



In the Tent

Ona Russell

I used to write at my desk or in bed. If I'm honest, mostly the latter. Actually, almost always the latter. I liked the idea of my desk more than the reality, and so did my muse, whom I always suspected was a little debauched. Propped up on layers of flimsy pillows, I would slouch my way into a respectable word count, my later backache a sign that I'd been in the zone. We authors all have our rituals, and this was mine, accompanied by coffee and scones, which, during my most productive sessions, left my laptop keys crumb-filled and pleasantly sticky. It was a ritual I loved, one I believed yielded the most candid prose, maybe because bed was associated with dreams, dreams with the unconscious and both with unfiltered thought.

But that was before the pandemic, when being housebound was a privilege. There are memes aplenty about how Covid hasn't really changed the lives of writers. But a month into lockdown, my bed started to feel less hospitable. And so did my words. I was working on a historical mystery, but the clues weren't coming and the present chaos demanded my attention, made history *truly* a thing of the past. By the second month, my bed was a prison, and by the third a medieval rack, where sentences were torture and illusive as sleep.

I'm lucky to have a decent-sized yard, though I'd never spent much time there. I'd never been into gardening, and my husband and I divide duties along conventionally gendered lines: inside for me, out for him. But suddenly, I needed air. Forget mopping and laundry. Sky and trees called to me now. Like Whitman, I lost myself in a blade of grass. Like Thoreau, I marveled at an army of ants. I wasn't writing, but I was communing, seeking correspondences in the remnants of a dying environment. I began using the patio furniture that had long been neglected, added a tablecloth and votive candles for the times that day bled into night. But when summer arrived and with it mosquitoes, when the global warming sun threatened to penetrate my SPF 1000, I needed a solution.

Enter the tent.

After much investigation, we settled on a \$250.00 Coleman pop-up job, about ten feet across with a screen curtain all around that zips for entrance and exit. The tan nylon roof allows for an incredibly soft, flattering light. It was in fact the discovery that I looked ten years younger in the tent that began my increased posting on social media. And indeed, for quite a while social media was the only use to which my laptop was put.

But soon I began wondering about the tent, or rather tents in general, their

origins, what functions they served, what they might represent. In other words, I started doing research, unconscious of the import, of the fact that such activity for me is always a prelude to writing.

Here are some things I learned or was reminded of:

1. Tents have been in existence almost as long as humans, developed as a kind of portable cave for shelter against the elements. Nomads carried tents on their backs, Native Americans created a pointed version we know as the tepee, and tents are mentioned by name in the Bible.

2. Tents come in a variety of shapes: dome and tunnel, geodesic, cabin, and pyramid. Mine is a hexagon, which feels both expansive and cozy, creates prism like shadows that frequently torment my dogs.

3. Militaries from all over the world rely on tents, from the Roman contubernium, or tent groups, to pup tents to the “marquees,” where officers drink and hold meetings, make momentous decisions, often about the fate of the enlisted. And of course there are medical tents, from MASH units to Covid hospitals, where limbs are amputated, fevers rage, and blood stains the canvass.

4. There are obviously tents for camping. But also for entertainment, persuasion or celebration. Circuses and weddings, fortunetelling and revivals. During such events, the tent is additive, enhancing the sense of the mystical and magical, both containing and heightening the experience.

So yes, tents are ubiquitous, ancient, and enduring. Yet, after much consideration, I have come to see impermanence as their defining feature. Impermanence, as in here today, gone tomorrow. A study in the fleeting, the makeshift, the temporary. And because of that, they lend urgency to the actions that occur within. Here today, gone tomorrow, so make it good. Sleep well, map out the enemy, predict the future. Pray, heal, smell the pines, but do it before the tent is dismantled, before the sum becomes just a collection of parts.

I suppose it is this realization more than anything else that got me writing again. Impermanence thrown into relief. It's true that in the tent the mosquitoes were thwarted, the sun diffused. But protection is really only as good as the imagination, which, in my bed, had felt under assault. In the tent, it came out of hiding. I changed coffee to tea and typed out a chapter. A fresh blossom on our jacaranda tree resulted in a new character. I breathed in the marijuana wafting from my neighbor's porch and added a plot twist. Through the tent's screen, I saw things anew, turned a hummingbird into an antagonist, dog shit into a hidden treasure. The tent's zipper inspired a sex scene, the hexagon made me rethink my story's structure. In the tent, I felt time's winged chariot hurrying near, and with it a now or never urge to create.

Scheherazade includes in one of her famous tales the character of Prince Ahmed. Among Ahmed's many possessions is a magic tent, which could expand so as to shelter an army and contract to a size that would fit into a pocket. My tent doesn't quite have that power, but a third of the way into a manuscript that was languishing on page one, it's a start.

