might not be around by then," Wei's words solidified my resolve. After all, you only live once. I already passed 50.

The next day sitting in Wei's car, my phone chimed with a message: "Welcome to Canada!" It arrived before we reached Newport, VT, where the total eclipse would last for an impressive 3 minutes and 35 seconds.

I saw it with my naked eyes: a translucent diamond ring, radiant against the darkened sky, encircled by stars twinkling in what my watch said 3:25 pm daytime. Not merely a crescent-shaped orange sun captured through lenses, but a dazzling diamond poised upon a sliver of the Sun's photosphere.

In that singular moment, I felt as if I were gazing into eternity, plunging into the depths of infinity—a glance that seemed to span a thousand years.

"Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him." Annie Dillard wrote in her renowned article titled "Eclipse."

Wow, am I getting married today? Thank you, Universe, for staging such a wonderful wedding for me. I am now married to nature for a lifetime.

"It's not about the difference between 93% and 100%," I proudly proclaimed on my social media. "It's the difference between 0 and 1. It's the difference between heaven and earth. It's the difference between living your life and not living."

Totality, I saw you.