A WALK ON THE PATH

BY MADIHA MOLANI
I looked up from the frozen ground and saw no one around me. The icy ground was untouched, like nothing or no one had set foot on the path for at least five days. Where was I? There was snow everywhere, surrounding me like inescapable quicksand. The air was freezing and biting, the ground was hard and cold. The sky was white with clouds, with no sun in sight, yet it was still so bright from the white of the snow. Was this winter? Or was this my nightmare? I kept walking forward, though I did not know what I was in search of. Stopping every ten steps, I looked behind me to make sure my individual path was being kept, but it wasn’t. Every footprint that I made when walking disappeared as soon as my next step hit the path. I had no idea where I was going or where I had been.

As I was walking, I noticed a squirrel on the side of the path, jumping along the tree branches that surrounded me. The squirrel was following me. Its bushy tail twitched often, like it was nervous. I knew that this was normal for squirrels, but why was it following me and why was its tail so energetic? I decided that the squirrel was just a coincidence, so I kept walking forward. I could hear the crunch of my boots on the ice as I progressed down the path. The ice was thick, but it was not slippery. There was no apparent danger in where I was, yet I was more scared than I had ever been before.

In a split second, hail was shooting down from the grey clouds. It hit my hand, then my neck, then my face. The hail was small, but came at me so fast that it felt like needles entering my skin when they struck. The wind picked up, pushing the hail in all directions, making it impossible to see where I was going, and where the path was. Somehow, I kept moving forward, pushing through the hail whipping across my face. After what seemed like hours, the hail finally stopped, and the clouds cleared to reveal the shining sun. With the new illumination
of my world, I could see my path. The snow was getting higher and higher as I walked along the path though, and I didn’t know how much longer I would be able to keep moving.

With my hands freezing and my cheeks beet red from the wind, I fell to my knees in the snow. I did not know what I was searching for, I did not even know where I was or what I desired. The only thing I could remember was the squirrel following me. Was it in search of food, just as I was? Did it want a friend in this lonely landscape that we inhabited? I knew that I was desperately seeking companionship in the desolate tundra I was exploring. But, if I was to find what I was in search of, I knew I had to keep going through the ice and snow to find it. Nothing but my raw will power was keeping me going, but I knew that my destination was going to be incredible.

I had heard stories of people getting lost in blizzards and wild areas. They had been separated from their group in some way, usually from curiosity. They would be lost for days, and finally a helicopter or snow patrol would find and rescue them. The people who survived being abandoned were strong. They had the determination to keep pushing forward even though there was little hope of any rescue or survival. The difference between those people and myself, though, was that they knew how to harness the power of the earth in order to survive its attacks. I had never been in the snow; I did not know how I got there. Under the bare trees to my left, I noticed a small stream. It was frozen over, but I thought that there might be running water under the icy veneer. I was desperate for water since I had no idea how long it might be until I might find civilization again. I approached the stream cautiously, trying not to slip and fall on the frozen rocks. I looked down at the stream, there were bubbles in the iced layer, meaning there was water under the ice.
Now came the hard part: I had to break the ice to reach the water without letting myself fall into the water. Any soaking of my clothes would guarantee hypothermia and could be fatal in these conditions. I had nothing with me that would create a clean break in the ice. I searched for a sharp rock or stick or stake, but found nothing. As a last resort, I took a heavy rock, stood away from the stream, and threw the rock at the ice. There was a huge crack from the rock, but it was not enough to break through to the ice. I tried again with another rock, and then another. I couldn’t break the thick ice consequential of the arctic temperatures. It seemed hopeless, but I was so thirsty I couldn’t give up. Using every ounce of remaining energy, I threw one last rock, bigger than the others, about the size of my head. The ice finally broke, and I could see the water flowing beneath the surface. The ice must have been about three inches thick. I had no idea what I was up against. The power of the earth was so great, it had the ability to defeat me with the simplicity of freezing temperatures.

I slowly approached the stream, being careful not to break the ice and let myself fall through. I took one more step on the ice, and heard a loud crack. The ice gave out and my foot was in the water. At first, I couldn’t feel anything, it wasn’t cold, it wasn’t wet. After about ten seconds, I could feel the water soaking into my boot, then through my sock, hitting my foot with its biting grip. I tried to step out of the stream as fast as I could, but the sharp ice caught my boot lace, and I couldn’t get my foot out. I struggled to release my foot, the freezing water numbing my toes with every passing minute. At last, the ice broke and my foot was released. At this point, I could not feel my toes. I convinced myself that my natural body temperature would warm my toes back up to normal, so I continued to get water and did not pay attention to the feeling of my foot. The water tasted crisp and cold, it was surprisingly refreshing. The feeling of
success of finding water rushed over me, and I found some motivation to keep pushing through the tundra.

As I walked along the path, I noticed a tingling feeling in my toes that lasted for what seemed like hours. I stopped to remove my boot, finding that the water from the stream had frozen the boot solid. When I managed to remove the boot, I took off my sock to reveal my toes. They were black. I had never seen anything like it before. I could not feel anything in my toes, they were black like they were bruised, I couldn’t move them. I had heard once that once your toes turn black, they start to fall off. I was terrified. It had not been one day in the wild before I had been struck by frostbite. The earth had won its first attack on me, and I could do nothing to retaliate.

The sky was getting darker, the kind of dark you only find in the absence of sun. It was getting colder, and I had but a coat, boots, a lighter, and a small pebble in my pocket. I had to find shelter somehow, but I had no idea where and how. I ventured into the trees, knowing that the forest would shield some of the whipping winds from out in the open. The area was untouched. No one had built fires or shelter here before, no one left behind anything that an amateur like myself could use. I tried to build shelter out of snow at first. Stacking snow bricks like an igloo, but it did not work. I could not get the bricks to stay up, and the snow did not stick together well enough to hold for the night. Next, I tried to stack, balance, and layer stray branches to make a hut. It was not nearly as warm as the igloo house might have been, but it kept the snow from falling on me in the night. I needed to find something warm if I was going to survive the night. I had a lighter in my pocket, but the snow made everything around me wet. The branches would never take the flame, and I would not have a fire. I contemplated what to
do for some time, and decided to try to light a fire inside the small hut I had built. The space was barely three feet wide and four feet long. There was little room for a fire, but I was desperate. I laid out small leaves and twigs in hopes that they would dry within the next few hours, enough for them to catch the flame and start the fire. Time passed, and the twigs seemed to be dryer than they had been when I picked them up. I constructed a small pile of twigs and leaves and held the lighter to them. It took a few tries, but the fire finally started. With the spark of the flame came a glimmer of hope that I was going to be okay and find what I was put in this landscape to find. The fire grew, I nursed it through the night to make sure it would not die, nor set the hut on fire.

As the night passed, I stayed awake thinking of why I was stranded in the wild. I had no idea how I got here, or where I was supposed to be going. All I was given was a snowy path through the ravenous wild. I held the small pebble in my hand. I picked up the pebble at my home. I was walking on the sidewalk one day, and right in my pathway was this small rock. It was perfectly two-toned, black and white. The colors created a harsh line where they met, like they were to be divided on purpose. There was no crossing over of the colors, there was no mixing or integration. Why this pebble caught my eye, I don’t know. But it meant something to me. It showed me the differences in the world, that those differences may be divided, but still peacefully existing on the same plane. The pebble reminded me of my family. We were all so different, but we existed together for many years, pushing through our differences. We lived peacefully with each other, though each person had their own beliefs and values. In some way, to me, the pebble spoke to a greater issue in the world: the coexistence of different beliefs, values, people, cultures. The pebble was so small, yet it held so much truth. The power of
something so small teaching me something so large baffled me. I made me realize that I need to look at the small things in life in order to understand the larger aspects.

The sting of my toes brought my mind back to reality. I was sitting cross-legged by the small fire, but it was not enough warmth to warm my toes. I took off my boot again to see if there had been any progress on the frostbite. The toes were black as coal, and I still couldn’t feel them. Some hope was lost that I would not be able to save my foot from the wrath of the earth. I kept ignoring it, thinking that the problem would disappear as fast as the thought did from my mind. But the pain of my extremities was as pressing as the meaning of the pebble; it was definitive, yet ambiguous at the same time. It baffled me how the earth had so much power over me, but I was also taken aback by the way that the pebble made so much sense for being a seemingly meaningless piece of gravel in the giant path of my life. It was small, like a mouse in the grand food web of the earth. The pebble seemed to have no meaning other than the unity of different worlds. But perhaps it was the motivation I needed to move forward. Moving forward to me always meant finding peace in the critical world we live in, it meant pushing through anything that tried to drag us down. Reflecting on the pebble made me believe in myself to keep moving forward, to push through the authority of nature to reach my destination.

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Waking from my short slumber, I momentarily forgot where I was; I thought I was living a nightmare. I quickly snapped back to reality and remembered that I was stranded in the icy cold, with no shelter, and now, no fire. The fire must have extinguished while was dozed off. I was awakened by the cold penetrating my coat. It was colder than anything I had ever
experienced, as if I was submerged in a tub of ice with no way of escaping. The pain from the cold made this reality seem like a nightmare. I experienced the same thoughts as when I had arrived in this deserted land: I knew nothing about how to survive, and I did not know what I was on a path toward. But somehow, I reminded myself that I was on a journey toward something I had never known; I knew I was to be happier when I reached my destination than if I surrendered to the fist of the earth. I picked myself off the ground, gathered my belongings and approached the path once again.

When I stepped on the path today, however, there seemed to be clear skies and the sign of warmth from the beaming sun. The day was looking up, but I had a twinge of discomfort in the back of my mind. I knew the rays of sunshine were too good to be true. I walked on the path until the sun met the center of the sky. It had been 36 hours since I had eaten, and I knew that food was instrumental in my survival. I raised my eyes to the horizon and saw a lush, plentiful forest. It was too green to be thriving at these temperatures, but it tempted me with its promise of fruit and meat. I entered the forest to my right, and saw a deer in the distance. I had nothing to hunt with, so I thought back to what my oldest acquaintance had taught me: why need something machine-made when you could have something forged by the hands of humans. I took this advice and gathered supplies for the first thing I could think of. I scavenged for long branches, pliable stems, and straight sticks. I bent the longest branch I could find, and tied a plant root to both ends. I then sharpened the ends of straight twigs to create a fatal point that would kill on contact. The bow and arrows were finished, and gave me the ultimate hunting tool needed for survival. Of course, I had never forged a bow and arrows before, so my first model snapped on the first attempt at a shot. I was desperate though, so I made a second
bow, and a third. Until finally the bow was sturdy enough to withstand the force of the arrow I needed to shoot my prey. It took me six tries to get anywhere near the deer. But on the sixth crafted arrow, I finally hit the mid-section of the animal. It was not enough to bring down the prey though, and I had no energy to run after it to gather my kill. I gave up, and returned to the path outside the forest.

I noticed the structure of the path for the first time since my journey. It was winding, I constantly felt as if I was turning from left to right, right to left. I wasn’t moving in a straight line, and I thought of how inefficient it was for me to be doing so. If I were to save my energy, I needed to walk in a straight path. There would be less distance needed to cover on a straight path versus a winding one. The snow off the path was hard as ice, it had frozen over last night, making it a treacherous hike. I had to take long strides to navigate the ice, working hard to stay erect and resist the sneakiness of gravity tempting a fall. I took one step; my foot broke the ice and was caught by the soft snow below the surface. I took another step; my other foot broke through the ice again. Determined to keep moving straight, I fought the ice and snow. The snow was up to my knees, my toes still frozen.

I walked for another mile before I came to another bushy forest. I tried once more to find food. This time, from the fish in the pond under the trees. There was a beautiful oasis hidden under the foliage. A large pond, not yet frozen over, displayed the ripples from the surfacing bubbles of aquatic animals. There seemed to be the promise of food, and thus survival. I approached the pond trying not to scare away any fish or frogs that might be living happily in the water. I grabbed one of my arrows, and aimed it at a large fish in the water. The fish surfaced the water to breathe, surviving the cold water as best as it could. I too, was trying
to survive as best as I could, so I raised my arm and directed the arrow straight at the
unknowing fish. I threw the arrow as hard as I could, and struck the fish. I watched the fish
struggle for some time before it gave in to the natural order of the food web. I was the
predator, and the fish was my prey. I must win this battle if I was going to survive the tundra.
When the fish was finally still, I reached into the water and grabbed it with my bare hands. It
was slimy and cold. It reminded me of a fish market full of proud fisherman displaying their
morning catches. I had no way to cut or scale or gut the fish, but my hunger was taking over my
entire body. I bit straight into the fish. It had an earthy taste, but it was not delicious like fresh
mushrooms. The fish oozed blood with every bite, and had a faint taste of algae. My taste buds
rejected the taste of the raw, dirty fish, but my body was craving the meat. I forced the food
down my throat and into my stomach, silently hoping that it was not carrying disease. I ate the
fish down to the bones, licking and sucking each bone until every bit of meat was consumed.
I finished my first meal in over 40 hours, and continued for the path. This time, I decided to
follow the turns of the path instead of fighting the ice to surpass the speed of the path. I
noticed that following the path led me to different sights and areas. I passed a patch of bare
trees, weighed down by the heavy snow falling from above. The dark trunks grew out of the
white ground. They towered over my head like skyscrapers: tall, sturdy, unmoving. Among the
empty branches was a single red maple leaf. The leaf was hanging from the tallest tree in the
stretch. The single leaf seemed to give life to the area. Its vibrancy brought a lighter feeling to
the forested area, and gave a glimmer of hope of life. In an area so dead and void of life, the
bright red leaf livened the area, hinting at a past life. I wondered if the rest of the trees would
ever produce another leaf, if they were to ever regain their livelihood. If they were alive before
the winter, of course they would be alive when the snow passes. I was inspired by the red leaf, it showed me that there can be color in the greyest areas.

I kept walking past the trees, and followed the path turning me right. This time, I came across an evergreen forest. The trees towered higher than the last ones. They must have been over one hundred years old to be the beautiful structures they were. The forest had pine cones, squirrels, deer, and small plants at my feet. There was so much life on this side of the path, but why was there none on the other side? One simple turn made the world of difference in my surroundings, and I did not know which I preferred. I enjoyed the scenery around me, but did not think much into it as I was passing. My body was exhausted, my toes were numbed, my eyelashes frozen. I could feel my mind slowing down with every hour I walked, taking in less of my surroundings, paying less attention to the needs of my body. I knew that if I had any chance of survival, I had to try to let the world know I was stranded alone. I was reminded of something my camp mate had told me the first time we went camping. She told me to climb to the top of the tallest tree I could find, light a stick on fire, and wave it above the trees to signal that I was alive and needed help. When she told me this, I never thought that I would need to do this, I never expected that I would be in a situation where I was fighting for my life against the earth herself.

I walked around the looming evergreens to find a suitable climbing tree. I found one that stood almost ten feet higher than the rest, its branches looked as if they were meant for climbing. They protruded uniformly from the massive trunk, like a ladder begging to be ascended. I reached into my pocket to ensure that the lighter was still there; it was. I then tightened the laces of my boot, took a step back, and made a running jump for the first branch I
could reach. Immediate failure. The moment I attempted to launch myself from the snow, my foot gave out and I fell forward without leaving the ground. In losing sense of my body, I had forgotten that my toes were frozen and useless. I sat in the snow, defeated. I loosened my laces, took off my boot, and revealed my unnaturally black toes. Something looked different about my foot though. I realized that the frostbite had traveled to the ball of my foot, and was starting to freeze the top half of my foot. It was only a matter of time before my entire foot would be unusable. I had to try to make myself known in this desolate landscape. I laced up my boot once again, and was determined to get to the top of the tree. I knew I couldn’t jump to the branch, so I piled snow, ice, branches, leaves, anything I could find to get myself closer to the first branch. I painfully climbed my makeshift lift to the first branch, grabbed a hold of the branch, and used my good foot to jump up to the branch. I struggled to find lift myself high enough to find my footing on the branch, but I finally found it and stood up. I defeated the first branch of the tree, and I was going to defeat fifty more before I would have the chance of being rescued. The second branch was four feet higher than the branch I was perched on, and it was rotated around the trunk about forty-five degrees. It seemed like a simple move. I lifted my bad foot to step to the next branch, but my other foot slipped on the snow piled on the branch, and I fell hard onto the ground below me. I had failed again.

Still determined to be saved, I climbed the first branch once again. This time, I was careful moving to the next branch. I made it to the second, then the third, then the fourth, until I finally came to the mid-section of the tree. The branches started to become closer together, making it easier to climb, but they were also getting thinner and less sturdy. I was scared to climb higher, but I told myself that I could not fear the chance of being rescued. I cautiously
climbed the thinner branches, taking care to test each one to make sure they would not break with weight. As I reached the top, I noticed that some of the branches were dead and dried. They would be perfect to set afire to alert anyone around me of my presence. I broke one off, but as I did I shook on the thin branch. I could hear the branch breaking under my weight, and tried to move as quickly as I could. But the branch broke and I was taken down about ten branches. I landed on my back between two branches, I could feel the long, hard branch jutting into my back as I hit it. The pain was immense, but I was lucky to have been stopped by the branches on the tree. I found my footing once again, and realized I had dropped the dried branch in the middle of my fall. I could see it sitting in the snow below me. Its dark color stood out like a fluorescent bulb in a dark room. The pure white snow surrounded the branch, creating a perfect juxtaposition of dark and light. The branch sitting in the snow reminded me of the red leaf I noticed earlier in my journey. Its solidarity reminded me that there is always something that prevails in a world void of life. Though the branch was dead and dried, it hailed from one of the greatest forms of life in this landscape. The tree that birthed the branch was full of life and color. It moved with the wind, it was a beautiful green that signaled thriving life. I suddenly realized that, as beautiful as the branch is in the snow, it was my only hope of setting a fire and showing my presence and survival. I remembered that there were more, thinner branches at the top of the tree from where I had just fallen. I climbed slowly to the top of the tree, breaking off a dead branch along the way. I kept pushing. I finally made it to the top.

Poking my head above the rest of the trees, I could see everything. I could see the other trees, the other patches of forest, and I could see the winding path that I had been following. I looked to my left, and saw a squirrel. It was the same squirrel with the twitching tail that was
following me on the first day of my journey. Had this squirrel truly been following me this entire time? It stared at me with its black, beady eyes, unmoving. It did not seem to be panicking, it was calmer than when I had seen it earlier. Its tail was less active, not twitching nearly as much as I remember it to be. Why now, was it calmer? The squirrel climbed to the top branch where I was standing, and approached me slowly. It kept its eyes on me while it moved around. The squirrel looked at me one last time, then jumped down branch to branch until it was on the ground next to the branch I had dropped. I quickly checked that the branch I was holding was dry, and when I looked back to where the squirrel was, it had vanished. It left no footprints, no trace that it was actually there.

Pulling my gaze back to the landscape, I looked at the winding path. It stood out like the branch in the snow. There was significantly less snow on the path than off of it. It snaked left and right, each turn bringing a new scenic landscape. I wondered why the path was winding and why it was keeping me from moving straight. Each turn brought a new challenge, yet somehow each turn also brought a new chance of survival. The path ran on flat ground, there were no hills, no mountains. There were no dips or divots. The land was perfectly flat, as was the path. I took no more time to contemplate the path, as I was convinced that sending my smoke signal would endure my safety and rescue.

I held the lighter to the branch for quite some time before a piece of the branch lit up. The fire spread slowly, but it finally reached a point where it was bright enough to stand out against the dark trees and the white sky. I positioned myself high above the branches so that nothing around me would catch fire. I lifted the flame into the air and waved it around like a giant match in the sky. I screamed for help at the top of my lungs, shouting as loud as I could in
case people were in the distance out of sight. I strained my voice screaming for help. I wouldn’t give up until I saw other life, any other sign that I was going to survive the cold wrath of nature. I shouted and waved until the flame burned out. The branch was no longer dry because of the falling snow. I gave up on the branch, and I threw it down to land on the ground. My last chance of survival was extinguished by nature. I was discouraged, disappointed. I wanted to give up in that moment and stop trying to survive.

The discomfort of my foot brought me back into survival mode, and made me think of ways to descend without hurting myself. I could jump from the top of the tree, but I had no idea how thick the snow beneath me was. It could have turned to ice at this point, or it could have melted to be only a few inches of snow. It was too dangerous to jump from this height. I sat down on the branch, and scooted down each subsequent branch, like a small child sits on each stair to get down. I made it to the live branches, then the thicker branches near the bottom. After some time, I finally made it to the first branch on the tree. The branch seemed to be so close to the ground after looking at the ground from the top of the tree. I jumped from the lowest branch to the ground, landing with a thud. The snow was thick, but soft. It was not ice, and it was easy to manipulate. The sun was setting, displaying a fire in the sky. The oranges, reds, and purples flowed in and out of each other, so fluid in their forms across the sky. The lands of color were broke, and though I was only seeing three colors, there were infinite colors between the veneer of the name. Hundreds of shades of orange were painted across the sky, the reds added to the heat of the sky, like the flame of the branch in the sky. It was the most color I had seen in the black and white landscape in which I was trapped. I was lost in the
brilliance of the colors, it felt as if I was coming closer to my destination with every new aspect of color I found.

Looking at the tree again, I realized that it would be perfect for shelter. I gathered broken branches bundles of soft pines to create a mat to sleep on. I then found larger logs and branches to make the walls of a shelter with. Tonight, the hut sat under the enormous evergreen that did not allow me to find rescue. Though it did not help me be found, it helped me survive the brutally cold and snowy night that was approaching.

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I was awakened by the sound of footsteps around my hut. I quickly sat up in hopes of help. I was losing all feeling in my foot, my stomach was calling for food, my mind was in a pit. I peeked my head outside of the hut, only to see three wolves pacing around my territory. They eyed me as prey, circling my shelter, waiting for me to make myself vulnerable. I was paralyzed with fear. I could not bring myself to shout, move, or run away. I was at the mercy of the wolves. I noticed that my fire was dying, but it was not extinguished yet. I blew air on it, and plies branches to try and grow it. Panicking, I reached for the long branch I dropped from the tree, arm’s length away from the hut. When I reached my hand across the barrier of the hut, the wolves growled, waiting to leap. I quickly picked up the stick, found the dry end, and held it to the flame. The branch wouldn’t catch, it was too wet from laying in the snow. The wolves held their gaze on me, their circling getting smaller and smaller. They were closing in on me and I had no way to defend myself against them. The odds were stacked against me three to one. I stayed in my hut, pushing myself against the back wall, trying to get away from the wolves every inch possible.
All of a sudden, one of the wolves jumped forward into the hut and grabbed a hold of my boot. It was thrashing its head back and forth, ripping off my shoe. I screamed as loud as my voice could carry, and like the snap of a twig, my boot was ripped off. Once the wolf had the start of what it wanted, I knew it wasn’t going to stop. I grabbed a twig from the fire, threw it at the wolf and hit it. It winced in pain from the flame, and took a step back. The wolves seemed to be scared of the fire. With my bare hands, I grabbed branch after branch and twig after twig from the fire, and threw them all at the wolves whenever they approached to attack. Each time, the wolves were deterred and took a step back. After exhausting the flame, the wolves had finally given up. They were retreating with nothing but the boot to bring back.

I looked down at where my boot should be, and where my foot should have been. The wolves had not only taken my shoe, they had taken my frostbitten foot. The snap I heard when the wolf prevailed, I realized, was the snap of my frozen bone being torn off my leg. I could see on my leg that the frostbite had progressed up to my ankle bone. There was nothing left on the bottom of my leg, there was no way I could walk or survive. One wolf would be the end of my time in this landscape forever. I rolled my pant leg over my ankle in an attempt to hide the gruesome sight of my altered leg. I had no shoe to cover it, no way to escape the memory that I no longer walked on two feet.

My heart sunk. I knew in this moment I was not able to stand, to follow my path, the reach my destination. I sat in my isolated hut in silence. I had no food, no water, and no foot. I came to realize that my time was dwindling and I would not be able to move forward anymore. I took the pebble out of my coat pocket. Its two tones were perfectly separate. A new truth of the pebble came to mind though: it showed me the juxtaposition of nature. I spent the last
three days and two nights in the bitter cold at the mercy of the earth. Each new turn on my path led me to a place of beauty and a place of danger. I witnessed the wrath of the cold, the ferociousness of the wolves, the dangerous heights of the trees. But being isolated in the tundra showed me the beauty of nature. The flaming skies, the lush evergreens, the gentle curiosity of the squirrel. I sat on the ground of the earth, as close as I could get, and realized that this landscape held the power to kill me, just as it holds the power to create the most beauty I could ever lay my eyes on. I accepted defeat as I watched the sky catch fire once again with the rising of the sun. In this moment, I truly recognized the natural powers of the earth: it gave me life, and holds the power to take it away just as easily.